

Intro - From World to World

An orc toiled endlessly in a field of grain, harvesting in long arcs with his scythe. He reached for his back and straightened himself to see a bright blue sky etched with twined strands of harrowing purple. He then took off his hat and fanned it against his cheek, mimicking winds that never came anymore. When it was time to collect the bushels and load them into his cart, even more than the last season turned to dust. It was time he did something.

"We survived the red pox!" His Elder screamed, shaking a rickety old staff at the farmer. "We survived the demons, the raging elementals, the world's destruction! We may starve, we may go hungry, but we will survive this too." He prattled on and on about honour and strength and resilience, but the farmer never cared much for any of those things. He was Krom, and Krom had a family. His wife, and four children. Their crops could barely make enough to feed them, let alone anyone else in the village. As much as it pained him it was time to go.

Krom took his wife, his children, his things and his cart. He left, though something hoped in his heart it would not be forever. He grew up there.

"Where are we going, Father?" His youngest asked. "I want to go back..."

"We will." He offered his most reassuring smile. "See all those trees over the mountains?" He pointed eastwards. "Beyond that is the City of Light. It is meant to help people. We will make a new farm there, and send back what we can. Then, maybe next season when things are better, we can go back."

His children didn't seem all that convinced.

—

*"From Moon and Star, From World to World / Carry Me Hence to a Place Untold
Sail Across the Black Night Sky / And Wake Ashore there Soon and Nigh"*

Erin hummed part of a Transplanar Telemancy incantation as she wandered through the portal room. She could never cast one on her own, of course. Even with three other people she nearly died trying once. Their cost was excessive, even for her exuberant standards, and Erin was pleased enough whenever she nodded to the very cordial Consortium members serving the portal to the other world as she stepped into it. Such a boring job it must be for them.

Erin liked it well enough in Shattrath, though a guilty pleasure it was.

It still stunned her to no end that she could simply go to an entirely new place, a new sky, a new ground, with a new sun. The furthest she could ever be from home, but still close enough to go back every night. But she was always reminded she was one of the lucky ones. To be able to come here on a whim, to ogle, for fun on her break. Not everyone had that same chance. For many people here, they may have no home to go back to.

As interesting as it was, there'd come a time she wouldn't be able to go back to Shattrath, to Outland. And for many people, they'd have no home to go back to.

Erin glanced over at the city's west gate. Here comes one now. A family of Orcs struggling to get in. She frowned as they went back the way they came, rather than being allowed to enter.

If she was here, she might as well be helpful.

Erin blinked over to the man stationed at the city's border, the one who turned them away. He jumped, flung his pen up, scattered his papers, nearly had a heart attack. She caught his pen and handed it back to him with a smile. For Draenei who usually stand so tall and proud in her mind from millenia of scars and war, Erin measured him as someone quite soft. Not weak nor meek. Just... soft.

He looked at her with a sideways glance. "The Scryers do that to me too. I need to put up a sign."

"My bad. I just wanted to ask you about the people you were just speaking to. Why didn't you let them in?" Erin asked, and tried to peer down the tunnel leading under the border mountains with Nagrand, though she couldn't quite see them.

"Just another family coming in from Nagrand. We really don't have any more spaces for refugees right now. We're already unable to feed the people we have here, and Lower City's worse than maybe it's ever been." The man at the border said.

"Why can't they just go through to Azeroth?"

"They said they didn't want to." He replied with a shrug, as if relieved of anything else he could possibly do. Erin could do more, though.

"I'll speak to them." She said, and ran down the tunnel to find them.

Krom was surprised to see a human of all things, after finding his hopes for his family's continued safety dashed against the rocks, racing towards him at full pelt down the tunnel passage and out the end. She brushed the hair out of her face, took a moment to pant and then flicked her head back up as if nothing had happened.

She gave a nerdy smile and offered him a handshake.

"Hi. I'm Erin. I can help you get to Azeroth."

Krom gave a sigh and pulled her aside so she wouldn't bother the rest of his family, giving them false hope like he had done. "I don't want to go there. I told the other man."

"Why not?" Erin gestured to Nagrand. Scattered islands floated in the air and held a tranquil air they both knew was a lie. "You can't stay here. No one can. Not for long, anyway."

"I don't expect you to understand." Krom snarked. "This is my home. It's broken, but I don't want to leave it."

"But you were already going to leave it, weren't you?" Erin asked. "To go to Shattrath? Why is going to Azeroth any different?"

"How is going to another world not different? How could that be the same as just moving to a different city? All I wanted was to find some money, some food, and send it back."

Erin pushed her hair back over her head, and tried to relate to him a little more. Not everyone was as casual with planetary travel as her. Was there anyone who was?

"You can do that in Azeroth too. I know it's difficult, I know it's... I know it's scary. To be that far from home. To worry you're not going to be able to get back. But it won't be because you went to Azeroth. It'll be because Outland fell apart."

Krom listened to her as she spoke.

"Look, I can't get you into the city." Erin sighed. "They're not taking in any more people, and I don't think you'll find anything there anyway. You'd be put into Lower City, and that's no place for a family." She turned back, and looked back at Krom's wife, and all his children. "But if you go to Orgrimmar, I promise you they can send you somewhere you can farm. Somewhere that won't fall apart. Somewhere other Orcs have already made their home. Somewhere you *will* be able to go back to."

Krom couldn't agree to it. "I can't leave everyone I know. I won't. I'd rather stay and die with them than that."

"Come on. Please. You can't really think that, can you?" Erin begged. "What would your kids do without you then?"

All was silent for a moment. Krom didn't really think that, no. But he still couldn't leave his clan, even if the reasons were more sentimental than he could admit.

Erin spoke up.

"I'll speak to your people. Your clan. Tell me the village you came from, and I'll get them out too. You won't be leaving them. You'll be the first to make a new home for them. Not just for your family. But your community."

Krom pointed to a small collection of huts by a lake. "Promise it?"

Erin looked at him. "Promise it on what, my honour?"

"On your word."

Erin took Krom's hand and smiled as she shook it. She escorted them through the city and showed them the portal to Orgrimmar. Though she could take them no further, she gave them a pouch of gold and her business card. If they ever needed trouble, ever struggled, she'd be there.

Erin blinked up to the man at the border again.

"You did it." He chuckled. "Orcs are usually a bit more stubborn than that."

“Pfft. I’m stubborn too.” She handed him a business card as well. “I’ll be in touch. Looks like I’ll be coming back a few more times than I expected. I have to get the rest of them to come too.”

“Really? You’re going to try to convince them?”

“I promised.” Erin smiled. “I’ll do more than try.”

1 - The Nethergale

"How did the Ogres go?" An armoured Draenei asked at Shattrath's northern border, as he slowly neared the end of his shift. Erin looked over at him from her stool and blew the hair out from her face, having seen now that no one else would travel down the road this way.

"Not great". She stretched, pulled her blouse and untucked it, and loosened her tie and rolled up her sleeves. "None of them wanted help."

"Maybe they don't realise how dangerous it is?" He replied, leaving Erin with a sombre look on her face.

She mumbled at the bottom of her breath, "They have to realise it sooner or later" but neither of them seemed all that hopeful.

Ten more minutes passed until his replacement came, and swapped out with him.

"World's End?" He asked.

"Yeah. We can try again tomorrow."

Erin had met Var'ruun about a week or maybe two ago now. On a flight of fancy she came to Outland to see it one last time before it crumbled and yet still she found something worth holding onto. The myriad peoples of this planet, deserving or not by some's measurement, all faced the same armageddon; total planetary destruction. It could take years or days. The projections didn't know. This deep in the nether maybe time didn't matter at all. Crops turned to ash, the seasons froze in place, the sky split by torrents of raw energy. Var'ruun, at his post on the city's border, had tried to help a family of orcs who had nowhere else to turn but he could not convince them to make the jump to Azeroth. Erin, however, could. With similar ideals and perhaps as her only contact in the city, Erin and Var'ruun took it upon themselves to deliver any and all to the safety of Azeroth's shores.

