

Erin's Algari Adventures

Prologue - The Hard Way

Erin heaved a massive telemantic artifact through the portal she had already wasted her breath on and came through into Dornogal, at the end of a huge hall. She looked around and flustered, then found a guard.

"Hey... uhh... you got a palette or a trolley I can wheel this on? I'm delivering it to uhh... Lodestorn? One of the Telemancers here."

She held out a piece of paper written in violet ink. It was from Aerilyn, and held her signature, promising the delivery of a Beacon in exchange for a copy of the leymaps of Khaz Algar's sprawling underground.

"You are designated 'Aerilyn'?" The guard looked at her, so clearly still in his Oathsworn ways.

"No, I'm Erin. Aerilyn's busy at the moment so I'm making the delivery for her..."

The guard raised a rocky eyebrow and looked at her with gem-set eyes, before pointing at the large archway entrance.

"Waykeeper Lodestorn's current task is to correspond with a Kaheti Leyweaver in The Fissure. You will find him there."

"The Fissure? Where's that?"

The guard pointed her to a place that was nearly on the other end of the city.

Erin mumbled, looking at the Beacon with worry. How the hell was she going to drag this all the way there?

"You do have a trolley I can use, right?"

"Not at this current moment."

She grit her teeth. It would be the hard way.

Of course, using magic was all about the easy way. Or at least, doing stuff the hard way to figure out an even easier way. It was just like Erin, then, to find the most overly complicated solution for what should be a simple problem. After all, this was the woman who learned how to literally fold space on itself just so she could avoid having to get on a boat.

So when all Erin needed to do was deliver her beacon across to the other end of the city, Erin didn't go out of her way to find a trolley. Nor could she without really knowing where she was going just open up another portal to get there.

No. Erin fought the hard way.

She stood before the beacon and raised three fingers. Her grip, once clawed, was now relaxed and serene. She wouldn't drop the beacon. The Magic held it up, in its comforting hands, encircling it, raising it aloft. And if she did drop it? Then she would just catch it again.

She kept it close, gliding off the ground, until she met her first foe.

The stairs.

Of course, a place of titanic origin just had to have ten million stairs leading from the Foundation Hall into Dornogal's main street.

Frankly, Erin could have just put the Beacon down and blinked it. There were no convenient excuses like that the 'minor teleportation could subtly impact the ever-so-delicate enchantments powering the artifact, rendering it all but useless.' Maybe Erin was just too focused on her task to consider other easier routes, maybe she had something to prove, or maybe she was just an idiot.

With each step down the stairs, Erin tried to hold the Beacon at a steady angle, gliding it diagonally such that it never even scraped the stone until she reached the bottom. As with all her levitation at the moment it still wobbled in the air in a seemingly unstable manner and bobbed along with her step but never dropped.

And then as she came through the main square where the banks and markets were, Erin saw so many people both standing and scurrying about. She held out her fingers and raised the beacon overhead as she pushed through the crowds. To keep one's focus in a loud mess like that required a will of iron, and Erin designated almost half of the back of her mind just to remember that the Beacon should be floating at all.

The ground quaked in heavy tremors, and she heard a call.

"COMIN' THROUGH! GET OUT THE WAY!"

Some asshole Draenei had decided that this was the day that he needed to ride his entire Clefthoof through the path Erin was taking! But there was no time to consider the logistics of how one carries a mount as exotic as that through from one planet to another. She hurried, stressing the magic holding the beacon up as she pulled herself by the wall of the Auction House as the great beast plowed through the crowd down the road. And she breathed a sigh of relief.

It wasn't far now, but obstacles always come in threes. Erin found that passage, 'The Fissure', where she was told that Lodestorn could be found. It was dark and dingy and had so many chains seemingly randomly arrayed between both ends, almost as if they were placed there to keep the whole thing from tearing even farther apart. She came through that dark alley, somewhere that seemed like a poor area forgotten by the rest of the city for refusing to obey the Edicts, and warily watched all corners. It was there that a shadowy figure ambushed her.

Eight eyes, six legs, and two arms joined a long spindly chest with a thin abdomen covered in dark silken cloth. It held out a knife and stuttered through its mandibles.

"That thing you're carrying! Drop it!"

"Look, I don't want any trouble, buddy..." Erin said, looking around for guards, But there were none there!

"You're gonna drop it right now, or... or else I'll shank you!" The spider said. Erin had never assumed a Nerubian could be a thief, but maybe anyone could be anything. Had he chosen too?

Erin slowly backed away, the Beacon still held high over her head. How could she get out of this? There was only one way.

"G-Give it now!!" The Nerubian hissed, and struck at her with a shaky grip.

Erin jumped back, and lost her control on the Beacon.

It fell like a pile of bricks.

The Nerubian looked up to see the beacon fall right on top of it.

“What is the disturbance?” The Earthen Telemancer, Lodestorn, spoke as he came down the alley and found Erin.

“Oh...!” Erin chuckled. “I... I brought you your beacon! Ta-da!!”

With a little illusory flare, she made it sparkle.

Lodestorn wasn't impressed when he looked down and saw the Beacon with a half-flattened Nerubian under it, who managed to eke out a wheeze.

“And you brought a Nerubian with you?”

“Oh no uhh... he tried to rob it off me.”

Lodestorn moved the beacon with a flick of his wrist, and the Nerubian scuttled away with a bruise on his exoskeleton and a determination to make better life choices.

“So, about that leymap?” Erin asked, eager to return home.

Lodestorn inspected the Beacon, nodding. “This will do well.” And then he turned down the road. “Come with me.”

“Where are we going?” Erin asked.

“I need to take this to Foundation Hall. Carry that beacon for me?”

Erin groaned and rolled her eyes. She did choose the hard way, after all...

Part 1- Dornogal Days

"I've been slacking." Erin thought as she came into Dornogal through a little door of folded spacetime. It was a far cry from rocking up on the Waking Shores for the first time, seasick and gross and groggy from sailing along with everyone else.

Khaz Algar had been accessible for months. While she had been totally meaning to see it first, Erin just had other things to do. And while usually she was the vanguard, this time her friends beat her to be the first to see those sights. Maybe if she got her ass into gear, she could still see some of it first. There was nothing better to her than whisking someone away to impress them with a spot they could never have found otherwise.

By now exploration had become a bit of a ritual for her or even a form of pilgrimage. She inherited a deep wanderlust from her dad and was truly at her best when she was out in the world, learning and meeting new people. When things go wrong, going somewhere different was always a remedy.

She sorely needed a break from all she had involved herself with recently, as if the stain of conflict had ruined her, and to do something she truly enjoyed was the only thing that could wash her clean.

