

Spellbound

Part 1

Erin stood on a windy hill, buffeted by blustery weather, as she waited on the other side of a portal. Her wife was soon to come back from work, and she couldn't wait to see her. A foot stepped through the gateway and Erin ran her fingers through her hair and flicked it aside..

"Honestly! Some people. You open an intra-dimensional gateway for them and they take a whole five minutes to come through!"

Rem snorted and rolled her eyes, uttering a sassy "Nice to see you too", only for Erin to wrap her arms around Rem's shoulders and kiss her the moment she could.

It was a brisk day here in Valdrakken, atop the Thaldraszian mountains where dragons roared above them and so many flights of stairs awaited.

As they had both finished work for the day, they had decided to meet up afterwards and enjoy some time out together before their dinner reservations later that evening, and took the time to relax and unwind.

Erin looked over at Rem, seeing her struggle with the blonde dreads that the wind caught and flung back at her face. "What was it this time?" Erin leaned forwards. "At work?"

"A Mogu stronghold, think it was recently rediscovered from the Vaults?"

Erin snorted. "Ooh, haven't had one of those in a while."

Rem smirked, regaling her daring with great glee. "Thought they were slick, too. Had these pressure pads with shapes on 'em. Set off different effects if you stood on the wrong one, like a flamethrower or arrows from the walls or whatever."

"How did you get through it?"

"I just didn't get hit?"

Erin laughed so loud she nearly choked and grabbed her hand as they walked through the market together. Valdrakken wasn't nearly as posh as Suramar, but lately as a neutral trading hub for such a melting pot of culture it had become a bit of a cultural hub. Without having to look far, you could find new ideas and concepts brought to life, as the two girls did as Erin hauled Rem over to a stand in the centre of the city's busiest market road labelled "Magic Trinkets".

A Vulpera sat behind the stand, wearing a hoodie with holes cut into it for her ears. They perked up when she saw Rem and Erin coming towards her, anticipating a potential customer.

“Hey! Hey! Look, new stock!”

Erin adjusted her glasses and leaned in. “What’ve you got for us?”

“First, first!” The Vulpera revealed a sort of wristwatch, but instead of a timepiece it had a polished opal set instead. “For scrying on the move!”

Rem raised an eyebrow. “I can’t even see that...”

“Yeah!” Erin huffed. “How the hell are you supposed to scry anything useful if the thing you’re scrying into is way too small?”

The Vulpera scratched behind her ear. “Uhhh... next one, next one!”

She opened a crate and revealed two runestones carved into comma-like shapes and demonstrated putting them in both her ears. “Soundstones for ears! No need carry! Communicate easy-way!”

Erin rubbed her chin, at least a little bit tempted by this one. Rem had to interject, saving her from the obvious scam this had to be. “What if they fell out? Is there any way of findin’ them if you lose them?”

“Not point, not point...” The Vulpera tried to stay positive. “Very comfy!”

Erin looked at Rem, and Rem shook her head. “Can we see the next one, please?”

The Vulpera heaved out their final object from under the counter. It was a large stone slab, with little else on it. The Vulpera also left a scroll on the table. “And what one’s this?” Rem asked, taking point. She folded her arms into her pockets and stood aloof. She didn’t want to give the impression they were actually considering buying it. She knew places like this preyed on people all too easily goaded into buying something they didn’t really need.

“Arcane Slate!” The vulpera beamed.

Erin’s eyes bulged. “No way. You have one?” Erin turned to Rem and, with big beady eyes, she wondered if they’d already lost their battle with frugality at that moment. “I didn’t know they sold them...” Erin muttered.

Rem pulled Erin aside for a moment, out of the Vulpera’s acute earshot..

“Babe, that’s literally just a rock. You’re not serious, are you?”

“But Arcane Slates are like the coolest thing at the moment! You can scribe all the contents of your spellbook into it at once and you don’t have to worry about pages or anything, it just goes in the stone!”

“I don’t get it. Doesn’t that mean you have to carry around a rock?” Rem ran her hands through her hair and massaged her temples.

