

Prologue

Full Moon Mirage - <https://tinkerbolt.co.uk/erin-full-moon-mirage>

This story provides context to two main characters but is otherwise unrelated to the storyline.

Act One

Dalaran Standoff

Dust blew and tumbleweeds rolled on the arid steppe, where no sensible or good-hearted man would roam. Flickering lantern lights like fireflies buzzed at the bottom of the ravine while their man stood watch at the top on his high perch.

He scratched a match on his boot and used it to light his cigarette and watch the smoke trail towards the moon.

“Quiet night...” he mumbled to himself, something he had become quite used to on his long watches. As much as he didn’t like the rest of the gang, their company was better than his own. “Don’t see no point in this. Always me, drawin’ the short end of the straw.”

He must have been seeing things, or it must have been the wind, because he could swear he saw the dry dead bushes about ten paces down the crag rustle like someone came through them.

“Hey!” He shouted. “Anyone there?”

His hand shot to a thin holster tied around his waist, inches above the grip, ready to draw. He stood and waited.

When no one showed he groaned. The moon was playing tricks on him again.

But he should’ve trusted his instincts.

The smoke of his cigarette fluttered, and before he knew it he was choking, sputtering, his eyes rolling back. He grasped at the cloth around his neck and heaved to pull it away but the force was too strong, and by the time his knees buckled it was too late. Consciousness faded, and he was gagged and bound.

A hand reached to unclasp the holster on his belt, and the hand then drew the weapon held inside.

Not a gun, as one might expect, but perhaps as close as you could get. A wand, polished and carved with a machine like precision, with no special care but with a standardised feel that made it seem like it was fresh from a factory. Her cloak of invisibility dropped, and she strapped the holster around her own waist, but hid it under her coat.

“I’m in the right place.” She said.

Time for the next step.

The valley below was the perfect spot for the kind of criminal who wanted to steer clear of the law. With only one way to make it down to the base on foot, their man on watch would have an easy time seeing any roaming officers try to bring them to justice, and they could be ready to blow them straight to hell.

They were a gang of seven or eight, and they kept their numbers tight. They’d usually jump caravans riding between Redridge and Khaz Modan, rob and steal or even kill those who

wouldn't pay. This time they had a haul which could set them up for life. They just needed to lay low until the heat died down, then they could find a buyer.

They sat around the campfire, assured in their security, and watched as their ringleader came out. With a name like Bighorn, a Tauren like him looked exactly as you might imagine. With him he carried almost half a carriage and dropped it by the others and spoke to the rest of his boys.

"We're movin' out tonight!"

A snivelly little goblin who could never make it in Fuselight piped up. "Boss? We were supposed to lay low until we knew no one would come lookin' for it!"

"Plans change. Haul's bigger than we thought, bigger than all of us. Start packing now, and leave nothing. We don't want to leave a trail."

"Boss! Hey boss!" Another member of the gang ran to the fire, this time a troll far too far from home. "There's someone here!"

Bighorn seethed. "Then why the fuck didn't you shoot them?"

"You'd shoot a client?" A voice called.

They whipped their heads around to see a woman dressed in a long duster coat, holding her hat down to shield her face from the wind.

She unclipped a pouch of gold and threw it onto the ground between them.

"A peace offering."

Bighorn came up to her and stared her down.

"How'd you get past the guard?"

"He let me past."

"I told him to let no one through, no matter what."

"Maybe he's smarter than you give him credit for."

"The fuck's that supposed to mean?"

She glanced sideways up at the cliffs above them, and back at Bighorn. "I heard about your haul. Now don't take it the wrong way- I'm not gonna report you. In fact I'm kinda glad you picked it up." She chuckled, a genuine little expression that gave some legitimacy to her words. "I had a vested interest in making sure it didn't get to its original destination and you made it a whole lot easier for me."

Bighorn held up a hand to stay his men's hands, but kept a heavy grip on his own holster. He eyed the pouch of gold on the ground. It must have been at least twenty. A good sum, but not enough.

"So what do you want?"

"I want the whole lot."

"All of it? You can't afford that."

She pulled her gloves on tighter. "I assure you I can. I'm desperate."

He wasn't sure what her game was, but the gold she left was real, and no one leaves that much just as a peace offering without being ready to haggle with more.