Erin scratched her head as she looked at the leymap she'd traded for with a local waykeeper called Lodestorn, one recently remade thanks to the fall of Dalaran disrupting all the old lines. The lines now were all criss-crossed and layered at varying heights and that was probably due to the big cave system she knew was underground. She admitted that was partially the reason she had been holding off coming to this place for so long; as she explained to someone recently, accidentally teleporting into a wall of solid stone is just about the worst outcome for a spell one could have.

So for now, she focused on the top part, the surface. The Isle of Dorn. What the hell was a Dorn, anyway? Presumably it was part of the word "Dornogal" too and there she found her first little mission, one which was quickly answered.

By the Alliance embassy there's this room with all these stones and gems on the walls, then a weird looking Earthen too. One might assume that to Erin all Earthen would look weird, but they'd be wrong because Erin had been to Northrend and not only seen Earthen there too but also Iron Dwarves and their giant counterparts, and she'd also been to Uldum and seen both fleshy and stoney Tol'vir. So that teaches them to make assumptions about her. He was weird looking because his hairstyle was dumb, like someone shaved all of his head but two strips down both sides.

"Hi!" Erin asked the not-weird-looking-because-he's-an-earthen Earthen. "Mind if I ask a question?"

Judging by the big shelves and rows and rows of them, this place was probably a library of sorts, and smart people who like talking about history always run libraries.

"You may ask a question from the Archivist." He said.

“Great! Can you tell me about why this is called the Isle of Dorn? What’s a Dorn? Actually, while you’re at it, maybe you can just spill the entire lore and history of your people? Pretty please?”

Though getting an emotion out of him was like trying to draw blood from a stone, Erin at least thought that the Earthen was happy to recite all the history he’d clearly spent a long time learning.

“Before it was known as the Isle of Dorn, the Titans designated this location ‘Sector AR-938.’ Along with The Keeper, our edict was to investigate and later become stewards over the fissure which would later be designated as The Coreway. We followed the Edicts, and The Keeper designated Watcher Dornic to oversee our activities. Watcher Dornic was a tyrant, and treated us as machines, and therefore we rebelled.”

“Ooh, exciting! I’m always down for a bit of an uprising. How did you stop him?”

“We bludgeoned him to death and dragged the broken shell of his corpse through a portal to never stain our grounds again.”

Erin’s eye twitched. “Haha... cool!...?”

“We refer to the island as Dorn as a way to remember that history.”

She made a mental note to not mess with any Earthen.

Erin asked the archivist a few other things to catch up, like just what The Coreway was, some of the more modern Earthen history, what all the gems on the wall were, as well as what the best local dishes were. She got a flurry of answers but was only disappointed by one. It was either rubies for Earthen, and mushrooms for everyone else. Eugh.

As far as Dwarf-adjacent cities were though, Dornogal was surprisingly unique- it wasn’t built like a fortress in the mountains. It was spacious and had parks and lounges and many many benches, it had public baths and springs and some weird charcoal bed things that would probably burn anyone substantially fleshy, and despite some of the city being quite clearly utilitarian there was a great deal of culture too.

From what Erin had asked the archivist, the Earthen were once split into two separate ideologies. There were those who followed the edicts, as well as those that refused them. Though now all Earthen had been effectively made free from the shackles of their masters these cultures still seemed to persist somewhat through the city itself- a fusion of strong foundations and beautiful boughs.

Erin held the leymap in her hands, with her best boots on and a fully restored stave. At the gates of the city she stared out onto wild rolling fields, and took her first real steps into adventure.

Part 2 - Dorn't Worry About It

Unsurprisingly, leymaps don't help you actually figure out your way around.

Erin got about ten minutes down the road outside of Dornogal and found a nearby rock to sit on. She grabbed one actual map of the Isle of Dorn and levitated it before her and with it anchored in place had hands free to cross-reference it with her leymap.

"Ugh... how the hell am I supposed to know which lines are for what elevation? Is it the ones on the lime green path or the teal blue path? Or is that turquoise?"

"Mmbaa..."

Erin put down one map and directed the other aside to reveal an adorable sheep looking... thing! Well, at least she assumed it was a sheep. Like an Earthen it had a stoney sort of carapace but moved just like it was organic, and presumably like an Earthen if someone tossed some seeds on them and watered it, the most lush coat of moss, flowers and leaves covered its body.

"Hi little buddy! You're kinda adorable..." Erin said with a smile, but the mosswool sheep was a wolf in moss coating, and its cuteness was but a distraction. It eyed the leymap Erin had placed on the stone next to her to lay down some affection and swiftly placed it in its mouth.

"What... hey! Give that back!"

Erin grabbed the other end of the map and tried to yank it out of the maw of the mosswool but its hunger was too great to give up.

Shhhhhrrrip.

The leymap tore in two.

"No! Shit, shit, shit! Stop eating, stop!"

The sheep stared at her blankly and chewed on it like common cud.

"C'mon! I literally just got out here!"

An Earthen wearing overalls, a hat and with a big piece of wheat sticking out of his mouth came over to Erin. "My mosswool's givin' you trouble, traveller?"

His accent almost reminded her of Westfall, but maybe it was just her projecting. Still; it seemed he must have been one of those Earthen who abandoned the edicts long ago, for he had clearly had the time to adjust to living life outside the city.

He walked with a big flock of about twenty more mosswool each as cute as the last, but Erin stuffed her other things away before those beady eyes could get any ideas.

"Yeah... that one just ate my leymap." Erin said, pointing an accusatory finger at the perpetrator.

"I don't know what a lay-map is, but I do know these little blighters will get their teeth on anythin' they can see! Sounds like a you problem."

Erin sighed and looked at the half-torn leymap she still had... showing only the western half of the island and its cave systems. Teleporting anywhere but Dornogal for now... but with some luck, she might still find someone who could help piece it back together.

"I'm a bit lost." She said. "Can you point me to the nearest town?"

He pointed to Dornogal, literally straight down the road behind her. "You sure Bessie didn't eat your brains too?"

"No, I mean, aside from this. I'm an explorer. Or trying to be."

"What sort of explorer needs a map and directions? Just wander and you'll find somewhere I'm sure."

Erin pursed her lips. "Okay, I see what you mean but maybe just tell me if this road leads anywhere?"

"Roads always lead somewhere." The mosswool farmer said, and patted the back of his sheep. He clicked twice and they all followed him, and if Erin wasn't so stubborn she might have followed him too. But he was right. Roads always lead somewhere... and maybe she shouldn't rely so much on maps.

Erin travelled over hill and grotto,
Across field and plain,
Through grove and weald,
Across the sea and over the sky, and...

Nope! Just kidding. It was actually only another ten minutes until she spotted the crossroads over the horizon, a place which had markers and maps telling her exactly where to go. She felt a bit silly there, standing around all the other adventurous types who totally had it together way more than her.