They took a seat in the corner of the all too aptly named tavern. Erin leaned back for the long haul and unbuttoned her shirt a few, before handing more coin than she needed to the overworked waitress who could surely do with getting out herself.

Var'ruun sipped his swill and eyed the parties in the room, the poor of Lower City, who came here for some hours to desperately forget their troubles. It was a strange thing to ponder on yet he found himself staring at their chairs. Rickety old wooden chairs from the war, barely holding on. Orcish stools, as utilitarian as they were uncomfortable. Stones dragged in from outside. Even a few good ones. Though there was unity, there was little joy. Only a chaotic quiet, as everyone drank as soon as they could, like they may never get another chance.

They sat for some time, until Erin came with an idea. "What about Shattrath's leadership. They have to know a way to get people out, right? Who even is in charge? Usually I wouldn't trust a politician as far as I could throw a house, but the planet is literally falling apart.."

"I'm not sure if they can help." Var'ruun inhaled. "As always, the Sha'tari are in charge. A'dal is doing everything he can to keep us safe, but everyone else in the order are busy stopping raiders and killers, keeping order. They won't have time to help anyone evacuate."

Twelve or so Draenei in crystalline armour marched outside the tavern, hurried hooves on paved stone sounding like a stampede. A characteristically stoic expression was drawn on each and every one of them. If they were going to their last mission, they'd do it bravely.

Erin felt a wave of heat come in from outside but wrote it off merely as a hot flush.

"They have to make sure the city is standing at all. Too many can't leave for them to just abandon it entirely." Var'ruun commented as he glanced at the Sha'tari, and rested his cheek on a closed fist, slowly whirling the drink in his hand.

Erin spied a few tables down from them an unlikely couple. A woman wearing some sort of white robe, inspiring images of the same sort that a member of the Cathedral back home would wear. With her was someone who was undoubtedly a Silvermoon Magister. They discussed something over a projection of Shattrath, a diagram of some sort of spire. Many nods and words were exchanged between them, though Erin couldn't quite hear what they were.

"There's also the Aldor and Scryers- the Priesthood and the Scholars. But the Priesthood has not had new recruits for many years. This is no place for the young, and who would come to a dying planet to join a Priesthood they never cared for? The Scryers too largely left Outland for their old home. I think that was wise of them."

"Is that everyone we could count on then?" Erin gave a solemn look.

"That is all. Those who remain, like us."

"Like you, maybe." Erin said. "I'm just a tourist."

"I thought you were going to stay and help?"

"No, that's... I mean, this isn't my home." Erin said and shuffled uncomfortably, her chair suddenly feeling hot against her back.

"It's not mine either. But we're trying." Var'ruun sighed. "It's all any of us can do."

With another sip of her drink, Erin noticed it tasted 'off'. Not like it had any great taste to begin with, but it changed flavour almost entirely. Like it was fizzy. Like it bubbled on her tongue.

The wind began to pick up, a wind Erin didn't know Outland still had.

It blew faster and faster and a look of worry stretched over her face as rolling waves of heat and a static in the air grew. Var'ruun's was painted with grim anticipation.

The waitress tried to close the door, but she couldn't hold it back.

The wind ripped through the tavern, and knocked Erin's drink from the table.

She snapped her fingers and called magic from them.

"Via!"

Her drink collided in the ground. Her spell had fizzled out.

"What's going on?" She whipped her head at Var'ruun.

"We... we have to go.." He stood up, as most other people did. "Erin, come with me."

"What's happening? My magic isn't working!" Erin breathed, and began to hyperventilate. Var'ruun had to pull her out to follow everyone else.

Erin panted and wept with worry as she was lead across the road from the tavern at the World's End, heading towards the Terrace of Light. She saw waves and waves of people, from every corner of the city, every height and every ditch hurriedly pacing to the centre like it was routine. The sky came over a deep purple, and the ends of Erin's hair began to raise. In those moments the heat got worse and worse, like she had been hit with an open furnace, like she had been shut inside it. It was loud and hot and frantic. And it was terrifying.

They stood in the crowded centre of the Terrace of Light. Still Erin shuddered, still she tried to teleport away, but her magic never came and it was like a part of her had been ripped out or blocked up.

"Stay here, and it will be past soon." He said to her, hoping he could comfort her.

All sound soon softened and made way for... a chime? Particles of light filled the air where they stood just at the sanctum's edge with a comforting glow that cooled the blistering heat, a sign that all who were inside the aura would be safe.

Erin gazed with worry out from the safety of her bubble at what would befall them. But it was not just herself she would have to fret over about. She saw a figure in the distance. It was the waitress from earlier. Hadn't she followed? What was she still doing in the tavern?

"Someone's still outside." Erin looked at Var'ruun.

He too looked and grimaced, but he wasn't fast enough to hold Erin back as she ran headlong into the storm.

The hot winds seared her skin pink, and it felt like her shirt was fusing with her flesh. But with every burning step she neared the tavern. She thought little, maybe nothing at all as she slung the tavern maid's arm over her shoulder and hauled her back. It would have been easier to do with magic. It might have been safe. But she had none, and she carried the person she meant to save with nothing but a reckless impulsivity that overcame the fear of her stolen power, or perhaps was only enhanced by it.

The heat was too much for her to bear and her ankles twisted as she faltered, only to find Var'ruun's hand on her shoulder. He dragged the both of them into the aura of Light mere moments before it hit.

The very foundations of Shattrath shook as a violent storm ripped through the city. Walls cracked and towers shuddered, rumbling like they might crumble at the next touch. Doors were ripped from their hinges, and the sky bled with amethyst light. A rat scurried out from its collapsing den, and Erin watched as it was vaporised instantly. It turned to ash and was swept away by the wind in one swift death. And it all lasted for too long for her to count.

When the sky cleared and the protective light faded, everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief and just... returned to normal. They left the Terrace and went back. Back to their homes, their jobs or the tavern. It was uncanny to Erin. Unsettling. Did no one else realise how terrifying that was?

"What the fuck just happened?" She sobbed at Var'ruun, desperate for answers. And he led her over to a chair which she refused to sit down on, unable to calm down.

"Sometimes on Outland," he said softly, and so matter-of-factly. "Something called a Nethergale appears. The sky opens up and crashes into an area like a tornado and turns anyone out in the open to dust. It's thanks to A'dal we can survive them."

“And people just put up with them?” Erin baulked, and Var’ruun looked at her with the melancholic acceptance of a fate unchangeable.

“This is why we need to help people leave. It’s just one of many hells. But at least it is a quick one. To some, maybe it is even preferable.”

Erin glanced over at the waitress she had saved, who began to make her way without a word back to the World’s End.

And Erin once again ran to save her.

Supplementary - Nethergales and their Effects

In a ruined library on Shattrath's northern half and too far from A'dal's protection lie scattered tomes; both forgotten and new. One such publication is from a scientific article titled 'Nethergales and their Effects'. Ironical, it must be, that such an etching might be found in the obliterated remains left behind by the very same phenomena.

Origins

Outland is hell.

There is no better way to put it. There are no more complex descriptions of its state. There is no nuanced consideration that might imply otherwise.

Since its destruction in 8adp, Outland has been met with at first an immensely rapid decline in its habitability, and then nothing but a slow agonising deterioration. Many scholars and researchers have tried to plot a timeline as to when we can expect for Outland to be fully unlivable, but no consensus has been found. Outland resides in the Twisting Nether, which by current cosmological theorising is placed as a realm ruled by Chaos. Due to such, Outland has staunchly defied all classifications except for one. Life is hard, and will continue to get harder without fail.