“Yeah, but everyone else has one...”

Erin's puppy-eyes never failed to help her get her way.

They went back to the stall, and Rem glanced into the pouch of money she got from her last job, certain not to give away she had so much on hand.

"How much is it?"

"Twenty silver!" The vulpera held out their hands expectantly.

The idea of paying twenty silver for a rock and a piece of paper was wild to Rem, but she did it. Erin squealed as she grabbed the stone and the scroll too.

"What's the paper for? Is it like a proof of purchase type deal?" Rem asked the Vulpera.

"Spell scroll!"

Rem looked at Erin, rather having her answer it than someone she just met.

"Oh! So, scrolls are like... premade spells. The person who wrote this one put the spell for making the slate work in a scroll, and I don't have to know the spell to cast it. Other than a small phrase and a gesture, it's basically all inside! I'll try it out when we get home."

"Just don't take too long. We both know it already takes you long enough to find an outfit. How many have you got, anyway?" Rem bumped her shoulder as they walked away. It took a while for Erin to think of an answer, as if actually counting. "Like, a hundred?"

Rem smeared her face in her hands for the hopeless situation she found herself in, and they both soon headed back home.

Rem stood before the mirror in their room, which was set on the inner panel of their wardrobe.

Pass over and loop.

She held the tie under her collar. Grabbed both ends. Folded it over, made a loop and... it fell apart. How did it even work? How does someone tie a tie?

She frowned, seeing herself become more and more frustrated.

It should be simple. Another figure entered her reflection, and she turned.

Erin entered the room, her hair long and flowing, draped in sparkles and starlight. She wore a long midnight-hued dress that came all the way down and opened on one side at the leg. It was low cut, as is standard for Erin. She always had to show off for at least her favourite person. Erin came in with heels and an assortment of bracelets on both wrists, hanging gems on one ear, and her beloved stormsilver band necklace. She pouted as she came up to Rem, looking up at her as she grabbed both ends of the tie. "Having trouble?"

Rem snorted, a crack forming in her smile. "You'd think a Kul Tiran could tie a knot. Bit of a scam, right? What's the point in being one otherwise?"

"Here. Let me. I know you're not a fan of them, but you'll look really smart."

Erin, with a decade's experience of dressing herself in suits and ties, expertly folded and looped the length and pressed down Rem's collars over it, tight end it at the knot and leaned in for a kiss. "There we go."

Rem couldn't help but stick her finger underneath it to loosen it, to have a little *give*. It was a miracle she wore it anyway, what with the black slacks Erin had found for her and the white dress shirt too.

Erin stepped back and smiled, turning in the mirror, ever seeking validation.

"And what about mine?" Rem snorted, wondering what kind of answer she was expecting. "You look stunning." Erin flicked her hair and gave Rem a wide grin before pulling her away. "You're damn right I do."

They came down the stairs and got to the door, and Erin glanced over at the shoes in the corner. "Oh right. Your footwraps."

Rem looked down. Perhaps not the best fit for the rest of her attire.

Erin took some arcane dust, just a hint of glimmer, and sprinkled it on before moulding the illusion to match the shoes beside her, using them as reference.

With an uneasy chuckle, Rem gazed down and felt a strange sensation, what she saw didn't match what she felt. "I'm gonna look down and freak out that I'm still wearin' shoes..."

"Just while we get in there?" Erin held her hands tightly. "I can dispel them when we're there?"

"Sure." Rem nodded, tugging at her tie again. "Let's go?"

If there was one thing Erin had, it was taste. It would be a crime for someone as well travelled as her to not only know the places everyone says are the best, but also the hidden gems too. Suramar was high-class, Valdrakken up-and-coming, Dornogal was just... no. She didn't want fine dining, and neither did she want a street food stall in a busy market road. All she wanted was a romantic dinner in a place they could mostly have to themselves. She knew just the place. Sometimes, you don't need to look somewhere far away to find treasure. Instead, you need to look close to home.