The crossroads held a few locations that sounded interesting- Rambleshire, Freywold Village, Boulder Springs and even a meadery. But one word stood out to her, purely by the fact she had no idea what it meant. A sign pointed to the north. 'The Proscenium'. She didn't need to ask, nor would she. She was an explorer! They don't need help!

A little bit down the way and Erin found an arena... though it wasn't one for staging tournaments and duels. It was a stage and a play was in full motion. The last time Erin had seen a play was also a time she was trying to hunt down a murderer, so at least this time she could enjoy it properly. She snuck into the audience when it was about halfway through and looked down at the actors.

She witnessed a large Earthen wearing a toga sat upon his high chair looking down upon his Earthen subjects. He pointed at one and told them "Prepare my palanquin!" and they ran off, before producing a chair held up by four other Earthen on a platform. The large one stepped off of one chair, which for the record was also held on the backs of some Earthen, into the Palanquin as they walked him around the stage.

"I am Dornic, and you will come to learn your place!"

Other Earthen moved to their positions and hammered and picked away at boulders of rubble or frantically pulled at the levers of consoles. From his high seat, Dornic whipped them with a long cable, and sparks of electricity flew.

"Increase your productivity by three hundred percent by tonight, or you will incur my wrath!"

Finally it came to an Earthen, tied by the wrists and standing before a painted hole. Dornic stepped down from the palanquin and said “Let this be an example to the rest of you. You must work and toil until your stones erode and the memory of your gems fade, and if you should not? Then I shall cast you into the coreway!”

In a dramatic scene, Dornic cast the pitiful Earthen down into the hole in a display of true tyranny. Erin gasped, fully enraptured in the tale despite the limitations of the stage as a visual medium, and was so immersed she forgot what she had told would happen next.

An Earthen slave came forward and addressed the crowd. “For centuries Dornic has ruled over us, and for centuries our toil has been for nothing! The Keeper has forsaken us, and our Edict has brought us no peace. There is only one option for us left. There is only one option to save us all!”

The Earthen scanned the crowd and saw one person more engaged than anyone else, and pointed her finger.

“We must rise up against Dornic. We must take back Khaz Algar! You there, join us and we will be free!”

Erin flushed as she looked around. “You mean me?” She was into the story, but to go on stage...?

“Do you want to take down the tyrant?”

Erin stepped down the aisle and hopped over the barrier into the stage, and stood ready. “I will help you!”

A heavy helmet was placed on her head as well as a foam hammer in her hands, and she formed just the faintest smile.

“I am Watcher Dornic! You bestowed upon me the Earthen and you cannot revoke it so easily, Keeper! The Earthen are mine to command!”

One of the Earthen pushed Erin forward, for it was her turn to speak.

She gulped as she looked at the audience, and wondered if it would be okay. But she was here now and sometimes you just have to go all out.

“For centuries you held us under your heel, Dornic, and we will answer you no longer!”

With her big hammer, Erin shattered the shackles of her comrades and shouted.

“NO MASTERS, NO KINGS, NO GODS- AND NO WATCHERS! TONIGHT WE WILL BE FREE!”

With her rallying cry, Erin and the other Earthen smacked Dornic into submission with foam hammers and picks and strung ropes across him.

“Now drag his husk from this place!” A voice called, as Erin then remembered the story she had been taught. She put down her hammer and ripped open a portal and held it open until they dragged him through.

The audience stood and clapped rapturously, but her spell had made her feel just a little faint. Erin came offstage as the others bowed and shuffled to the stalls to get herself a drink. o the stalls to get a drink.

Some time later, the actor for Dornic turned up and spoke to Erin, but she blurted something out first. "Stars, I'm so sorry about that! I didn't hurt you, did I? I really didn't mean to get that into it, I just..."

The actor snorted. "That's just because I'm that good. I really want you to hate me, to hate Dornic." He brushed the idea aside. "Ahh, it's alright. Usually we don't have a real portal, but it sounds like the audience loved it, and it's not that far to walk back here from the city anyway.."

Erin breathed a sigh of relief. "Phew! That was fun... it was good. Like, I needed that. I needed to whack something with a foam hammer. Sorry." It probably wasn't a great idea to admit that to the very person you spent five minutes whacking with a foam hammer, but it was out there now and Erin couldn't take it back. Thankfully, the actor laughed, and they could laugh about it together.

By the end of the day, she had forgotten all about her leymap woes.

Part 3 - Land Down Under

Who designed the Coreway?

No seriously, who actually thought this was a good idea?

Erin knew it was some sort of geological fissure that the titans just happened to find and sent their Earthen to go keep an eye on it because it's presumably important somehow, but if they were so omniscient and all knowing wouldn't they realise having a giant hole in the middle of the city stretching down thousands of meters should at least have an accessibility ramp on it or something?

She watched as Drakeriders and those on their Stormrooks dove headfirst down the hole held safely aloft by wing and feather, and scowled.

The one time telemancy wasn't enough.

She asked her new buddy the archivist, and apparently there was an elevator down to the mysterious depths that everyone had suddenly decided to take an interest in. One was just outside Freywold Village, though that was on the other side of the island. She ended up waiting an hour for a carriage by the gates of Dornogal lead by some stoney rams, and had a nice-enough conversation with the Earthen also heading to Freywold about what her plans were and what she did.

"I'm an explorer" she'd say, and "it's my first time here."

Neither were entirely true, but they were close enough.

As lovely as Freywold was, it would have to be explored in a second visit. Erin was here for the same reason everyone else was- that big cave, and came upon the elevator.

There was a lever she presumably had to pull, and noted a small marking etched into the metal.

"Hi! I fixed your elevator. Hope you don't mind. Lula T. :)"

Erin scrunched her nose. Everyone really *had* done everything before her!

The elevator was long and creaky and she felt her ears pop many times on the way down, and then she came into the cavern.

It was huge and lush, with flowing waterfalls and a surprising amount of light diffusing through holes in the ceiling she never saw on the surface, but as everywhere pretty she found it had been despoiled by capitalism. That elevator just happened to take her down to Opportunity Point where travellers and traders lined up for far too long in order to get their chance to head to Undermine. Erin was glad she was not going that way.

But it was at Opportunity Point here that Erin spied a familiar face huffing his pipe on the hill. She spied on him quite creepily in fact, in the distance from where he stood he could never see her, but Erin made sure it was who she thought it was... before teleporting up behind him. "Hey Fulgrim!"

"NORGANNON'S NUTSACK, WHAT IN THE...?!" He flung his pipe upwards and startled before tumbling over. Erin genuinely did feel quite bad as she saw the old dwarf probably had a heart attack and keeled over, but it was to her luck he wasn't dead yet.

"Sorry! So sorry... I just saw you standing there and..."

“Thought to scare the ever living life out of me?”

“I just wanted to say hi?”