Each of Outland's distinct remaining regions experiences unique and dangerous phenomena, from Shadowmoon's constant hellfire rain to the seismic instability of the northwestern mountain range. The rarest and most dangerous of these, however, is the Nethergale.

Understanding the Nethergale requires one to understand the nature of the Twisting Nether itself. It is a plane of violent masses of energies backed by an impassable abyss. Raw magicks, fused and tainted by other essences form into untamed streams or clouds that streak across the Nether's expanse. And it is due to these very manifestations that Nethergales exist. When one of these rivers of raw arcana impacts the surface of Outland, or rather, Outland impacts with it, it creates a violent localised storm of the highest calibres of destruction. It takes a being as powerful as a Naaru to resist a Nethergale's fury, and while technology of a similar capability does exist it is only possessed by Ethereal Cartels and is far too advanced to be constructed by anyone else, even by the Aldor and Scryers.

Nethergales are the most recent manifestations of Outland's plight, as many of Outland's residents may yet remember a time where they did not occur at all. Even since the destruction of Outland they did not appear initially. It seems that, as Outland drifts farther and farther into the plane, it encounters more and more of these pockets of energy and rendering Nethergales increasingly more common the farther on the remaining continent's fringes one travels.

The first recorded Nethergale was in 35adp and struck the continent's western coast, annihilating an Ogre encampment. It initially went unnoticed, as it was only when the neighbouring town of Halaa (in Nagrand) reported a sudden and inexplicable end to the raids they had been experiencing since its founding. Dating on the ash found on the inner cave wall seemed to display that the Nethergale

occurred four months earlier than the time of discovery. This has been used to create a general timeline of Nethergales and their locations, and they appear to be becoming more common. Netherstorm, as the region deepest into the Nether, experiences Nethergales at much higher rates than anywhere else on Outland such there is currently at least once a day within that region. Ethereal Eco-Domes and Manaforges remain the only places able to resist Nethergales due to their architectural stability. Travel to and within Netherstorm is, by all accounts, suicidal. The safest place to experience a Nethergale is Shattrath, for reasons explained later, but as with any natural disaster the only truly safe option is to not be anywhere near it entirely. The only permanent way to escape Nethergales is simply to never step foot on Outland to begin with, as current records fortell they will only threaten the planet more and more.

Consequences

I write this as the Consequences of a Nethergale, for it is the most accurate way it can be put. When experiencing a Nethergale, one cannot consider any harnessing of its immense power or even a relief that one may shield themselves where their enemies are left turned to ash. They are indiscriminate, ruthless, and wholly destructive even to those who wish solely for it.

The initial warning signs of a Nethergale are that of a hot wind. As the edge or border of the Nethergale's effects enter the region you stand, it weakens atmospheric pressure and creates ripples of heated air. Outland's atmospheric cycle is largely inert, other than by the influence of Elementals in very limited locations, so it can be taken as warning in most locations if there is any air at all it may be a sign of a Netherstorm oncoming, or at least passing by a bordering area.

The Nethergale has also been widely reported to disrupt or even entirely inhibit arcanic casting abilities, truly cementing it as a force of equal terror no matter who is unlucky enough to befall it. As chaotic magicks suffuse the area, it acts as a dampening field for magical spells and abilities. While arcane magic involves suggestions or demands for ordering spacetime in a certain manner, the space around and within a Nethergale is too chaotic for it to be ordered, with a much higher requirement of output required from the Mage to be able to overpower the dampening effects. Even the simplest spells become incredibly difficult, and for complex incantations like teleportations one would far better spend their time running for cover than trying to magick themselves away.

The recorded effects of a direct Nethergale collision are scarce as it defies both magical and mechanical analysis. Winds from the Nethergale blow with incredible force, enough to shake the earth and send cracks running through stone structures, and even when inside such force can cause danger to those standing under objects or cause caves to collapse. The true danger of a Nethergale though is the heat. Generated from the untamed, raw arcane energy, the heat is enough to instantly vaporise any organic matter in the vicinity. If you are not protected, you will be instantly killed when standing under the full force of a Nethergale. Exact temperatures are unknown, but numbers of such are largely meaningless when faced with such calamity.

Mitigations

As stated earlier, there is no known way to prevent a Nethergale from occurring in any one location. They are natural disasters of the highest order and as such cannot be reasoned with or avoided, only mitigated.

After first noticing the forewarnings of a Nethergale, it is imperative to move to cover immediately. A sufficiently insulated space, such as those far enough underground or reinforced layers of stone or concrete will be far more able to resist the effects of a Nethergale. Ethereal technology, as seen with the aforementioned Eco-domes, has also been known to weather the worst effects. A'dal in Shattrath erects a protective barrier within the Terrace of Light during such an event, though it is not always possible to reach such in time depending on how deep into the city you are, or if you are not there at all.

General best practice for avoiding a Nethergale has been suggested to the Sha'tari Council by the following steps.

G: Get away from the Nethergale as fast and as far as possible.

A: Anticipate the worst if an attack is inevitable.

L: Lower yourself underground or into cover as far as you can.

E: Evacuate the immediate area after the Nethergale has passed.

While this section is unfortunately and quite morbidly short, it is intentional. There are very few reasonable mitigations for Nethergales possible. I can only hope that whoever reading this takes this as a message.

I truly cannot state this enough- Nethergales are a terrifying, horrid manifestation of some of the most powerful magical forces that can naturally coalesce. It will never get better. You will die on Outland sooner rather than later, and all too terribly if it is by a Nethergale. For your own sake, take no chances. Leave and never return.

2 - Kindness

It was Winterveil in Outland, year 40.

Tara always thought it was weird that it was called that here. She'd heard from her parents and obviously read some books about it. The first snows on Arathi. Trails of colourful lights. Pine trees, and the presents under them. She and her friends had snuck into the World's End tavern after closing hours with her key and set up a party of their own. They played some music on the piano, drank and ate all they could bring in, and gave each other whatever gifts they could.

They made this awful place bearable.

"Tara!" One of her friends ran over. "This came in for you earlier."

"Eli! Fucking hiding it from me, I swear." She slapped him on the back of the head with a sassy huff and sat down to open it.

It was a white shirt with these embroidered long sleeves. She gasped and threw everything else off to try it on. How the hell did she get something this expensive, all the way out here?

She looked at the note it came with.

"To Tara, from Mom and Dad.

We're sorry we couldn't be there. As always, they say it's too dangerous for us to come there all the way from Honour Hold. They'd need to arrange a whole platoon. But we managed to get this for you. We hope it makes up for it.

We love you."

Tara teared up. She didn't even notice Eli come up to her and hug her.

Tara wrapped her arms around him and sobbed. "I miss them."

"I know. But I'll wait with you for them. I promise."

The night stretched on. Tara had opened up some of the kegs from the bar downstairs, the ones the boss says are too expensive to open. She didn't care, not tonight. Everyone had a glass or maybe three. And it was then the Nethergale started coming in.

Okay. It's fine. Tara got up with the rest of her friends and hurried out from the bar towards the Terrace. It came in quick, and they wouldn't have much time. It was already too hot to bear. But she was used to them. Just follow the street, up the ramp, through the gate.

She looked around. Eli was still out there. He was only a few steps away when the Nethergale hit. Maybe it was just bad luck. Maybe he was too drunk. Maybe he just needed to walk a bit faster.

Tara watched as his skin vanished, and his bones a second later.

It was Noblegarden in Outland, year 41. Tara spent her break, all too short, reading a book about flowers. They used to bloom in the spring, though she never saw them. She loved every colour but purple. And then she looked to a note from her parents again. It came a month ago and she hadn't had a reply since.