Stepping through the portal, Erin led Rem to the entrance of a restaurant by the side of the canal bordering Cathedral Square. The best way to describe it was cosy; with warm lights, wooden outdoor seating and meticulously overgrown vines. It held a rustic sort of look that breathed a comforting atmosphere, like a welcoming rural cottage with a grandmother who cooked with recipes a hundred years old.

Erin was undoubtedly overdressed for such a venue, but when wasn't she?

Erin glanced over at Rem as they came in. She shrugged with a smile at Erin, her hands deeply tucked into her pockets. Erin reached in and felt them balled into a fist, but she eased them out and locked fingers with Erin as she lead her in.

They came up to the waiter at the entrance as they peered around the restaurant. It was an older place, maybe about fifty years old. Each table was set with candles and flowers, draped with patterned cloth, and on each seat there laid a cushion. There were a few other exits- one leading to a kitchen, and another to a service hallway.

Erin smiled at the waiter, holding up her index and middle fingers.

"Table for two, please!" With a wink and a tilt of her head, she silently let him know that perhaps they'd prefer the quiet spot by the window.

It wasn't empty there thankfully. It would have been concerning if it was, but neither was it packed. There were mostly couples like them in their mid

twenties to late thirties who sat and held their own conversations in their own bubbles.

The waiter lead them to their seats, holding chairs out for Erin first and then for Rem, then lit candles in front of them and handed them their menus.

“Please take your time to decide what you would like.”

It held a variety of dishes from pasta and rich cream sauces to pizzas, cheeseboards, salads and flatbreads too.

Erin scrolled through it with glee, desperately wishing she could just order everything and spend all night there, but sadly there was no spell for that.

With perfect pronunciation, she looked up and asked the waiter.

“Can I check if the cacio e pepe is suitable for vegetarians? I heard this place was good for that” The waiter nodded and bowed. “Our cacio e pepe is made with a cheese alternative, which still retains that same iconic flavour. Worry not.”

Erin beamed, seeing this as a sign she’d done her research well. “I’ll take that then, and maybe you can find a wine that will pair with it?”

The waiter wrote it down and looked to Rem. “And for you, madame?”

Rem looked up at the waiter and joked, stifling a laugh. “Nah, don’t worry about me. She feeds me enough at home as is. I’ll take a juice box if you got one though?”

Erin stepped in. “Oh! I just remembered- can we also get a caprese salad? Thanks. That’ll be all.”

The waiter went away, leaving Erin and Rem together.

Erin took her hand and traced runes with her nails in her palm idly.

“Not sure if that’s something you actually wanted, but just thought I’d get him off your back. I just appreciate you coming.”

Rem loosened her tie again. “It’s alright! Said I’d go anywhere with you, didn’t I?”

They sat there for thirty minutes and thirty more, as Erin grumbled, rubbing her head in her hands. "Where are they? It shouldn't take that long for a salad and some pasta." Her stomach growled.

"You want me to go look for 'em?" Rem stuck her head up to scan the room for a waiter.

"Nah. Let's uhh.." Erin exhaled, blowing some air up to the fraying strands of her hair as it landed over her eyes. "Maybe we can play 'I Spy?'"

"How old are you again?" Rem chortled.

"Twenty-five is a completely appropriate age for I Spy. C'mon.

I spy with my beady eyes, something beginning with... h."

Rem leaned back in the chair. "Hunger."

Erin threw her hands up. "That easy? Alright, your turn."

"I spy something beginning with..."

The world around Rem slowed down. She heard something, a vibration through her soles, like something crashed on the ground with a thud. There was a stifled cry, a groan. Then, suddenly, the door swung open revealing a waiter she hadn't seen before leave the kitchen and exit through another employee-only area.

"Something's wrong."

"Well, yeah it fuckin' is." Erin grumbled. "Food isn't here yet."

"No, I mean... wait there." Rem held her hand out. "I'll just be two minutes. It's probably nothin'."

Erin grabbed her hand before she could pull it away with a determined expression, realising the gravity of the situation. "I'm coming with."

They went as quietly as they could. Rem pressed her hand against the kitchen door and crept it open, and gasped.