He pulled himself up and adjusted the glasses over his bulbous nose as if he were ever doing his best greatfather winter impression. He was stout and surly, like all dwarves, and of a venerable tri-centenarian age. His beard was voluminous and pillowy, his eyes were keen, and yet his voice was ever mellow.

He brushed himself off. “And here I thought I’d have a quiet day. What are you doing here? I didn’t think you were Dragonscale anymore.”

The last time they had both seen each other was back in the Waking Shores, at the Dragonscale basecamp. Whereas Erin worked in the Telemancy Team on the Gateway Restoration Project, Fulgrim led the Titan Research Team... a task he excelled at. As an old scholar and skald he knew all the mythology and lore surrounding the titans and was alive well before they were ever proven to not only be real, but long dead. Erin admired his enthusiasm about the Titans even if she didn’t share it, but like most people Erin was ‘friends’ with perhaps jumpscaring them was a little past what they were comfortable with.

“Ehh that’s kinda on a moment-by moment basis.” Erin replied, still unsure herself as to whether she was even officially employed by them still, in just a variable situation as she was with the Kirin Tor before she pulled the plug on that. “Whatcha doing here?” She asked him back. “Working on your shaman stuff?”

“Shaman stuff?” Fulgrim seemed confused. “What shaman stuff?”

“Didn’t you have shaman stuff? Like... you said your husband was a wildhammer and he like passed that totem to you and it was your duty to bear it and find balance between nature and the titans teachings...”

He seemed utterly bamboozled. “Are you sure you’re not the one that’s been on the felweed?”

“Am I just making this up? I could’ve sworn, I mean your name is Thunderbreath! You told me about how you’d do like, battle skald stuff and sing lightning into people’s swords or shout them off cliffs?”

He shook his head vehemently.

“I mean... your first name is Fulgrim! It has the arcanic word Fulgur in it... for lightning!

‘Cause you did Air shaman stuff?”

“You must be confusin’ me with another Fulgrim... I’m just an Archaeologist. Anyway, haven’t you got Ley in your name? Does that mean you also use the leylines?”

Erin shrugged, not about to get into an argument about predestination. “It sure worked out that way regardless.”

He harrumphed and puffed out his chest, gesturing as if telling a speech, changing the subject before they really do go nowhere.

“Yours truly has been tasked with a special mission! While the rest of the Scale bumbles around back in the Isles, the League contacted their PRE-EMINENT TITAN SCHOLAR to assist them with a special task. Have you ever heard of a memory gem?”

Erin nodded. “I mean, even if I hadn’t they kinda sound exactly like what they are.”

“Then you’d know they’re valuable! But not only that, but rare. The Earthen for a while had to keep overwriting the data on their memory gems because one of their titan facilities was broken.

So much lore and knowledge was lost! But get this- one facility here was locked off for so long the Earthen that shut down there didn't even get their gem rewritten. Think of it! Centuries of knowledge on the titans, just there for the taking!"

"Isn't that like... someone's brain, though?" Erin asked.

"Of course! But they can get a new body, we just need to upload that data to the archives first."

"You say 'we' like I'm coming..."

"I know you, Langley. You don't turn down adventure."

He had her with that one.

They travelled through the Deeps, past Gundargaz, to the facility known as the Stonevault. It was one of those multiplex facilities which housed multiple sub facilities each with their own function- it had the awakening machine, the heart of industry, and the one they travelled to as well.

"Old Earthen records list this place as Kthgarmnzzg..." Fulgrim spat, his tongue vibrating over each syllable. Erin didn't ever bother trying to pronounce that or wonder how it was spelled. "It's a depot and logistics facility." Fulgrim said as they came up to the entrance with a set of metal doors. "It feeds the other facilities here with materials- like the golems the Heart of Industry makes all gets its plate metal from here. You usually can't get in here without Administrator privileges... but thankfully for you, the Machine Speakers cloned me a key."

He came up to the console at the entrance and held up the key, a small metal card, before tapping it on what presumably was the scanner.

Nothing happened.

He tapped again, and again, nothing.

He swiped it through the magnetic reader. No dice.

He even tried entering the key and entering the four digit security pin which was coded onto it, but nothing made those damn doors open.

"Aggramar's arse! The console must be busted... we need another way in."

They saw two large vents poking out of the entrance, as Erin looked at Fulgrim with a grin.

"Push harder!"

"Hgnnn!"

"I'm crowning! I'm crowning!"

"Stop saying it like that!" Erin shouted and pushed Fulgrim as hard as she could, stuffing his tubby body through the vent with her telekinesis before blinking after him. They slid through into a ventilation shaft just wide enough that they could crawl through, though Erin was remiss to have Fulgrim's backside directly postured towards her.

"They could have carbon monoxide in here you know!" He hissed.

"You want that memory gem or not? Stop complaining!"

They aimlessly scrambled through the vents, clattering and humid and regretting their choices but it was too late to turn back now. They reached a fork in the path and heard something else.

"There's something in the vents coming towards us!" Erin said.

They held their breath as it wasn't just steps they heard on the metal panels, but skittering.

Eight legs tapped in series, evoking the sort of primal fear in both of them that made them freeze in place. Fulgrim started breathing rapidly as if in his three hundred years he had never felt such terror, and Erin had to reach around him to muffle the sound.

Down the vent they watched a single bronze-hued machine with eight legs and a sort of pincer-mandible on its front crawl and creep right to the passage before them, only to turn and take another path.

They both exhaustedly exhaled when it was far enough away.

Eventually they came upon a grate in the vent which Fulgrim peered through.

"I think I see somethin'... let me get a closer..."

Thanks to Fulgrim's immense density, the moment he crawled on the grate it swung open and sent him plummeting below! "Fulgrim!" Erin shouted and dropped in after him, and they found themselves in a larger room.

This one was like a hallway, a long corridor surrounded by a number of other doors they couldn't get into. While it definitely seemed like they were getting closer the hazy lights and sameness to its patterned metal walls gave it a very liminal feel.

Fulgrim huffed with two hands on his waist. "Welp! I haven't the foggiest where we are."

"Maybe it would be best to tell us where exactly we're meant to be going?" Erin dared to ask the pre-eminent titanic scholar. "Just an idea. Did the machine speakers say where the memory gem was supposed to be?"

"Of course they did! A storage closet, apparently... hence why no one found them when the facility was abandoned. Maybe through here...?"

They came up to another door, locked by a titanic administrative keypad. This one required a series of correct numbers to unlock it. Fulgrim scratched his head.

"Fulgrim... you know how to get in here, right?" Erin asked with uncertainty. He pressed six buttons and scoffed. "Five, eight, nine, zero, two, zero. Obviously. The machine speakers said so."

The keypad flashed red. They were denied.

"Oh... maybe it was... five, eight, nine, zero, two, zero, two...?"

Erin facepalmed, and prepared for a long wait.

Ten minutes passed.