"We're going to speak to the garrison commander. At this rate we're going to have to request to be released from service. But at least we'll be together?"

Her boss banged on the door. Her break was over.

It was like the worst sorts of people in Shattrath came here. World's End was Lower City's melting pot. Ogres and orcs and retired soldiers came here, they were drunk and smelled and vomited and smoked, they leered at her or pulled at her shirt which had already snagged on too many rotting table ends, and they just never stopped coming. But she hated the Arakkoa most, because out of all the patrons they seemed to hate it here the least. They can have this fucking hole, she whispered under her breath. Then maybe I can go.

It was almost summer in Outland. Tara didn't have time to read anything today. It was too busy. She whirled around trying to get everything served for everyone that she didn't even see any new customers come in. Some woman paid for a 2 silver drink with an 8 silver tip. Tara huffed. What good was money when she was stuck here anyway? There was nothing to spend it on. She finally got to go on her break and stood outside, when a courier handed her a letter. It was from her parents. Her hands trembled as she opened it.

"Hi Tara."

She sobbed and gripped her shirt tightly.

She couldn't even read it all.

She just saw a few words.

"Couldn't."

"Have to.."

"Stuck."

It was already a bad day when a Nethergale hit. And when everyone else went to leave, no one else came to check on her as she sat in the corner by the empty door frame. No one hugged her. No one pulled her with them. And her heart ached and her face burned and her throat was beginning to close. She just wanted it all to stop. To go.

But a hand did grab her. And put her arm around their shoulder. And pulled her to the Terrace. And when she tried to go back out, to go back to normal, sobbing with embarrassment and guilt they came back again before pulling her to that clinic on the city's north side.

Some Anchorite was running it, and looked almost as busy as her on a shift just after the end of the week. A crystal got put next to her, and with a prayer it ebbed soft light to soothe her burns.

Both her and the person who saved her got beds next to each other. But Tara couldn't even speak. She just couldn't.

"Are you okay?" the woman asked.

Tara didn't reply. She wasn't, really.

"I'm sorry, I... I know you went through a lot, but I just wanted to check?"

Still, Tara couldn't find the words.

The woman banged her head on her pillow and showed the same wounds, the same burns.

"Look, I just pulled you out from something that could've killed you and you can't even give me your name?"

She spoke.

"It's Tara."

"Well, hi Tara. I'm Erin. Can we talk?"

"Do we have to?"

"No, but it'll be really awkward if you don't. The cleric said we'll be here for a few hours."

"What do you want?" Tara looked at her.

"I just wanted to see if you were okay. You could've died out there. It looked like you just gave up."

She was silent.

Erin felt a guilt wrack her chest. She knew now.

"I'm sorry..."

What felt like an hour passed, and Erin spoke again.

"So... what do you like to do?"

Tara huffed, but at least appreciated the effort.

"I read."

"Anything good?"

"No."

Another eternity passed. Maybe she should just be honest.

"Tara?"

She looked over. "What?"

"I just want to help. You look miserable."

"You can't, I'm stuck here."

"Why? I can help you leave." Erin said with a hopeful heart.

"I can't afford anything else. If I quit my job I'll be homeless. And I have to wait for my parents. They're stationed somewhere and they won't let them leave."

"In the army?" Erin asked.

"In Honour Hold." Tara nodded.

Erin thought about it for a bit, and came up with something that might work.

"Okay. I'm going to look into getting your parents out. But you need to get out of here too. If another Nethergale comes..."

"I just said I can't leave though!"

"I know!" Erin replied. "But you're not leaving. Just taking a break. I'm going to rent you somewhere to stay in Stormwind so you're not on Outland. And I'll pick up your shifts for you at the tavern so you don't have to do them."

Tara froze. Why would anyone do this? Is it a trick? Is there a catch? She barely knows this person, is rescued by them, then they offer to fix her life? Is there a cost? Maybe she did die, and it's all just a trick of the mind.

All this and more swirled in Tara's head, but she could only ask one word.

"Why?"

Erin smiled as she looked at her.

"Because I can't just sit back. I have to try."

3 - Her One Happy Ending

"So where did you say you were from, Tara?"

Erin stood with her arms crossed on the windowsill of the small room she'd managed to find for her just to get out of Outland, and felt a wonderfully cool breeze brush her on that otherwise blisteringly hot day.

Tara gazed up from her book and sighed. "My parents were from Arathi. I think they were in the army there before the 2nd war."

"They must be pretty old, then?"

"From what I hear from them," Tara said, "almost everyone still in Honour Hold is. From about fifty to as far as seventy."

Erin clenched her fist. "It's ridiculous."

"Yeah.." Tara nodded.

Erin pushed herself away from the window and looked at Tara.

"Every second longer they stay there, the riskier it gets for them.

I'm going to get them home today. No matter what."

Erin's thoughts pushed their way to the front of her mind.

'Can you really promise that?'

'Do we have a choice?'

'Choice not to give her false hope?'

'No. To not let them die.'

Erin went straight to the source. If Tara's parents served in Arathi before they went to Outland, then maybe someone from Arathi would have a claim to either retire them or recruit them back into their own station. It doesn't matter what. It doesn't matter if they're still in the army, just that they're off of Outland. A clap of her hands took her to that northern stronghold past the battered war machines covered in moss and battlefields of half-buried swords. Where better to find an off-duty commander so thoroughly soused she might easily manipulate him than the tavern?

Erin analysed her surroundings and spotted a man too covered in blue-gold armour for him to be unimportant, and approached the table he and his men sat at.

"You should get some new material." He said to one of them, drawing a small breath of his ale. "That's the seventh time I've heard it this week."

"Oh, hark at him!" the soldier scoffed. "Some of us are stuck in these walls. What's your material? Ogres give you any good jokes?"

Erin came over and presented her staff fully within view. "You'd be surprised at what sort of jokes Ogres can tell if you give them the chance."

The soldiers made some snide comments about her which she did her best to ignore, until the commander stepped in.

"Alright... enough of that. This woman here is a civilian, here for her own accord... though I am curious as to what she wants."

She watched as the other soldiers left, and appraised the commander.

'He wears his flag proudly. Still in armour, even in the tavern. He's committed to this.'

Erin held out her hand to shake.

"My name is Erin Langley. I understand that an audience with you might be a lot to ask, considering your station...?"

"Commander. Lance Lionguard."

Erin's brow furrowed. '*Oh dear. One of those?*' She was certain to not let those words spill.

"Then I really am in good company. Good to meet you."

"So what can I do for you, Ms. Langley?" He nodded at her staff. "You're a wielder."

"I can't say I've heard anyone call us Wielders in about a decade. But yeah. How much do you know about Outland?"

"We are taught all of the wars. The second ended just before I was born."

"Then you'd know Outland is fucked." Erin spat.

Lance took another drink. "I'm aware. I know men who are stationed in Honour Hold... no idea why but it's not my place to question the politics of Alliance movements."

'*Now's your chance*' Erin thought.

"That's actually the reason why I came to speak to you. I need your help or... or someone's help, getting two people stationed out of there. They're good soldiers. They want to serve. But they will die on Outland if they stay. Undoubtedly."

"Just two? And who are they to you?" Lance replied, suspicion already creeping.

"The parents of a friend. She's grown up in Shattrath. She's about my age. And the whole world is falling apart on her... literally. But she can't leave without her parents, who are stuck in Honour Hold. She's waited for them all this time. But I worry if she waits any longer, either she or they are going to get themselves killed."

Lance glanced at his mug and pondered it. "She's stuck waiting for her family to come home?" His voice sounded wistful, pained even. There was a thread here Erin could pull.

"You can speak to her, if you like. Ser." Erin replied.

"Let me clear some things up here first. I'll meet you by the gates."

Some time later, Erin knocked on Tara's door.