It was empty in there save for a single thing.

A body lay on the floor surrounded by a pool of blood. It was immediately obvious what the cause of death must have been, as Rem's stomach turned sick at the sight.

The man's face had been hollowed out all the way, like it had been scooped out by a spoon. She peered inside and saw only dark, bloodstained flesh, with no sign of a skull or any spinal column.

Erin gagged. "What the actual fuck?"

Rem heard footsteps, and there was nowhere else to hide. She dragged Erin inside a staff wardrobe, gazing through the gap where the doors met. Usually Erin wouldn't have minded being stuck somewhere so close to her wife, but the situation certainly soured any particular thoughts at that time.

Someone came into the room. An elf. Sin'dorei, judging by his still-emerald eyes. He reached into the murdered man's robe and pulled out some sort of crystal mask and stashed it before leaving again.

"You think that's him?" Rem whispered.

"Killers always return to the scene of the crime! He must have forgot to take that mask before." It really wasn't just her favourite crime novels Erin had learned it from- it was more often than not true.

"Then let's follow him." Rem and Erin crept once again out of the kitchen, and hurried down the hallway they had seen him leave the first time.

A long corridor met them which connected with the back entrance to the kitchen, presumably just being where they ferried in ingredients delivered to the restaurant.

They reached a fork in the path, and Rem noticed blood stains from where the killer must have stepped in the blood of his victim before leaving. He was sloppy. They followed that, went up the stairs and entered a records room with an open window.

"Looks like he jumped out."

Rem gazed into it and saw no view of the outside, not the canal or any back allies. She saw a coat closet.

It was only when Erin got close they figured it out. She stumbled, her head going faint, nose trickling blood now from some unseen force. Erin gurgled, and Rem held her up so she didn't fall.

"It's a portal! I can't even tell what it's being powered by or who it's being cast from, but it's strong enough for me to passively feel it."

"Are you okay? We can stop?" Rem was always concerned for Erin first more than anything, but Erin had to be fine. "I'll manage. Stars know the guard can't handle this. We're the only people who have a shot of catching this guy!"

With determination, they jumped through.

Part 2

Through the portal they went, and came tumbling out from the coat closet and into a theatre. One of the audience members in the packed rows shushed them, clearly disgruntled. They stood at the back amid a large space, with drapery coloured crimson and leather seats while a markedly lacklustre performance of *Giles Kopff's "The Exodus"* played, retelling the epic saga of the Draenei's race across the stars. It was the sort of tacky yet self-important performance where audience members were called up on stage to participate for a more "immersive" experience despite being highly inaccurate to the point of offensiveness. Rem groaned at the sight, but Erin was more concerned as to why here of all places.

"This is the Opal Theatre in Jade Forest... no wonder that portal nearly knocked me out, that thing was way too long range to just be left open." The audience member shushed them again, hissing. "We're watching!" Rem looked at him and whispered. "Did you see anyone else come through?" "Did you all come out of that closet? How many of you can fit in there?" The man nodded.

"Did you see where he went?"

"I think he sat down?" The man turned forwards, hoping she'd take it as a sign to leave him alone.

Rem took Erin to the side. "What spells have you got prepped right now?"

"None." Erin shook her head. "I thought this was just going to be a nice dinner, I wasn't expecting us to have to track down a murderer!"

"You can't scry him?"

"It'll take too long, by the time we're back he'll be gone."

Rem huffed and turned. "Wish we bought that dumb watch now. We'll have to do it the hard way. Pretend we're looking for a seat."

The performance swelled as a reenactment of the Draenei's frantic crash-landing on Draenor. Everyone sat in the rows faced forwards, cloaked by dim lighting, forcing the two of them to slowly walk down the aisles and scan down each seat for the man they had seen. Sin'dorei, with emerald eyes. Erin hooked her arm around Rem's to play the part of a couple just looking for where they needed to sit, but with each row they scanned they couldn't see where the man had gone.

They reached the front row, and then a spotlight fell on them.

An actor on stage called out.

“Long we travelled,
‘Cross stars we flew!
New lands unravelled,
To meet friends anew!”