"Have you tried five, nine, eight, zero two zero?" Erin asked.

Beep beep beep beep beep... red flash, denied. "I'm certain I tried that one before!" Fulgrim said.

Thirty minutes passed.

Beebeebbeebbeep... "Bugger!" Fulgrim shouted. "I pressed the wrong one."

"Alright I'll hold a portal open to Dornogal and you can find a machine speaker to tell us what the password is supposed to be..." Erin said.

"No, no, I have it! I remember, it was six nine eight zero two zero two eight six five!!"

Another hour wasted...

Erin sat leaned up against the wall. Beep beep beep beep... it drove her beeping mad!

"Fuck this, I'm calling Lula!"

"No, wait! Please, I'm certain I have it now... for sure!"

Erin rolled her eyes at Fulgrim. "One last chance."

Five, eight, nine, one, two, zero.

The keypad flashed red.

"GRAHH!" In a fit of anger, Fulgrim ripped off his backpack and tossed it at the door.

But Erin noticed a little piece of paper that tumbled out.

She picked it up and read it.

"Five, eight, nine, zero, three, zero."

She put in the numbers.

Ding! The keypad flashed green, there was a click as the door unlocked, and they went on in.

Erin made sure Fulgrim saw her glare.

Blessedly, they found it. For real this time. The storage room, marked by a sign next to the door. They were nearly there! All that awaited them was one... final... damn console.

Erin stepped up to it and the console spoke.

>Initiating Biometric Scan

A beam of light enveloped her and stopped just under her face.

>Biometric Scan Complete. Access denied.

"Dunno why I thought that would work... urgh..."

Fulgrim pushed her out of the way. "No, let me! I'm a Dwarf, we're basically the same thing as an Earthen, much more closely descended from our titanic origins than you..."

He stood in front of the scanner with a puffed out chest.

A beam of light enveloped him, working its way scanning down his body, and then stopped just below the waist.

>Access Denied.

"YOU BLASTED MACHINE, I'LL STICK YOUR BIOMETRIC SCAN RIGHT UP YOUR..."

Erin went to the corner of the room where she could actually hear herself think, opened up her bag, and pulled out a runed stone. She held it up to her ear. "Lula, are you there?"

Fulgrim, seeing this, darted over. "No! Don't call her! I can get in! Just give me a chance!"

A voice from over-the-stone replied. "Erin? Are you okay?"

"Oh hi bestie~! I'm fine, I'm just..."

"DON'T LISTEN TO HER!" Fulgrim shouted as Erin covered his face with her hand.

"Is uhh... who was that?" Lula asked.

"Oh, pfft. Long story short, I got dragged into something by perhaps the world's most annoying dwarf..."

"She won't know who that is!" Fulgrim muffled.

"You're with Fulgrim?" Lula smiled faintly on the other end and heard a profanity barked through it.

"Yeah! We're in a titan ruin right now... every single time Fulgrim tried to get us through a set of doors we've failed horribly so if you could kinda please maybe bail us out that'd be great..."

At tech-support Lula's request, Erin kept her on the stone as Lula spoke into the console.

>Initiating Biometric Scan

"Oh uh... authenticate with another method."

>How would you like to authenticate?

"Voice authorised activation, please."

>Please state username and password.

"Watcher_LulaTinkerbolt, and, Tinkerbolt."

>Access granted. Welcome, Watcher_LulaTinkerbolt."

"Open all facility doors... oh and disable all facility defences... if there are any."

>Confirmed. All security gates and defences disabled.

"Thank you!" Lula was always certain to be kind even to random computers.

The storage room was finally open. It was stacked to the brim with shelves overloaded with old tech and materials and things the Earthen presumably thought they would need but never did. In the corner the body of the Earthen, still holding a crate, stood frozen still like it was caught in ice. It was a sordid sort of sight, but at least now their memories could be recovered, and maybe another body would be found for them.

Fulgrim used a chisel and hammer and was useful for the first time today, when he managed to pry the memory gem out all by himself like the big grown-up boy he is.

"Did you get in alright?" Lula asked.

"Mhm! Looks good, bestie. Thanks! Fulgrim got what he wanted... I feel like I should pay you for it! You really saved our asses."

Lula chuckled. "Hah... you don't have to? That's what friends are for!"

But when Erin glanced over at the shelves and piles on the floor, she had an idea.

A few minutes later at the Tinkerbolt Workshop, all of a sudden boxes and piles of glorious garbage, joyous junk and all that sort of scrap from the titan facility fell out onto the floor.

While Lula was rifling through age-old equipment trying to piece together what it was and while Fulgrim returned to Gundargaz to hand over the memory gem, Erin soon went home. Her adventures in Khaz Algar would have to continue another day.

Part 4 - Blink and You'll Miss It

A week or two had passed since her ordeal in the Ringing Deeps and Erin had covered a lot of the ground she had missed in her first couple of times in Khaz Algar, poking around more of the Unbound villages on the island surface, some trips to the hot springs and meadery, and even watching a theatre performance for real this time. She had also gone back to the Deeps and seen their machinery and quarries and while she could not admit it was a little disinteresting to her, she did appreciate that someone she knew would probably find this entire place fascinating. She spent long enough here that she made a few contacts, even, for future work she was quite excited to get her teeth stuck into.

There were two more caverns to explore, she knew, adjacent to this but couldn't say she had much interest. She knew about the Nerubians, of course, considering they were the whole reason Dalaran blew up and while the prospect of meeting a new culture was intriguing... she would also rather not tread into an active warzone to do it. The other cave, Hollowfall, was the same. She had met humans before, religious ones too, and the big glowing crystal was probably really cool but she frankly couldn't care less about what and who she called 'Stromgarde 2'. What with that and talk of said big crystal randomly turning dark and causing monsters to attack... and it really wasn't on her itinerary.

That is of course, until she was made an offer.

Erin sat in a bar in Gundargaz, studying with a mug of Cinderbrew she hadn't really touched when someone came up and introduced themselves. Only, they weren't Earthen.

"Hey. Are you Erin?"

She looked up to see a human, red hair just like hers, though with just the tiniest pointed ear tips poking out. By her light clothing with well-worn boots and some padded features Erin guessed she might be a scout. "Yeah...?" Erin got her mage hand to pull out a chair on the other side of the table for her, not wanting to appear standoffish.

"Finally. You're hard to find. I'd heard you were in Dornogal just an hour ago." The woman sat down on the chair and straightened her back with a formality that made Erin just a little bit uncomfortable. If she was going to be arrested or something she wouldn't have sat down, this woman had to want something, but Erin couldn't wasn't ready to agree to anything yet.

"Yeah, I move around a lot. Sorta comes with the territory... anyway, who were you?"