"Tara, there's someone who wants to talk to you about your parents."

Tara unlocked the door and welcomed him in, as she grovelled and bowed. Anything to get her parents back.

"Yes, milord... I... come this way, please ser."

Lance hid a shudder as he came into the room perhaps too small for Tara to live in for her whole life. "Ms. Langley said you are from Arathi?"

"Yes, milord my... my parents served there before."

"And they serve now in Honour Hold?"

"They have since the Second War... but when they had me they sent me to Shattrath for a better life."

"Why didn't you just leave without them?" He asked with genuine care.

"They're my parents." Tara's eyes turned red and sore. "They promised me they'd come home with me."

Erin watched as Lance brushed his heart as if he had been stabbed through it, and hid it well as he turned towards the door.

"Don't worry, miss. We'll get your parents home."

Erin jogged after Lance. "Hey, are you okay?"

By now, he'd already returned to his stoic self. "I am. I can get us to Honour Hold quickly."

They came to the mage tower, and entered a room Erin hadn't seen before. Lance gave his name, rank, and details for his visit. It was all very hush-hush. She took great interest looking around at a presumably clandestine little operation they had going on here, or at least they acted like it was. As to not anger her new friend, Erin stowed Violetspire away in a box at their request, and a portal soon appeared straight to Honour Hold's mage tower.

Erin made idle conversation as they went from the tower out into the shattered landscape, through the broken stronghold at the end of the world. Green clouds are good, Erin thought, and watched the skies carefully.

"Their names are Davron and Meghan Hayward." Erin said as she looked at Lance, as they stood outside the Commander's Quarters.

Lance knocked on the door, and didn't wait for a response to enter.

He gave a stern salute. "Commander Lance Lionguard of the Arathi Legion. I arrived via Warp Portal and was hoping if you'd be able to assist me in the current project for the reclamation of Stromgarde."

Honour Hold's commander gave a puzzled frown as he sat down. "I'm on the wrong planet for that, boy."

"We know of two Arathi-born natives serving here. Good soldiers we could take home to assist us. Stromgarde is a bastion of the north, and reinforcing it serves well in protecting us against the Horde."

"We're short staffed as it is." The garrison commander said. "I won't leave us undermanned if the Horde decides to attack."

Lance whispered to Erin. "How important is this to you?"

Erin replied. "I can't just leave them..."

Lance cut him a deal.

"This woman is a wielder and would more than make up the service of the two soldiers I'd be taking. One week's service in exchange for them."

"A week?" The commander balked. "No. A year."

"One month."

"Six months."

Lance glared. "One month."

"Three months."

Sweat dripped down Erin's brow.

'Are we really doing this? What are they going to make me do?'

'They can't make you do anything.'

'But it's the army...'

'You know they can't hold you. And from here, you can get the rest out too.'

"Fine. One month. But she can start repairing the south wall tomorrow."

Erin gazed at the contract in front of her.
One month of service in Honour Hold. Expected to be at her station twelve hours a day.
Duties both magical and non magical.
It's just like any other contract she'd signed. Right?
She put pen to paper.

Tara's parents sobbed with joy when Lance came to relieve them from their posts, finally able to leave this hellish place. And when they brought them home to Tara, she wept and wept and could barely stand, only held up by her family's embrace.
Lance watched the reunion with a pain only someone who might never find their own. Is that why he had done this? Either way, he was good for helping.
"I'm retiring you from service." He spoke to them as he left, stoic and guarded. "Spend your time with your family. Make the most of it."

Erin left them with a pouch of gold coins and a list of names they could look into to find a place big enough for all of them.
"Thank you." Tara sobbed to her. "Thank you so much."
"I did promise, didn't I?" Erin tried to smile.
"What are you going to do now?" Tara asked.
"I'm going to get the rest of them out. Or try my best to."

Another morning came. Erin put on her shirt and trousers, a staff on her back.
She stepped up to the portal to hell and took a deep breath.
How far was she willing to go for this?

4 - No Land for Young Magi

Erin felt the ground heave and bend as she stood on it, and with each step dirt turned to dust.

She levitated stone after stone onto the south wall, as the *illustrious* Commander Francis Travers, who considers himself master of what was left of Honour Hold, watched over her with a keen eye. How kind of him to take the time out of his busy schedule to watch. It was cosmetic, really. A light breeze could blow them over again, let alone a Nethergale.

Erin strained harder on the spell than she needed to, used incantations less efficiently than she knew how to, and felt the blood drip down her nose.

'Little rebellions.' She thought. *'Keep your cards close to your chest. Take every inch.'*

"Commander, ser." She looked at him and spoke. "I can go on no longer."

He tossed a mana vial at her with a disapproving scowl. "You will."

Long, gruelling hours faced her with little reprieve. She knew not what she hated more—being outside to the elements, in that airless space, ever watchful of a sky that could open up and swallow her at any moment, or the crumbling keep itself. Every floorboard, every strut rotted and infested with roaches, dust from eroded stone falling onto her face, cracks in nearly every corner. There was little food to eat, such that even hardtack was a highlight.

She spent a lot of time in the mess hall between pointless duties, and from her earliest chance began to meet the others who served there and avail herself to them.

She saw an older lady there sitting with some reports and a bowl of gruel. Erin carried hers over and sat across from her with a smile.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Erin!"

The lady folded her reports away and smiled. "You are new here, aren't you? I cannot remember the last time I met someone new, but I am overjoyed. My name is Olivia. I'm Commander Travers' second."

Erin raised an eyebrow. "Ah. I interrupted you while you were busy."

Olivia smiled. "It's not like *that*, dear! What do you think of him?"

Erin pushed her hair out of her face. "I am contracted to serve. It doesn't matter much what I think of him."

"That bad, hm?" Olivia sighed. "And just how long do we have the pleasure of having you here, Erin?"

"A month." Erin replied. "But I don't have to stay nights like you do. It must be awful sleeping in these beds."

"Maybe you can get us some new sheets when you pass through the capital?"

"Maybe we won't have to? At this rate..."

Erin cut herself off before she could say anything more.

'Sow the seeds, and let them grow.'

Olivia pouted and brought something out from her bag.

"Here, Erin dear. Have a cookie. I pilfered it from the Commander's secret stash."

Erin smirked. "Thank you."

Olivia had offered to help Erin after the Commander had tasked her to repair the decaying wooden fences on the hold's perimeter with posts and panels that were only slightly less decayed. It made the work easier, somehow, having someone to talk to about getting out again.

"Do you think much about Azeroth, Olivia?" Erin asked her.

"Only about as much as you must think of Outland I suppose. It's been my home longer than it hasn't."

Erin shrugged. Olivia held the post firm while Erin missed it a few times with the mallet, only to finally get it on the fourth try.

"I've ended up thinking a lot more about Outland than I bargained for. I kinda hate it here."

"Don't we all?" Olivia gave a doting smile and rubbed Erin on the shoulder. "But for some of us, at least it's a hate we know."

"But why stay? They know they're going to die here?"

"We all will, one day." Olivia sighed.

"I don't see the point of dying somewhere shit." Erin angrily drove another post into the dirt, only for it to cave away under them. Erin beat herself on the head in frustration.

"Shh... it happens here, okay?" Olivia tried her best to calm Erin. "Sometimes the ground is a bit soft."

"I know!" Erin shouted. "And one day it's going to fall out from under *us*!"

Erin looked at Olivia. "Promise me I can get you out, if nothing else?"

Olivia smiled, and pulled something from her bag.

"Here, dear. Another cookie."

"So. Have any of you got family on Azeroth?" Erin asked a man in the mess hall, as she had with so many of the other people here. Perhaps it would work on him, as it hadn't before. So many here were so resigned, so married to their duty, so willing to fall...

"I do." The old soldier replied. "I left them there in Westfall."