The cliff above them crumbled, dropping stone and debris. She was quick to regain Bighorn's attention. "Look, I know you're in a rush. You need to make a sale now or you risk way too much dragging a haul as valuable as that with you. Let me take it off your hands."

"And who exactly are you, anyway?"

"Name's Langley. A hundred gold. How's that sound?"

It was too clean, too easy, too beneficial.

Bighorn's men crept closer at his order.

"And how exactly are you going to carry all this?" He asked in the most polite of tones.

She held firm to her belt before looking at the cliffs again, pursing her lips to not give away her game. "I'll call in a carriage. You look like a smart feller... how about we make that two hundred, and I can go home?"

The cliff crumbled again.

Bighorn wasn't playing any longer. "Maybe you give us the gold and you'll be lucky to get home alive."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Bighorn."

"Oh?" His wide mouth turned into a grimace. "Why's that?"

"I'm taking that crate with me, whether you're dead or alive."

In an instant she drew the wand from her neck and pointed it at his neck, and all the other bandits in the gorge did too, facing it at her. Bighorn slowly drew his as Langley spoke.

"You sure you even know how to use that, big guy? It ain't as easy as a swish and a flick."

Bighorn raised the wand overhead and pointed it to the cliffs, and with a single kinetic motion ejected a missile of arcane so powerful it bored through solid stone, causing the cliff to crumble. A man fell down and off it into the gorge below, heaving himself up from the rubble. Langley looked over at him. "Sollan..."

"Save the arguments for later." The elven man spoke. He was Langley's number two, and whatever plan they had just fell apart like dust to the wind. He aimed his wand at the members of the gang. "We gotta clean up this mess first."

"Hey Bighorn?" Langley spoke, and raised her wand as all the others pointed at her.

"Think fast."

She snapped her fingers and warped away, missing a hail of wandfire as it exploded. Sollan had a free shot and took it at Bighorn, but the gang boss was faster than he looked and turned just so the shot grazed his arm and disintegrated a boulder behind them. "They're fuckin' mages!" Bighorn slung his wand again and again as Sollan tried to put up wards, each shattered in an instant, and he could only hope Langley could keep the heat off him.

Opting for her own weapons instead of a wand, Langley tried that opening trick she first used on the guard out front on the other members of the gang. Shrouded and undetectable they fired wildly at any whistling bush or rock, desperate to catch her, leaving clouds of dust in their wake. The little goblin saw movement through the dust all too late before he felt his body be raised from the ground by unseen force, and then propelled into the sandstone beyond.

Bighorn reached for Sollan for a point blank shot, just as the elf readied his wand. Bighorn slapped the wand sideways with a boulder-like swipe and sent the shot tearing through the cliff. Sollan scrambled away, knowing even a huge frame like Bighorn's would struggle with stone tumbling meters down upon him, and felt the ground shudder as it crashed.

Langley and the other members of the gang looked over to see the impact, but with little more than a snarled expression did she react. She had a job to do. A wand wasn't really her style, especially not one as deadly as that. She'd fling crates, barrels, anything she could get her hands on, and took a few of the weaker members out with a well placed strike. She held a wagon wheel above her as the troll came in to take her on, and even as she smashed it over his head his cuts and bruises healed almost in an instant. She drew her runecloth lasso, the one she took out the guard up top with, and looked for the first opening she could get.

Sollan stepped up to the rubble pile and held his wand firmly. He waited there for any sign of life, to know if he could turn his back or not, to know if Bighorn was dead. Everything was still, and he turned his head to look if Langley needed help, just as Bighorn's hand erupted from the boulders and snapped Sollan's wand in two. Another wand was easily shattered, and Bighorn held Sollan up by the neck. With even just the slightest tension Sollan's windpipe squeezed and he choked for air. Bighorn held up his wand. It was all over for him.

Langley looked over at her partner. She screamed, "Sollan!" and didn't waste a moment. She dredged the depths of her strength to smash the troll's head directly into the stone floor, shattering both his tusks, and even if he would heal in a moment she needed any time she could get. From a burning log tossed in the campfire, Langley lifted a bright flame above her head and held it directly onto Bighorn's back. He roared furiously and lost a grip on both Sollan and his wand, and in that instant Sollan stole the weapon and cast it.

Bighorn's shoulder gaped, as his sinews and ebbs of blood drained from an open hole. The muscles and fibres that were left were not strong enough to hold the rest of his left limb, and when they snapped it collapsed onto the floor.