The lady moved her hand into her pocket and produced a wooden box with a flint and steel and some oil inside. Erin didn't know if she was supposed to recognise what that was or not, but thankfully the woman carried on before Erin needed to ask anything embarrassing.

"I'm a lamplighter, Victoria Ashwyke. My orders are to find a Telemancer."

"Oh! Well, you found one I guess. Though I don't know why you haven't gotten in contact with the Kirin Tor...:

"We've asked a number of other mages but they've not been able to actually stay and help."

"Alright. What's the situation?"

Victoria unfolded some scattered, half-burned research notes and handed them to her. Erin recognised at least the parts she could as theoretical calculations, parts of a very complex ritual using *Tirnallis' Fourth Principle* as its foundation, but the rest was so unreadable she couldn't even make out what sort of spell it was meant to be describing.

"This is all we found which survived from an attack on one of our people. Wenren Althal was an Arathi mage, the only one we had who was trained in Telemancy. He was trying to help us find a way home but cultists looking to stop him from succeeding killed him and destroyed his research. We need help. Maybe you can succeed where others failed."

"It's always cult stuff with this, isn't it. That really does sound awful but... you do have other mages right? Why can't they learn Telemancy?"

"We don't have the time to have them studying for years. We may not have months, let alone years."

"And none of you remember where your home was?"

"We do, but I believe we need access to magical resources to find it. Resources which are... of course, back home."

Erin sighed, shrugging, taking a big huff from the Cinderbrew in front of her. She gagged and pushed the mug away. "I don't know why you guys don't just ask an actual organisation for help. Surely like... Stormwind or something would be happy to lend a hand?"

Victoria shook her head. "We may be visibly human, but that does not mean we are not strangers to your Alliance. We're desperate. Please, we'll pay you well. We just need help."

She knew the sort of danger that awaited in Hallowfall. A creeping reminder in the back of the mind that the sun could go black at any point, that suddenly a happy day could turn horrid, that in your sleep you may be woken to fight and be flayed alive. The Arathi were strong, stronger than her, and as much as she was not religious herself she saw why they needed all the faith they could get.

Telemancy existed for moments like this. Who would she be if she said no?
"Alright. I'll do it. I'll do my best."

The least Victoria could do was show Erin around and get her what she needed but Erin did not expect to effectively have the lamplighter as her own personal bodyguard. In order to make sure the Order of Night didn't get the better of her like they did with Wenren, Erin was accompanied by Victoria every step of the way. Each day she came to Hallowfall she met Victoria by the gates. They would take one of their impressive zeppelins across the fields, farms, cliffs and waterfalls and arrive not too long later in Mereldar.

As the days passed Erin found her opinion on the Arathi changing, and even Hallowfall. She had never spoken to the Arathi much, she admitted to Victoria wholeheartedly that she struggled to recognise the differences between them and the humans from the known world. Other than their accents and the colours they wore they were almost unidentifiably different at a distance and up close should they not have those trademark shared human and elven heritage traits they might as well have not been Arathi at all. Erin did notice their strange proclivity for putting y's in their names, but linguistically it was fascinating how little the language changed despite being so far away for so long.

Erin had expected the Arathi here to be standoffish or cold or withdrawn and exhausted, but what she saw was almost the opposite. When she walked through the streets of Mereldar or their taverns, their shops and farms, even to some of the dawntowers and their borders with the Nerubians, she met people who were curious and kind and always ready to help their neighbour. They weren't suspicious of her for being a mage nor were they displeased by how little piety she held as she rather expected. One day her research, following Wenren's trail, took her and Victoria to the Priory of the Sacred Flame. Even as someone who refused the concept of spirituality wholly and entirely, for she could not accept that any power was not her birthright for the taking, Erin still felt the presence of something special there. It wasn't some holy spirit or sacred flame she could attribute it to, no. It was the people, and their spirit etched into every stone and every song.

She was glad she had come here in the end. It was worth it, and it wasn't something she would have found if she'd skipped over it out of fear that something could go wrong.

She spoke to Victoria a little bit during that, when undoubtedly their days glued together had turned them into friends.

"What does the Sacred Flame mean to you? To everyone?" Erin asked. "I always used to hear the church bells from the tower when I was a kid, and I felt nothing. But I see not just at home but here too people who struggle every single day with a smile because they think something is looking out for them. What if the Sacred Flame just decides to not help you?"

Victoria shattered Erin's preconceptions again, answering more straightforwardly than she expected. "I guess I just always have. I'm sure if you asked the Prioress she could come up with a good answer but for me, it's just part of who I am."

"So there's no deeper meaning then? No affirmation through it, no reflection of what it all means?"

"We usually have more important things to be doing than contemplating."

Erin shrugged and nodded... dissatisfied, but understanding entirely why. She had misjudged all of them really. They were just like the people back home in Lakeshire. Sure they prayed and went to church, gave tithes and all that, but maybe it was more cultural than religious. Maybe they never really expected anyone to answer back but they did anyway.

"And you?" Victoria asked, shredding off a piece of bread. "What's so great about magic? It sounds boring."

All the answers Erin could come up with fell short. Usually she'd go off about freedom, of connecting the world, of control and bending things to your will, a self actualisation to realise you can change the world with a word if you just try hard enough, to be someone else and to be your truest self. But in the end, maybe, she wasn't so different.

"I've always been a mage. I've never been anything else. I guess you kinda got me with that one."

After a week, it was about time she finally started showing some results.

All this time Erin had been following Wenren's trail. Literally following it. The Law of Sympathy describes a magical phenomenon where the more a user uses or involves an object within their spellcasting; the more of a unique signature from that person is left on that object which can be identified through other spells or even traced. The destroyed notes Wenren had left traced many places through Hollowfall, to Mereldar and the Priory, arcane-soaked beaches where latent mana from Dalaran had leached through the cave roof and contaminated water sources, and even to places on the surface. Erin realised these must have been places Wenren had opened up portals to... but why?

She had avoided it too long under Victoria's request, out of their own safety, but they had to go back to Wenren's house to have any hope of solving this mystery.

The bloodstains hadn't even been cleaned off the floor when they came in. Crusted wooden floorboards and a permeating smell of something indescribable. Victoria went first and scoured the area and pointed her shortsword into the darkness as if there were anything there to witness it. She then went to the window and glanced out. Beledar still shone. "Let's make this quick."

Erin set up several pieces of equipment, the sort of stuff she used to map the leylines in the Isles along with Aerilyn and Astrandis. She would have brought them too if there wasn't such risk, but by now Erin wondered if she had simply been paranoid. This 'device' if it could be called that, just like all arcano-mechanical equipment, just worked like bigger wands. There were no moving parts and no automation; even if there was it would ultimately be unnecessary. These rods were especially sensitive and especially attuned to Wenren's sympathetic aura that Erin exposed them to and she could use them to amplify the lingering traces of the last spell he had cast. The cultists had killed him, perhaps, but it was clear they were not smart enough to destroy what only a mage could think of.