"Westfall's doing a little better nowadays perhaps than when you left it. Damaged, but recovering. Do you ever want to see home again?" She asked.

"I don't think I ever could."

"Why not?"

"Because I am already home."

"But your home is falling apart..."

"I hardly think I'll outlast it." He gave a reluctant smile. "At least I know it will be safe."

"Do you know how to scry?" Commander Travers asked Erin.

"No, ser. I always thought divination was utterly droll."

"Then learn." He sat her in front of a crystal ball and tossed a tome at her. 'How to Ponder your Orb'. "I want you to observe Thrallmar. I expect a full report in two hours."

Erin flicked through the pages when he had left and tossed it away. She already knew what sort of report she'd give him. Erin instead scanned the region for magical signatures, and spied as a Nethergale swirled and swept through an area blessedly far from them. She'd never seen one from this angle, but she could swear she could feel the heat through her crystal ball.

Something was off. She could see a shape in the storm, through the orb. She felt it shudder. Cracks began to form. She took it closer, scried closer, just enough to see the form of the shape. It was... humanoid?

It turned to her.
The orb cracked, and went dim.

Another exhausting day in sunny Hellfire passed without wind as Erin was forced to conjure litre after litre of water that would only exist for an hour. She and Olivia slumped onto a table in the mess with three others. Olivia introduced the other soldiers as Simone, Luca and Rabi. "How have your days been?" Erin asked them.

Rabi shook his head. "You know I'm sixty-five years old this year? And I haven't seen the sun in forty."

"Why do you stay then?" Erin asked.

"You think the Commander would let us leave? I'm glad you got Dav and Meghan out, but the rest of us are in it until we're buried."

Simone patted him on the shoulder. "Maybe we can at least send some letters out? Surely the Commander wouldn't mind that."

"Unlikely." Olivia looked at them seriously. "He's worried the Horde are going to steal our intel. Had a meeting with him last night about it."

"Are you serious?" Luca raised his voice, almost shuddering the thin, broken walls. "What intel would well-wishes to our families have that's worth stealing?"

Erin saw them argue. She could help. "Let me."

Olivia looked at her. "Let you... send those letters?"

"I could do better. You guys have all worked so hard... your debts and service to the Alliance paid more wholly than anyone on Azeroth. And those soldiers get to retire. Why not you? Why should you die for a Commander that doesn't care for you, as he chases shadows of a foe just as broken as us? What's the point of honour when a Nethergale could sweep through here in a second and turn us all to dust?"

They looked at her grimly. Olivia, especially so.

"Just... venting. Sorry." She sighed.

Erin had barely stepped through the portal one morning when she felt the blaring of a warhorn in the distance. Commander Travers grabbed her by the neck and tossed her towards the gates. "Soldier, get to your station!" He cried.

Erin held back as long as she could. "What? What's going on?"

"Report to the lieutenant commander at the gates, or we'll all be demon food!"

Every defender Honour Hold could muster was there as droves of gnashing felhounds brought low. Erin saw Olivia there, and she put herself in front of Erin.

"Stay back. I'll keep them off you."

"I can't fight!" Erin stammered. "I.. I didn't think he was going to make me fight!"

"Don't worry." Olivia smiled. "Just watch my back!"

Olivia charged off, and Erin tried to make sense of the skirmish from the back lines. Waves of hellhounds came in, chaotic and disordered, cutting off the defenders to go for the backs.

'I'm not going to let them die just so I can lie to the Commander. I have to help with every inch of what I can do.'

Erin began weaving mana and moved men and hounds both from her position at the backlines into places that would better suit them, like the hand of a player moving pieces on a chessboard. Archers to elevated cover. Defenders in a line at the gates to create a chokepoint. Hounds in front and away. She guided blades to hit their marks true, and pulled men back when they came too injured. But mana was raw here, chaotic, and forcing it into slim channels was harder than she thought. Moving someone farther than a few feet had her dipping into her potions. And they ran out all too soon.

Erin saw a hound leap at Olivia's jugular and moved her out of the way in the nick of time, before her nose exploded, and she fell into the dirt.

Erin woke in the medical wing as Commander Travers held out a glass of water for her.

"You've been holding out on me." He said.

"I don't..." She gripped her eye, her head still ringing, and drank the water.

"Don't lie. I saw you out in the field. You've had it easy until now. I'm putting you on a special assignment regarding our efforts against the Horde. Standby for your orders."

Erin pulled herself into Olivia's quarters, still bruised from the battle, her nose still gushing blood. She choked on it and begged her. "What's he going to make me do?"

Olivia pursed her lips and came over to prop Erin onto a chair and wiped the blood from her nose, offering another water. "Start from the beginning?"

"The Commander just spoke to me... said he knows I've been holding back... he says he's going to send me on a mission against the Horde. He can't make me do that, right? I'm a civilian!"

Olivia shook her head. "I'm afraid he can. You signed the contract."

"Then what's he going to make me do? You have to know, right? You're his second!"

Olivia locked the door to her chambers. "You won't tell anyone?"

"No." Erin was quick to answer.

"We discussed it last night. He's considering having you teleport into the Horde base and assassinate their warlord."

"Oh Stars..." Erin clutched her chest. "We can't stay. He can't make me. We have to leave, I'll get Simone and Rabi and you and we'll go... he can't do this."

Commander Travers read the report handed to him by his most trusted.

"It's come to this, then? That didn't take her long. I knew she was planning something. It was good of you to remember where your loyalties lie. In service to the Alliance."

His most trusted nodded.

"I'll try talk her out of it. She thinks you can't compel her, but legally you are well within your rights."

Commander Travers replied. "You really think you can convince her? She's foolish and stubborn. She could have kept her head down and served, and come out fine."

His most trusted shook her head.

"I have to try. We can't allow treason, but something tells me she doesn't realise how serious this all is. The Alliance needs us here."

"That it does." Travers replied. "But if you can't succeed, Lieutenant Commander, then I expect her in chains before she can sneak out."

Olivia saluted and took her leave.

She'd spent forty years here in service to the Alliance, and in the end that mattered more than anything, or anyone, else.

5 - Where Violet Winds Blew

A faint sun set in the skies above Honour Hold, clouded by reams of raw energy and a fading atmosphere that turned once blue sights black. Out of all of the aged stronghold's living quarters, one was perhaps maintained the best. She could do nothing against the entropy that slowly caused stone walls to peel off in thick sheafs, nor could she stop the splinters and chunks and nails that would fall from supporting beams too broken to be fixed. But in this room, this place of order, Olivia sought to maintain it. After all, what else did she have?

A nagging doubt pulled her towards one of the reports she'd written on the girl who had come here recently, and she read over it again and again to try garner the strength she needed to do what she had to.

"To Commander Travers,

It is my displeasure to report to you that our recent contractor, one Erin Langley, is currently plotting a scheme to enable the desertion of other soldiers and treason against the Crown.

Over the time she has stayed here, she has repeatedly made attempts to question your authority, our duty as soldiers, and the purpose of Honour Hold's duties on Outland. She has spoken to many of our men and women and attempted to coerce or convince them to leave their posts due to the dangers Outland presents in what she claims is otherwise unavoidable death. While many of our men remain loyal to the Good Cause, three may have been swayed and we should ideally keep them within their chambers until the issue is dealt with. Erin believes me to be a co-conspirator, a position within which I will leverage.

It is my honest belief that Erin genuinely believes she is helping our men escape a terrible fate, yet perhaps merely does not understand the gravity of our work. We have laboured to enable stability for the few soldiers remaining, and her reopening of old wounds implies a moral failure of hers to me instead of any malicious intent.

Though hired as a member of our forces, Erin is ultimately a civilian and does not have the training, aptitude or discipline the rest of our men can be expected to hold.