Langley gagged, choking her own blood onto the floor.

"You're not getting away." Sollan said, the wand still clutched in his hand.

Bighorn croaked. "You think I can? After all this?"

Sollan's gaze was piercing... and uncompromising. "I don't give second chances."

With another cast, Bighorn was executed.

"Sollan!" Even through her drained mana, Langley forced herself to her feet to confront him.

"What the fuck was that, why'd you kill him?"

Sollan scoffed and stowed the wand. "You said you'd take the chest back, with him dead or alive."

"As a threat! I didn't ask you to shoot him in the head after he was already bleeding out.

What about the plan?"

Sollan strode towards the chest. "Plans change."

He cracked the chest open to reveal at least fifty more wands just the same as Bighorn's gang had used. Langley muttered a profanity and said "Let's destroy them and get them out of here."

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Erin." He replied.

"Why the fuck not? You've seen how dangerous these are, even non-magical bandits become a huge threat if they have just one!"

"Not everyone can be trusted with them, obviously." Sollan sighed. "But we can. Not everyone is a criminal. Think of how easier our jobs will be if we had something like this." He did his best to laugh, even bring a bit of joviality to the situation when he said "Not every day we get into a good ol' Dalaran standoff, is it? Imagine if we had this back in Nazmir."

She ignored his reminiscing. "I can't be trusted with them, and I'm starting to wonder if you can either." It was clear to Langley that even through the breadth of jobs she had worked with Sollan on after the fall of Dalaran to clean up magical messes across the world, maybe she still didn't really know him.

"I thought you quit being a Katie to get away from bullshit like this."

"Just because I don't appreciate their methods doesn't mean I never agreed with their goals." He replied.

Langley stood close to him and pointed, bloody nosed and red eyed.

"I'm not fucking around tonight, Sollan. Disenchant the wands and let's go."

He grumbled, and held his hand over the chest. With an incantation or two it was done, turning the pile into nothing more than wooden shavings and arcane dust.

When she had walked off to set up their portal home, Sollan pulled out the wand he took from Bighorn and stowed it somewhere secret.

He wouldn't give this up so easily.

Give a Mage a Hand

Erin sat with her arms folded, her mail portal churning on the desk.

The watch's hand ticked. Hour after hour.

She scrunched a piece of paper and tossed it in. "Fuck you too, then."

She felt the hairs on the back of her neck tingle from a magical ripple, a wide enough splash to be a polite announcement of their arrival. The Shal'dorei came up to Erin and sat down on the other chair with her hands folded on her knees.

"Aerilyn! Wasn't expecting to see you today... everything alright?"

"You booked a mage study buddy session with me... don't you remember?"

Erin smeared her hands down her eyes, across her cheeks and down to her chin. "Shit, sorry. It's been busy. Stressful."

"Do you want me to come back?" She asked, but Erin shook her head.

"Please don't. I need a friend."

Erin slid over the book she was learning from. It describes how to conjure a 'mage hand', a summoned familiar which could extend a mage's reach far beyond their usual.

"Are we learning this the normal way, or the Erin way?" Aerilyn asked with a slight smirk. Erin sighed and stretched out before sitting up properly. She stuffed her hands in her hoodie pockets and looked at Aerilyn from below as she spoke. "I like the idea of it, but I'm shit at conjuration, and I already have telekinesis to hold stuff."

"My problem is; with Telekinesis it can be hard for my brain to remember that something's being held. I wondered if a visual aide might help. Same principle of a floating magic hand... but instead of it being a physical, conjured manifestation, it'll be an illusion I twine with the cast and basically paste over whatever I'm trying to hold."

Aerilyn smiled. "A very fun idea! How do you plan on starting?"

"I'll leave the theory and spellcrafting for now. I just need to figure out how to actually draw a hand first."

Magic can take you to strange places, and not all skills useful in the art are exclusively arcane either. For something that involves an expression and projection of the mind like illusions, it effectively becomes a creative sort of art, where the mage is the painter, mana is their brush and the world their canvas. Erin had never much focused on understanding the anatomy of a hand itself. Even when she made her visages she would use as much of the existing shape of her target's hand as much as and where possible. There would be no half measures this time, though.