Rem looked at Erin and shook her head, but it was too late. The actor lept off stage and brought them up to the top, and prostrated them towards the crowd. “Friends, introduce yourselves!”

Rem stood up, feigning a wide smile and a confident, theatrical attitude. “Hi, everyone! I’m Nui, and this is my girlfriend... Esmerelda!”

Esmerelda?! Erin nearly broke character to drag her for that one, but she rode it well, stepping up and flicking her starlight hair and immediately becoming a crowd favourite for reasons more related to her outfit and appearance than the fake name.

“Now, with new allies together we travel, from our crashed Genedar to the settlement in the distance. Perhaps these savages would join us too?”

Rem participated in the performance as much as she could, following the rest of the actors as they ‘rode elekk’ across the grassy plains of Nagrand. But her eyes never left the audience, scouring it for her target. And there, she spotted someone with faintly glowing emerald eyes coming down from the aisle and slipping into the dressing rooms!

Rem leaned over and whispered in Erin’s ear. “Down there!”

Neither of them cared enough about the performance to not leave now they saw their mark escaping, much to the chagrin of the actors and audience who booed and balked in disbelief as they broke character and went off stage behind the curtains that lead into the dressing rooms. But no one was here!

Erin looked around hurriedly. “Shit, we lost him! Are you sure he went this way?”

“Sure as anythin’! Literally came right in here. Not even a back door... who built this place?”

“Maybe he went through another portal...” Erin searched every nook and cranny. “It could be anything large enough to fit through, a shape with a defined border. Windows, doors, wardrobes...”

Rem found a hairpin from one of the glamour tables and rammed it into a lock on the floor before swinging it open. “How ‘bout a hatch?” Peering through, they felt a cold draft come in. Erin came close and felt another gush red from her nose.

“You’re a genius!” Erin smiled through the blood, and they both climbed in, closing the hatch behind them.

The atmosphere was immediately different, hollow and silent save for the dim crackle of candlelight. They found themselves stepping on cracked tile flooring in a dank room, pooling with water and the smell of rot in the air. A notice on the wall listed arrival dates for patients with no time set for them to leave. A creaky window beckoned Erin over to close it, only to see outside withered trees and barren fields. “Not even sure where we are now... Duskwood? Lordaeron?” Rem shuddered and peered behind a veil curtain to find a stained medical bed with cuffs on each corner. “Guessin’ this isn’t the kind of bed you keep asking me to strap you to, is it Erbear?” In hindsight, the joke gave her little comfort.

Rem carried one of the candles with her, carefully watching for the glint that flickered in the reflection of broken glass littering the floor, only to hear it crunch under Erin’s step behind her.

“Hear anything?” Erin whispered, checking each dark corner for anyone or anything that could leap out at them at a moment’s notice.

Rem focused her hearing, honed it so she could hear past her breathing, the faint crackle of her candlelight, the draft pouring through the window, Erin’s crunching step...

Breathing, crackle, draft, crunch...

Rem turned around. Erin had stopped for a moment. Another crunch. It wasn’t them!

Rem pulled Erin out of the way as the killer came running past them almost knocking them down into the broken glass as he did, and he screamed. “Stop following me!”

“Hey! Get back here!” Erin rushed forward to chase after him through the abandoned asylum, as Rem soon overtook her. “Get in front of him, I’ll take him down!”

Rem would have been far faster than the killer in any other circumstance but the littered ground made it difficult to reach her top speed. She sprinted after him, seeing him crash headfirst into a doorway and rebound off of it as she skid and slipped on spoiled water and managed to right herself before returning to the chase.

She had begun to make a mental map- the main entranceway was bordered on the ground floor, where they were, by a circular hallway which held all the patient rooms. It was long enough that, if this kept up, he might be able to slip into any of them and disappear again. They had almost looped round to the main entrance again with Rem hot on his heels, and just as he began to tire a large medical cabinet appeared in a flash of light causing him to crash into it!

Rem and Erin looked over the man as he stumbled over his own words.