I request permission to see if I may convince her to drop her attempts towards this, and otherwise take full responsibility of returning her to you so she may be charged for premeditated crime with the full force of the Alliance's power.

By your leave,
Lieutenant Commander Olivia Richter."

She put down the page and breathed deeply, slipping a pair of handcuffs into her sleeve.

Erin was hardly so collected. She scratched endlessly at her neck under her hair as she sat in the corner of the mess hall.

'Come on. COME ON! Where are you?'

She dug her nails into her neck as worry filled her mind. They were supposed to meet there ten minutes ago. It was all falling apart. Any moment the Commander could...

"Luca!" Erin spotted him and hissed, waving him over. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Trying to find everyone else." He replied, and sat down on the chair across from her, ever watching behind his shoulder. "I couldn't find them anywhere. Not at their usual posts for sure."

"Damnit..." Erin seethed.

"You don't think they found out?" He asked. "I... are you sure this will go okay? You know what they do to deserters."

Erin grit her teeth and leaned in. "They won't do anything to a sixty year old man. You served your time, you served it more than any other soldier. It'll cause even more dissent if people see that's what a lifetime of service gets you. It's time you take back."

They looked as Olivia came over. Erin smiled with relief. "Thank the Stars you turned up. We can't find Simone and Rabi anywhere."

Olivia tilted her head, wondering if she could lie to her any more.

"Ah... about that."

Erin's expression turned glum.

"I need to speak with you for a moment. Can I ask you to come to me to my quarters?"

Erin felt it all fall away. Something was wrong. That feeling of dread as they walked the halls was palpable and silent, and the click of the door locking behind her proved it.

"Erin.. you can't carry on with this." Olivia told her, doing her best to look unthreatening.

"Why not? I thought you wanted to leave?" Erin stood on edge, and folded her arms to smear her clammy hands against her sleeves.

"Because it's treason, Erin. We have duties and expectations of us, and they apply to you too. When you signed that contract.." Erin felt her heart wither. "When you signed that contract, you pledged yourself to those same rules that bind us. Yours had an end date, but it doesn't mean you can break them."

Erin looked down at the ground. "Is breaking rules any worse than dying?"

Olivia sighed. "We're dying anyway. At least this way it means something."

"But the others, they don't want to die! They want to see their families again, to go home, to not sell themselves to an industry that just uses them and throws them away!"

Olivia tried to calm her, knowing these walls were all too thin. "Erin.."

"I thought you were on my side. I thought you wanted to leave too? What changed?" Erin begged and blubbered, desperately hoping something could prove it wrong, that her assumptions of this old lady who just wanted to feel the wind on her face for the last time was real, and that no one should want to remain in this dying place, and that no one should want to die.

Olivia looked at her with that stinging disappointment, and Erin felt it dig into her deeply. It was that look someone you thought was on your side gives you after something goes wrong, and a feeling like when you realise a parent or teacher never understood you to begin.

Olivia spoke softly. "Erin... the Commander, he... I reported to him and told him that you wanted to do this, but he won't take any action if you don't."

Erin's voice only raised. "You reported me to the Commander?"

"Because what you would do is commit treason! It is real, and it is serious!"

"You lied to me... you said you wanted to get out!"

"Only so I could protect you!"

“That doesn’t even make any fucking sense!” Erin grabbed her head and turned away, the walls of this stone prison enclosing around her. She had bitten off more than she could chew. Of course she couldn’t help. Of course it would all go wrong. She had one happy ending, and now it all had to go to shit just like it did every single time!

Erin turned and saw the glint of iron from Olivia’s pockets, and the familiar sound of chains. She snapped her fingers and screamed her incantation, anything to get out of here, but Olivia grabbed her arm at the last minute and sent both of them tumbling outside in the dirt as they rolled down the hill outside the keep.

Olivia struggled and gripped Erin’s hands and wrestled her towards the cuffs. “If you had listened, if you had stayed quiet, it would have been fine!” All she said was true, and while she meant it well Erin only heard it as immovable authority. Never change anything. Never fight to improve. Never move past your station or make a mess or fuss or try to help anyone ever.

“Get off me!” Erin shouted. “You can’t make me!” She balled her fist and punched Olivia in the corner of her head, enough to startle her and cause her to go weak. Erin scrambled to get up and run away, get some distance, but Olivia launched herself with surprising vitality just as the ground began to shift. “We never wanted your help!” Olivia said, still intent on cuffing her. “It would have been fine without you!” And Erin didn’t want to hear her, or discuss, or talk because how could she be wrong? For the people who she spoke to, who genuinely wanted to leave, why should she give up? She can help, she has the power to help, magic at her fingertips and she’s just supposed to sit back and let people die in hell as they spy and plot on enemies they’ve long been at peace with?

Erin struggled under Olivia’s grip, and pried her fingers free... only to hear a crack. A rumble.

The peninsula shelf gave way out from under them. Erin caught rocks seemingly more stable, but Olivia had been farther from the ground, and was too far to grab onto anything.

Erin turned her head downwards and saw in slow motion Olivia plummeting into the abyss.

‘I can’t let anyone die here. I can’t!’

Snap.

Erin snapped her fingers, and blinked Olivia closer to her, but missed her entirely.

“Hold on. I’ll catch you!”

Snap

Her arm moved too slow, and passed by Olivia too late.

“Just... just wait!”

Snap

Her clammy fingers slid off Olivia’s hand.

Snap

Olivia kept falling, any rocks she tried to hold onto crumbled.

Snap

Blood oozed from Erin’s nose...

Snap

Snap

Snap

Erin tried one final time, but no magic came from her fingertips.
She watched Olivia fall into the dark, and be consumed.

Commander Travers sat in his office across from Erin. She was a mess. Pathetic really. No matter how much she tried to hold in her tears and grit her teeth, sputters of spit left her with aching sobs as she pled her case.

“We fought... because I didn’t want to fight the Horde.” She drew in quickened breaths. “And I tried to run away... but she caught me and then the ground broke... and she fell.”

He appraised her unrelentingly, seeing only a criminal, a traitor.

Erin felt cold iron from the other soldiers wrap around and lock her wrists, and put her in a box under the ground.

Only this time, she didn’t bother escaping.

6 - Alone On A Floating Rock

Erin stood alone on a floating rock. It was some island they'd gated off at the fringes of Outland's hellish landscape, a lump of red stone and sand floating slowly into the abyss. They didn't even bother to chain it to the mainland. To even pretend.

Erin paced around her 'cell' and abruptly came to a halt as she saw one of the chunks of stone underneath her feet crumble and fall through the island, creating a hole in which she could peer into darkness. Why didn't she listen...

Soon, there was a sparkle, a crack, a roar as some horribly unstable portal wrenched itself open and spat out two men. One was an Alliance Arcanist from the Tower at Honour Hold, the other a familiar face. It was Lance, the Commander who had helped her save Tara's parents. She had a lump in her gut that told her all too quickly he wouldn't do the same.

"You can't stay here, it's too unstable." She told him, worried that it would swallow him too. No one should have to be here in this desolate, forgotten place. Least of all him.

"Why do I feel like I'm not the only one you've had to say that to?" He replied, and Erin honestly couldn't answer. What point was there even pleading her case anymore? But he looked at her with a stern disappointment and called her up with a hand. "Get up, soldier." He said. "And explain yourself."

Erin looked at him with a sorrowful glance, one of acceptance. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get you involved with this." He didn't seem convinced, but she told the truth. "I wanted to help people get out. It's only a matter of time and I thought it was better they be on Azeroth than stay here. I thought Olivia wanted to but... she didn't. We fought. I tried to get out. She chased me. The ground broke..."

Erin's nails dug into her arm. "I didn't kill her. I didn't want to."

"I said one month... keep your head down for one month." He scowled at her.