Erin's hands rose as she poured magic into the six crystal rods around her, and they flashed with arcane light. A portal soon began to form, flickering, unstable... She needed something to help it take shape. Wenren's spell wasn't complete perhaps or maybe there was some interference on the other end. She got so close.

Then Beledar turned dark.

"No, no, no... not now! Curse it!" Victoria hissed and grabbed Erin's sleeve. "We have to go!"

"I need to finish this!" Erin shouted. "Just a minute more and I can open the portal!"

"We don't have a minute. I'm not having another Wenren on our hands."

Victoria dragged Erin out from the house, and already it was too late. Horrid bog monsters and Nerubians and fish-men that Victoria had described another day as Kobyls already stalked the outskirts, encircling them, far farther than Erin could blink them to safety.

"I'll hold them off!" Victoria said. "Get back to Mereldar and tell them what you found."

"I'm not leaving you. You don't have to throw your life away for me!"

The hordes crept closer, and Victoria smiled even despite the odds.

"The Sacred Flame gives me courage to do things like this. That's what it means to me."

Victoria kicked Erin through the door and slammed it shut, buying Erin the precious time she needed to teleport herself someplace safe.

Her hand shook as the monsters flung themselves at her, but maybe as Victoria was ready to sacrifice herself for the greater good in the name of the Sacred Flame she had forgotten something important.

Erin was not a believer.

The door blew open behind Victoria to reveal a swirling portal, a complete one, and Erin yanked her through.

They tumbled onto the grounds of the Priory, a safe haven as much as could be found under Dark Star Beledar. Victoria breathed heavily and looked at Erin for answers, confused, while Erin held up a single finger to buy her a moment to lurch into a bush and vomit.

She came back a little bit later. "Eugh. Sorry about that. You got a water?"

Victoria looked up at her and handed her a waterskin without breaking her gaze and asked. "How?"

"You mean the place or the portal itself? The place, well, we came here earlier. It seemed like a good spot. As for the portal...? It was already half open... it just needed a direction. Wenren had already portalled here a couple of times. I just followed that trace. Only thing is... that might've kinda interfered with the trace of the spell we were following to get back to your empire. Like when you spill ink on a letter and the letters get covered up."

Victoria hung her head. "It wasn't worth it. Not to trade my life for everyone else to get home."

Erin nodded. "It's not, but not in the way you meant that. I know you all want to go home... but you should get the chance to see it too. I'll come back with better equipment, better resources, maybe some friends some time. We'll get you guys back home, the smart way, with some elbow grease and smarts. Not by throwing ourselves at it without thinking."

Erin extended a hand to Victoria to help her up.

"I guess that's what magic means to me."

Part 5 - Nerubian Tea Time

The last thing Erin expected to receive from the courier the next time she visited Dornogal was a shadecaster. Like gnomish holograms, this enchanted object projected an illusory message captured by its maker and stored it inside. She found a quiet place to sit down and watch it.

Rendered in a faint purple light was a Nerubian with thin dextrous appendages and a face horrifyingly hairy, with mandibles that chattered a language she shouldn't have been able to understand.

*"Human Telemancer Erin Langley
I am Vejet'genab, Leyweaver of the Kaheti,
I hear much of you from the daywalkers above
It is time we finally speak
Meet me in The Fissure on the day you see this
I will know, and come find you"*

Erin had never really spoken with a Nerubian before, especially not one that presumably was from a faction she was technically still at war with. Should she be concerned? Should she be honoured? She wasn't certain. If it was anyone else it would make sense to her. If it were the Kirin Tor or Dragonscale or even Silvermoon Magisters she would know where she stood. She'd know what angle to play. Going would be risky... for all she knew this was a ploy to spin her into a web and drain out her insides. Did Nerubians drink people's insides? She didn't know!

But if there was one thing she learned in Hallowfall it was that sometimes people would surprise you. It was easy meeting Orcs, Tauren, Pandaren, Vulpera or Dracthyr for the first time... because they were so obviously people. Maybe she just needed to give Nerubians the same chance too.

Erin donned her suit that night and waited around the Fissure, with faint firefly lamps illuminating the dark crevice which was otherwise a fairly unfriendly side of town. She checked her glammers from a pocket mirror held by her mage hand, and saw a figure creep up in the corner of its reflection.

"Eep!"

Erin jumped up and turned around to see the same Nerubian she spied in the shadecaster earlier, this time wearing a silken robe and hood wrapped around its head. On the embroidery there were some strange characters that must have been magical by the fact that they glowed, but they were in no script she had seen before.

The Nerubian's jaws made a chattering noise that had her spine in shivers, but she was most surprised by the comprehension that came with them.

"Did I startle you?"

Erin awkwardly chuckled and scratched her neck, taking a moment to take it in, taking a moment to reply. "It did a little bit, but that's okay. I can be pretty jumpy."

"Your reaction is expected."

It blinked at her from one eye after the next in sequence, as they awkwardly stared at each other.

Only a few seconds passed until the Nerubian interjected. *"I am Vejet'genab of Azj'kahet."* Erin nodded, thinking that was obvious from the fact that no other Nerubian would want to talk to her and just tried to move the conversation on. "Yes! It's nice to meet you, sir... miss...?"

Vejet'genab blinked a few times. *"I am just my name."*

No gender-specific honorifics. Got it. Erin held up a hand to shake... but not only did she repulse at the idea of shaking 'hands' with it, she yet again was stunned as if that was a thing they even do! She drew her hand back in slowly as Vejet seemingly did not understand what she was trying to do and she found a place for both her hands tucked firmly into her pockets. "So, did you just want to meet or-"

"Follow."

Vejet led her to the end of the Fissure where an empty gateway stood. The Nerubian drew strings of arcane like silken strands and connected them in a web-like pattern, criss-crossing them over each other until they formed a sigil, which soon faded away into the image of their destination- a dark rooftop overlooking an underground cavern.

"That's how you make portals?" Erin gasped in astonishment. "I've never seen casting like that before."

Vejet almost seemed proud as it nudged her through and into. *"Many more secrets will be shared."*

When Erin came through the portal she felt a pressure on her chest from how far underground she was. It was a lightless place deeper than the other places in the cavern she had gone yet. Where Hallowfall was pleasantly warm and the Ringing Deeps damp and cool, here it was cold and almost icy but also surprisingly loud. Insects buzzed, flapped, skittered all around her from every corner. She could see from the tower suspended from the cavern roof by skein and string all across in every direction. She saw the bioluminescent grubs and growths lining the ceiling to the west, she saw colonies of huge mushrooms sprouting from the walls, she saw ancient fortresses lined with troops, a magnificent city whose many layers twisted her brain, and she also saw the deep abyss where something unknowable festered.