Erin and Aerilyn spent hours drawing, sketching, analysing their own hands and that of several models. They saw its shape and how they were not quite square and not quite curved, how each finger was not a cube nor a cylinder but a wierd bumpy shape covered in wrinkles and creases. They did not bother with colour, and yet even still it was mind boggling, for every time they summoned a hand into being it just looked wrong, ever so slightly off, and putting it in motion was ever harder.

Erin, dissatisfied with her progress but intent on making something she could be satisfied with, returned to sketching her own hand in various positions. Aerilyn glanced over at her and offered a change in topic.

“What were you bothered by earlier?”

“Oh. That.” Erin barely looked up from her page. “Someone who I thought I knew turned out to be someone who’s not.”

She carried on drawing. Aerilyn wouldn’t let it go.

“It sounds serious. What is going on?”

Erin drew one more crease, a fold between the thumb and the balled fist she had depicted, and put her pen down. With a great breath she deflated and fell further down her chair, sagging.

“I worked with a man called Sollan Suncrown. An ex-Kirin Tor. After Dalaran, I wanted to help clean things up, all the magic gone haywire, escaped prisoners from the violet hold, stop the people who planned on filling the gaps of power left for their own gain. It worked for a while. I’m not going to say we were besties, but I did trust him. I thought we were one in the same.

I worked with him a few days ago. These wands, really powerful wands were being transported and got stolen by highwaymen. They were planning to sell them off, and we stepped in to stop them. But Sollan didn’t just execute their leader... he argued with me as to if we shouldn’t be keeping them. I shouted him down.

Now he’s not talking to me... sent him what, like three or four letters now? And nothing. Not even a note back saying he’s read it. So if that’s how he wants to play it, I guess I’ll be sorting this on my own.”

Aerilyn rubbed her brow, wondering why things could never be easy with Erin maybe.

“What’s wrong with the wands exactly?”

“All the power is infused into the wand. You don’t need any mana at all to cast it. It’s powerful enough to break shields and wards. A single missile shot from it blasted a whole clean through sandstone. You could kill someone in a single cast.”

“You can do that with a lot of magic...” Aerilyn replied.

“But has that ever been so accessible, so low risk, so free? There was a whole crate of these and we don’t know where they’re coming from.”

Aerilyn stopped for a moment and thought carefully about her answer. “I know back during the rebellion, we would have greatly benefitted from something like that. I thought you wanted magic to be accessible. Like how you were so excited when Astrandis’ discovery would mean making telemagic easier for everyone?”

“Because it isn’t anything like that. Astrandis’ discovery could’ve been abused but it was there for a good purpose. These wands are weapons, purely weapons.” Erin flustered and picked up her sheet, showing what she drew before putting it back down again.

“I’m not learning magic to hurt people, I refuse to. I’m learning magic because its fun and its dumb and it helps people and I love it, even when it sucks.”

Aerilyn asked. “Magic means a lot of things to a lot of people, and a tool is only as good as the hand that holds it. Those wands aren’t just weapons, and even if they are that doesn’t mean they will always be misused. It’s not different at all.”

“Yes it is, Aerilyn.” Erin stared at her. “And I don’t want to talk about it any more.”

Erin worried that maybe Aerilyn too might leave her for thinking that.

But at this point, Erin would dare her to.

She wouldn’t accept that this could be justified.

She wouldn’t give this up so easily.

Three Long Coats

Part 1

Faster. Faster. Faster.

Rain splashed under her boot.

Keep going. Keep going.

She heard six footsteps behind her, as the grey worn buildings all around turned into a blur.

Almost there...!

She rounded the corner and ran across the wall, over a fence gate and rolled to land.

Don't look. Have to get away as far as possible!

The gate door smashed open as they gave chase. She vaulted over a line of crates and pushed one as she went past into their path to slow them down, but the big guy just kept coming.

Fuck's sake!

She turned and drew an arrow from her belt, and in one leaping shot fired it into his boot.

She landed and kept running the way she meant to. His shouts told her it had worked.

She gazed up, spying a path.

There!

She jumped onto a ledge, slid across, climbed a ladder, flipped onto the roof. She gazed and found across the adjacent river another building in reach. Another arrow nocked, this one with a wound rope and a hooked tip. She fired it and saw it spin and latch over her mark, tested it, tied it off to the chimney stack next to her. She saw her pursuers follow close. They wouldn't be for long.

She took her bow and jumped off the building and slid down the rope all the way to the other side and cut it off from the end.

She disappeared down winding alleys. When she had the chance to take a few deep breaths, she finally risked checking her pockets. A sigh of utter relief left her when she pulled out a single note.