"I know, but it was either that or let them die."

"Damn your arrogance!" Lance spat. "You don't dictate what people do with their lives. It's not your place to question their choices or why they made them. You got two people out, so you had to convince yourself no one else wanted to be here?"

Erin looked down and away, she couldn't meet his glance, but tried meeting his words.

"Would you be able to make the choice between risking the lives of all your men, or just saving a few?"

"You don't have the rank to understand the weight of that question." Lance said, his voice grim. "I would risk my life to save my men, and I know they would do the same. I would **never** question their resolve or loyalty if they chose to stand against insurmountable odds. These aren't children trapped in a burning building, not helpless villagers in a raid. They're proud soldiers of the Alliance!"

"I just don't understand why someone would want to stay here!" Erin finally mustered the courage to shout. "Do you know what they're stationed here for? Because they don't! Are they just supposed to stay here, always following orders, never asking questions of superiors who could just be exploiting them?"

"The Alliance means something to them!" Ever more rocks crumbled and fell from the island as Lance's voice boomed. "To them this is their home, a beacon of the Alliance in this hellscape. They fight because for some of us the Alliance is the only thing they have!"

Erin measured his glance. She wouldn't win. "Alright."

He could only look at Erin with disbelief. Just how much had she given up?

"Alright? Alright... then you'll hang for murder and treason. While I don't believe you committed murder, sewing dissent to desert is treason, and the punishment for both is the same."

"They already decided it?"

"The Garrison Commander has the final say. I will do what I can to stop this from happening, but you need to accept the gravity of the situation. You are under military law. And the proof against you is clear cut. You need to wake the fuck up. When we're done here, I'll march you to the commander to plead your case."

Erin swallowed the stone in her throat. She stood on the precipice even still, and one wrong step could send her tumbling off. She spited it and she spited herself. Well-meaning would never be enough, and yet, had she really meant well? Had she tried hard enough? Had she been smart? These things, throwing yourself into danger for the sake of others, worked so well for other people. What piece of the formulae had she missed? If she had only spoken to the soldiers, understood them, why they wanted to stay, maybe she could have gotten them out another way or made it kinder for them to stay here, less hellish. She hated the idea she should just keep her head down and never try to make the world better and yet she knew that she could still be wrong on how to make it better, and the consequences for her mistakes were always the highest. Erin still could not understand why someone would want to die for the Alliance, only that for better or worse they do.

"How much grovelling should I do?" Erin asked

Lance looked at her before turning away. "As much as you need to be believable."

Rows of candles and braziers burned intensely as Erin and Lance entered the hall of her judgement, Commander Travers' quarters. She followed Lance down the passage and to the front desk, treasuring that with each step there would be another, until she stopped.

Lance saluted at him. "Sir. I have Miss Langley here. She wishes to say something to you." Erin waited for her turn. *'Take no chances. Don't speak out of line. Stars. For once, just hold it in...'*

Commander Travers judged her from behind his war table. "You think this is a trial? Go on. Say your last words."

"I realise how my actions were foolish... how they put the entirety of the stronghold in danger... I thought I was helping people... I didn't think people wanted to be here, serving the Good Alliance... I didn't know they could be proud of it."

"You didn't think... you didn't think... and you decided to commit treason." He frowned, but averted his gaze sideways. The brazier beside him crackled and from it rolled a misty haze of smoke... and he saw it stir. He looked at Lance and they locked glances, who frowned in acknowledgement. Erin gazed, only half-aware, and saw the Commander draw his blade in a horizontal arc to carve through the air only for a wake of black blood to explode outwards and spatter the wall. Lance threw her to the floor and brought up his shield just as blades enveloped in shadow revealed themselves and struck his shield, causing sparks that illuminated two eyes in their darkness. "Assassins!"

Commander Travers was all too eager to strike back at his assailant, coming down hard with the crossguard of his sword and caving in the skull of his foe, only to seal the job by driving his sword through their chest.

Lance roared as mightily as his namesake and rung his aegis against his assassin like the bells that soon began to resound, alarms that the fort was under attack once again. He rammed the assassin into the table and pinned him there, only for a third assassin to appear down the hall.

Erin had forced herself to her feet now and keenly heard the iconic 'decloaking' of a rogue's shadow-stealth as well as the whistle of thrown knives, their blades shining against candlelight. She whipped herself around and snapped her fingers with fury, energy enveloping the flying steel and redirecting it only a foot to the left out of harm's way. "Another, behind us!" She called, not ready to let the same people she was trying to save die in this worse of ways.

Lance grabbed the head of the assassin pinned against the table and showed it to the third. "Stop now or I'll kill your comrade!" The assassin's drawn dagger, ebbing with venom, was answer enough. A crack came as Lance snapped a neck, then pulled up his shield and slammed it sideways. Dropping to his knees, the final assassin slid over the floorboards under Lance's barrier and worked his point straight through the gaps in his armour under his belt. With a furious war cry, the soldier's shield slammed downwards and shattered the knife, but the assassin was too quick. He jumped, kicked off Lance's shield, and began running down the hallway. "Stop him!" The Commander bellowed.

Erin held out both her hands with a three-finger grip and let the world hear her incantation. "Leva in Animo!" On one side, the door of the chamber slammed shut with unseen force. On the other, Erin strained and felt sweat drip down her nose as she put every ounce of her energy into holding the assassin in place. He forced himself against her grasp, though with every step he made he was pulled back in equal measure, as if trying to walk through gale-force winds. But mana was hard to control here. Wild particles and streaks of violet-blue danced and denied her. *'No, you will listen. You bend to me!'* She screamed in her mind, and turned them to force. She gurgled, and choked on her blood. "Quick..!"

Lance responded in earnest and ran into the fray, catching his footing as he went. He sought to drive his own sword into the assassin's stomach, but the Commander had other plans. "Alive!" he shouted, and with skill Lance swung the flat of his blade into the assassin. He stumbled, and Erin vomited, croaking, dropping to her knees and watched blood pool on the floor. There were no further chances, and the fight already finished, when Lance snatched the wrist of the final assailant and headbutted him to the floor.

Guards soon rushed into the room and all turned quiet again. Erin knelt there as her own blood traced through the cracks in the wooden floor, her vision and hearing foggy. The Commander and Lance traded comments, no doubt discussing how this could happen. People came to pick up the assassin and carried him away. But in her malaise, she heard a few words still.

"Once we have what we need, he'll be executed."

She gripped Violetsfire's haft and, though she wasn't strong enough, Erin wished she could break it in half. If only she'd listened, if only she did what she was told, she could've stopped this... she could've prevented this... and stopped this from needing to happen at all.

"Still. If not for you two, I'd likely be dead." The Commander said. "I suppose you see things more clearly now."

Erin always did know how to feel the eyes of her 'superiors' on the back of her neck, crawling down her spine. "Yes, sir."

The Commander continued.

"I don't believe you killed Olivia. She would have given all three of those assassins a run for their money and you could barely handle one." He scoffed and wiped the blood off his blade. "As for treason, you fought well for the Alliance today, you fought not only for your own life, but for your fellow comrades. Perhaps there is hope for you once you have put aside your misguided beliefs..."

He looked at Lance's wound and nodded.

"She's free to go, though if I see her back here again without an exceptionally good reason there will be hell to pay. Am I clear?"

Lance nodded, all too eager to get out of there. "Yes... sir."

Erin mumbled in acknowledgement, and had to be prompted to give a salute.

"Yes, sir."

Erin was back on safe ground again, off of Outland.

She didn't want anyone to see her like this. At least not right now. She hardly knew how to feel herself. Shame, anger, regret? Guilt? Hate?

She shuddered and felt shower water, boiling hot, crash and burn on her back as she heaved, and hoped the sound of that rain pounding against the tile would drown out her aching sobs.