Erin knew where she would have to sit, as there was a wooden chair designed for humanoids from somewhere while the others on the table were just stools.

"Make yourself comfortable." Erin heard Vejet say, and put her bag down beside her and laid her staff next to it. If there was any time she was going to be eaten, now was a very good time.

"You aren't wearing any pheromones."

Erin looked at Vejet and grimaced. "What's a pheromone...? Have I done something wrong?"

The Nerubian was quiet and didn't answer her until it came back with a small elixir. It pressed the button on the nozzle, and Erin was sprayed with some sort of coloured mist. She reeled from it but didn't feel any different or any stranger and pouted. "What did you do?"

"Pheromones are necessary in Azj'kahet."

"Were those pheromones...? Like, scent things? I don't understand."

"They mark us."

"We wear pheromones and daywalkers do not."

"Did that mark me too?"

"It marked you as a guest."

Vejet brought over a tray with various jars, some of different sizes, all marked with some intricately engraved patterns in the traditional Nerubian style. Vejet then poured something into a cup and nudged it towards her.

"Drink."

The liquid was gooey, almost viscous, and as she moved the cup it almost seemed to wobble like jelly. She grimaced as she looked at it, and it seemed Vejet was waiting expectantly for her to do so.

"Here goes nothing..."

Her 'tea' was atrocious: worse than that even. It barely even constituted as a beverage. It was like slurping slime straight from the sewer gate. Both the flavour and the squelching texture running down her throat was so abhorrent her body violently rejected it. With a gurgle, she spat it straight back out into the cup.

Vejet chittered on the stool. *"Now, food."*

Erin looked on with horror as the Nerubian brought out a translucent glass jar, crawling with worms and grubs inside which pulsed as they moved. Vejet unsealed the jar and pulled forth one of the grubs and placed it in her hands.

"Eat."

Was she really going to do this? Was it worth it? Why was she even here?

The grub squirmed and extruded its intestines over her as if she were a meal to be caught.

"I can't!"

Vejet watched as Erin repulsed and flung the grub away into the void as she in her entirety repulsed from the very notion of all this.

"I'm sorry, I can't! All this, with Nerubians and this cave and the drinks and you... I don't understand it, it's freaking me out! I'm sorry."

Vejet never seemed to have any emotions to her, but that is just because she could not read its face. If she were Nerubian she could have spotted the subtle shifting in the angle of its hairs, a different flavour of pheromone. But in the same way, Vejet did not know how to read Erin or her own emotions.

"Are you hurt?"

"A little bit, yeah... all this... I just don't get it."

Vejet's mandibles rubbed together like Erin rubs the scar on her neck when she's uncomfortable.

"Follow."

Vejet opened another web-portal to Dornogal, and stepped through.

Erin met the Nerubian there, and she calmed down. This was a place she understood. This was a place she could feel safe. She took enough breaths she needed to, to calm down, and found the strength to ask.

"Why did you want to talk to me in the first place?"

*"The Leylines bind us all
Silken strands of the grand web.
We walk different spirals,
But we both connected
We can learn from each other."*

Erin pouted. "You just wanted to talk about Telemancy?"

Vejet did not nod, and realised Erin could not comprehend its wordless reply.
"Yes."

She laughed. Laughed at herself, really. Not a scoff. Not a pfft. But a big, ugly laugh.
All of this stress and she completely over complicated it?
How dumb she must look.
But then again Erin realised she had to have looked quite different in eight eyes than two.
She did her best to connect either way.
"I would still like to do that."

The Fissure was their middle ground, the centre of the thread upon which they met. Close to home for Vejet, and out in the mostly-open air for Erin.
Their subject was magic, and they talked about it for an hour.

"Nah. I mean, I totally respect my teachers from Stormwind and Dalaran. They taught me the basics. But my style has always been more of a Shalassian one. Humans didn't even call it telemancy until we met them, before that it was all Portalmancy."

"Inelegant. Obtuse." Vejet added.

"I know, right. Anyway I like to focus on more permanent fixtures, I did my thesis on infrastructure and I worked on the gateway network in the Dragon Isles. I love how convenient they are. That portal you made to Azj'kahet was stunning. How does it work?"

"The anchor thread, the axis on which we spin."

Erin still couldn't quite get used to Vejet's pattern of speech but did her best to interpret it anyway. "Like a conduit then? Or an actual Anchor?"

"Yes."

"Ah that's so interesting! We do them a bit like that sometimes too. It's crazy how different cultures so far removed all independently develop the same sort of solutions."

"We wouldn't not."

"Mm, true. Magic is the same anywhere you go. But it feels like your fundamental understanding of it is different? Like when you cast your spell. What language do you use?"

"It is called arachne,

We are aware of runes, in Elven and Titanic

This makes sense.

Woven lines converge to make shapes,

A tangible arrangement of radicals."

Erin's eyes glowed with wonder. "The only other language I've known to draw runes physically in the air was in Draconic but they always used their breath as part of the casting, not a web. I wonder if the physicality of it adds a certain permanence."

"Perhaps you would like to see."

Vejet lowered both front appendages to the ground and pressed the hairs up against it, and Erin saw them quake and shiver. Erin followed and put her hand on the floor and opened herself up to the magic coursing perhaps not so deep beneath the ground.

“Sense the lines. What shape do they take?”

Erin chuckled. “I’m not very good without a ley map. I usually have to learn it off by heart before I can cast.”

“Try harder.”

Erin pouted, not picking up at all on the tone indicator there to know if Vejet was being encouraging or snippy or even a bit sassy. But she did try harder. She closed her eyes and followed the lines in all directions, from here to the Proscenium, to Opportunity Point and Gundargaz, to Mereldar and Azj’kahet. She had been to all these places, and even just knowing their proximity and relation to each other was enough to help.

But she was confused. Every time she followed a line, there was this sharp turn and she would fall off it before she found it again.

“Why are they so... angular? They usually flow and curve?”

“Lodestorn calls it a matrix. But we feel a web. A fractal of a greater form, to him. A spiral among the grand web to us. Layered. Dense.”

It would take Erin time to understand this, but wasn’t that the point?

She spoke with Vejet some time longer, and then they traded final words and gifts.

Erin snapped her fingers and handed Vejet a cake. “I don’t know if you guys eat cake, but I always think it’s a great way of connecting with people. This was made by my friends, some other telemanagers. I hope you enjoy it?”

Vejet took it and handed her something too. Another jar. *“You should eat. Marinated maggots.”* Erin did grimace a bit as she took them, but maybe this is what her cake looked like to Vejet? Maybe these meant the same thing cake did for her? She didn’t know, but she took them and appreciated the gesture anyway. After all, maybe her raccoon would like them.

Erin held out a hand, and Vejet gauged it for a moment before placing in one of their legs as Erin lightly shook it.

“We should do this again.”