"You don't know what you're doing! You're one of *them*, aren't you?"

"I don't know who *them* is, buddy, but you killed someone!" Rem spat, and went to grab at his arm. He yanked it away and opened up the cabinet.

"You won't get me! I know what they do to people!" Before Rem could snatch him again, the slippery bastard had crawled into the cabinet entirely- he must have opened another portal inside it!

"Fuck! Okay, next time we knock him out." Erin snarled, starting to get more than a bit pissed her romantic dinner date had been ruined because of him, and they followed him through one final portal to confront him head on.

They appeared through the door leading into a circular library, stacked to impossible heights with tomes and scrolls. Judging by the general architecture and gold-hued tones lining everything, perhaps they were in Quel'thalas?

Rem stormed towards the man as he scrambled back onto the bookshelves behind him, fumbling for something which could help him, then laughed as he yanked a scroll open and read the words scribed on it!

"Sphaera Immortalitatis!"

Rem reached out a hand as a faintly violet hued globe of energy manifested around the murderer. The letters on the scroll he held burned and turned the vellum to dust as he sat comfortably inside the space, watching Rem's hand bounce off the now impenetrable barrier.

“You can’t get me now! Give up!” He cackled. “This *Dome of Impenetrability* can’t possibly be destroyed by the likes of you. Nothing gets in. Only another master-level spell can counteract it and I can tell neither of you fit the bill.”

Rem groaned as she pounded on the globe. “Maybe you shouldn’t have ripped some bloke’s face off if you didn’t want us after you!”

“I won’t leave! You won’t get me!”

Erin rested a hand on the barrier and looked in. “What do you think you did? What was the mask for?”

The killer shook his head. “I don’t have to tell you anything!” He looked at the scrolls he had pulled off the bookshelf already as they lay scattered by his feet, and picked up another. “Leave me alone. Now!”

Rem and Erin started to back away.

But the man was already shaken, maybe crazy. They didn’t know if it was a twitch, a breath, a wrong step that he saw... but he felt threatened, and he cast the spell from his scroll.

“Centum fulgura!”

Wrathful lightning blasted out of the killer’s dome, darting through the air as it split into a wide conical series of streaks that reached from his end of the library to the other. Erin grabbed Rem as she saw the scroll move and blinked her out of the way, but the sheer voltage of electricity filling the air still left them shocked and bruised.

“He’s not gonna listen to us!” Erin cried. “I’ve got an idea! Take this!”

Erin passed Rem a scroll from the shelves. “Read it!”

“You taught me how to read common, not magic!”

Erin checked the scroll as the murderer prepared his next. “This one’s for fireball.”

“Is that a good one?”

“It’ll have to be! The words are scintillans ignem pila!”

Rem spoke the words as she held onto the scroll, and as it burned away a large crackling ember formed in her hands. She threw it at the murderer with a mighty *BOOM!* The smoked soon cleared though, revealing the sphere was in tact.

“It’s a dome of impenetrability!” The killer gloated and sneered, readying a spell. “Give up!”

He consumed the scroll, creating a trio of ice lances above his head and directing them towards Rem, forcing her to waste time dodging them that she could have used getting another scroll.

Meanwhile, Erin sorted through an endless pile of rubbish. "Candlelight? Minor Illusion? *Truestrike*? How does he keep getting high level spells while all we find is garbage?"

Rem felt a cold chill and leaned back just as an ice lance shot past her and lodged itself into the bookshelf before her, and used it as a stepping stone to climb higher up and throw one back down to Erin. "If this is anythin' like my dungeon crawls, they always put the good stuff at the top! Try this one!"

Erin caught the vellum. "Conjure Grand Piano? Fuck it, it'll do!"

A cacophony of notes rattled the library as Erin summoned it directly over the dome, but it did not leave even a crack.

A violent war erupted between both parties as they mustered the magic hidden within the library's scrolls, with no one giving the other an inch.

From within the dome the murderer threw violent and powerful spells while he himself enjoyed complete immunity to their volatile effects. Erin, with no other magic but Telemancy at her disposal (being the few spells she had mastered enough to not need to prepare) blinked about the room quickly draining what little magical reserves she had to avoid damage. Rem moved too fast to be hit by any of the spells, but without Erin to read out the words for her the scrolls were useless.

The killer drew another powerful spell from his arsenal, and sent out a cloud of choking poison which slowly rolled across the room as it poured in great volumes from his fingertips. Erin hugged the wall of the library and choked through the noxious fumes as she found her next spellscroll and cast its contents! "Counterspell! Finally!"

Colourless waves emitted from her hand and within moments the deadly gas subsided, but the dome still stood. Erin seethed and looked at Rem, who had just found her next scroll. "Talk to me, Rem! What have you got?"

Rem scoured the page for the runes she had to cast and did her best to explain them. "There's uh... some numbers, and little dudes?"

Erin tossed another useless scroll away and thought what it must be. "Mirror image, maybe? Probably multiplicet persona!"

"Why've they gotta be so hard to pronounce?"

Rem had little time to think, as the killer summoned a powerful array of arcane missiles, too many for her to count! She ducked under one, flipped over another, but there were too many. Clutching the scroll, she took a chance and shouted out the words Erin told her.

Another torrent of missiles flew towards her, but as many copies of her began to form like reflections in a shattered mirror they struck through thin air rather than a body.

Erin grabbed two scrolls off the bookshelf and blinked one into Rem's hands. "Maybe we can overwhelm it if we both go at the same time?" "On it!"

"Trabem lunae!"
"Sol furore!"

Erupting from their palms, a cerulean beam of condensed lunar energy swirled forth from Erin while a vermillion ray of solar power was fired by Rem, both striking the dome of impenetrability, causing it to crack.

From inside the dome, the murderer too began to crack. He had everything, some of the most powerful spells at his disposal on his home turf, how had he been backed into a corner like this?

"You don't get it. *They're* the enemy! They'll come for you too, you'll see that I'm right. Everyone will!"

"Are you gonna shut up and explain it to us then?" Rem asked, using this moment of rest to catch her breath, feeling sweat roll all the way from her brow to her fingertips. Erin pressed one side of her nostril and blew hard, ejecting a glob of congealed blood onto the floor next to her. She only had a few more blinks in her at this point, and any semblance of being put together had crumbled.

"I can't trust you." The killer groaned. "Not now. Not after you chased me halfway across the world, not after you wouldn't give up! Why would I give you a chance?"

"You're the one who admitted to killing a guy and you're playing the victim?" Erin couldn't believe what she was hearing. But as she drew ragged breaths, she felt a sense of dread as he brandished another scroll.

"I gave you a chance to get out. But if I'm going to get out of this, I'll have to kill you too!" He screamed, and summoned the magic from his spell. The air turned purple around them, and within a moment the room was rocked by an intense magical explosion.

Erin snatched a scroll and ran to Rem, freezing them together in an ice block for the initial blast but the force of the spell shattered it. The seals on the other scrolls still surrounding them were burned open by latent magic left by the explosion, and drew their effects out as wild magic surged!

The whole library began to rumble as scrolls chaotically burst open and released their effects. Fire and frostbolts flung into the air, waves of acid rolled down the bookshelves, the very foundations they stood on cracked and heaved as the whole thing started to list sideways. Erin watched as everyone turned invisible, only for a moment later her vision restored as she could now see through the invisibility. They shrunk and grew to various sizes, and illusions of countless animals were released and darted around the room. Erin was struck by one wayward effect, and saw her hands were hooves.

“Baah!” cried Erin Sheepley, she who had been polymorphed.

“Snap out of it!” Rem slapped her, and the force of the blow dispelled the effect, turning her back to her previous form.

The floor rumbled and soon the whole library was ripped from the ground and sent crashing down. As they fell Erin saw that the library was atop a high tower in the Eversong Woods. Another spell broke. Time and her movements began to slow, as she watched a hundred chunks of stone and thousands of books and scrolls soar almost motionlessly through the air, and saw amber trees swaying in the breeze of the land of eternal spring. The killer, safe in his dome, was the first to hit the ground as rubble and debris broke upon impact with it and moments later she and Rem crashed into the ground.

Rem found herself wreathed in welts and blood and bruises, and struggled her hardest to push herself off the ground with her remaining strength. “I need to get up... I gotta...”

“Save it.” The killer spoke. “You’re done.”

His lips danced through the word. He was still terrified, and took no pleasure or glee in what he was going to do, what he had to do. The scroll crumbled away in his hands as a crooked finger began to crackle with hateful energy of unknowable darkness. “You should have got out while you could.”

Rem looked up at the spell and knew one powerful word could kill her, then and there. He was still safe inside the barrier. There were no scrolls she could retaliate with. She was too tired to run.

A shadow came from the rubble.

Erin crawled to the top of it, broken but not done. Her leg and nose were bleeding, gushing wounds covered in dirt and grime, her dress ripped and stars knows how she was still wearing her heels. But with a gravelly voice, she spoke.”

“Hey! I’ve got one more for you!”

The killer looked up and screamed as she showed the scroll, letting it burn away in the breeze.

She held out one finger and pointed it using her thumb to line it up, and then let fly.

“Disintegrate.”

The dome’s crack grew and grew, spreading across its entire surface, until it shattered and turned to dust.

“No!”

Rem reached up and slapped the man’s hand to force his spell to go wide, and then threw herself at him. She ripped the tie off her neck and wrapped it around his tightly, as he struggled on the ground to grapple her or push her off but she wouldn’t let up. His eyes rolled back. And then he finally collapsed.

Epilogue

The violent explosions of magic from the tower's collapse echoed through the entire forest, surely summoning in local authorities from Silvermoon to investigate. Erin and Rem shared their side of the story, and breathed a thankful sigh as the killer was taken into custody.

Things remained tense for a time, as for a few days both of them were held in Silvermoon while their outlandish claims were verified. Thankfully, the traces of the unstable portals they travelled through as well as the body of the victim gave weight to their words. Erin and Rem were ultimately released but not for their own altruism and good nature but instead for political reasons. It would create too much tension with Stormwind in an already tense time to risk taking things further, especially when it was ultimately a Sin'dorei who had illegally teleported into Stormwind and killed someone there.

Left with an array of conditions and concessions for their release, such as being barred from any land or settlement owned by the Sin'dorei for the foreseeable future, the two were simply happy enough to have their life and most of their freedoms intact.

There was still one thing that they couldn't figure out. Erin scrawled notes into her journal, with an artist's impresssion of the mask sketched on parchment.

"The mask the killer took off the body was like nothing we'd ever seen. With a light teal sheen it seemed to catch the light at strange angles. It was made of clusters of geometric shapes, squares and pyramids, like it was made out of gems. Both the eye and mouth holes were rectangular and slim.

My contacts in the Explorer's League had no idea what it could be, though they presume the material it was made out of was probably bismuth from how I described it. It was claimed by Silvermoon authorities, obviously they wouldn't let us keep any evidence. I imagine they would have had to hand it over to the Reliquary. Maybe they'll have a better time checking it out than us, but for obvious reasons I can't contact them.

Rem also double checked with some of her contacts; a sort-of-legal group in Boralus run by a woman called Madam T. They've got a bunch of fingers in underworld-flavoured pies, and she said she'd never seen anything like this. I'm not sure whether the fact that we can't tell if it's linked to any crime syndicates is comforting or not, but hopefully we're all just overthinking this and the mask really had no deeper meaning.

Either way, whatever it is, it's genuinely unique and not linked to any existing group or culture from what we can tell. All we can do is keep an eye on things."

She put down her pen and took Rem's hand.

"Okay. Dinner date, take two. Are you ready?"

Rem snorted, having asked if she could skip the tie this time and instead go in her normal clothes instead. "All good!"

Erin fixed her collar and lead her out the door, opting this time for a hearty meal cooked by Halfhill's finest.

From a distant hill neither of them noticed the masked figure who watched them and disappeared again into the unknown.