"I still have it..."

She read it again. This had better be worth the effort.

"I'm very interested in hearing what you have to offer. I'll be sure to let my security know you'll be coming so you won't have any trouble.

Perhaps a demonstration would be beneficial? I've heard stories of these weapons, but never had the chance to use them myself. You say anyone can use it. Anyone at all? The City Guard should be very pleased at this proposal.

Shall we say tonight, an hour before noon?

You know where to find me."

She snorted. Obviously it would be ridiculous if they had signed this letter... she needed hard proof.

The media, the courts. They couldn't just go off an unmarked letter dragged from a gang leader's office, no. But if they had a stack of papers from a journalist who had clearly done her research, and hundreds of the public demanding answers?

Maybe then they'd open an investigation.

Naomi just needed...

Footsteps. They're close!

She spun around and saw him in the corner of her eye moments before he reached her. It was the big guy from before. His eyes were furious, likely from having an arrow shot through his foot earlier, and Naomi didn't have enough time to move before he plowed into her and threw her to the floor. He beat his fists down on her and she barely managed to move her head out of the way to avoid the worst of the strikes, then reached down to her leg to pull out her knife.

Pinning it into his shoulder was enough to let her break free, but she realised when she got up she no longer had the letter with her. The thug ripped it up and went in for the kill.

Naomi could see his swipes coming from a mile off but the problem with fighting a truck is that making one wrong move would mean it was over. She was faster than him, and in his padded jacket she could mark the points under his arms where the lining was thinnest. She'd already lost her evidence, so as much as it stung she'd need to distract him long enough to run and try again another day. This case would be massive... if she just had the chance to make it.

Two strikes under his arms were made, one slash and one deep thrust which plunged up all the way till she felt the bone, but the bastard was tough and it didn't put him down like she planned. He grabbed her by the neck and had arms too long for her to reach and pull her knife back out. She'd need a miracle to get out of this one.

Or maybe, fate just didn't feel like killing her off yet.

The thug stopped in his tracks, unable to move. It was like he was paralysed. His grip weakened enough for Naomi to squeeze out and she was taken aback as to why for a moment until she saw a violet aura closing around the thug.

Someone stood behind him and lifted him up, before throwing their arm outwards and slammed him against the wall so hard his ribs broke.

Naomi spotted a woman with long copper hair, standing in the rain. Her nose ran red.

"Inefficient." A voice spoke from her staff. *"You're burning energy even more than usual. This is not productive."*

The woman snarled at her stave and paid it no more heed as she came over to Naomi and reached out a hand to help her up.

"Erin Langley?" Naomi asked.

"What gave it the fuck away?" She snapped back.

Naomi shivered. "Thanks for the help. I'll leave." She and Erin had, admittedly, never been on the best of terms. Since Erin and Apples had infiltrated and destroyed a Black Saturday auction; the same case which had kickstarted Naomi's career, Naomi had been curious what magic user was strong enough but also so involved as to get down in the trenches and help in the fight against organised crime.

But obviously, it was never about altruism. It was about personal agenda. Naomi knew Erin positioned herself as someone “for the people” but that couldn’t be any further from the truth. She was just another member of the rich and powerful who threw their weight around for their own agenda.

Meanwhile, as far as Erin was concerned Naomi was just a deadbeat reporter dead set on making a name for herself and getting herself involved in matters she had no business in. For all she said about freedom of speech and holding the corrupt accountable, what the hell would writing an article in a newspaper no one would bother to read achieve?

With that being said, Naomi could spy that Erin was tense, at her wit’s end. She pried further. “Gilneas isn’t usually your spot. So why come?”

Erin folded her arms. “Got a situation I’m trying not to let spiral out of control. You?”

“Another case. Some special weapon being sold to the mayor through the black market.”

Erin raised an eyebrow. “Special weapon?”

“No idea what it is specifically, just that ‘anyone can use it’ and he’s considering arming the guard with it.”

Erin rubbed her eyebrows when serendipity struck again. “I know what it is.”

She held out an object in her hand. Made of gnarled blackwood and with blank, empty crystals set into it, it seemed to be a rather chunky looking wizard’s wand. But it had been molded and shaped. There was a handle, a barrel, sights. A trigger.

Naomi gazed at it. “Some weird, fucked up gun.”

“It’s a wand.” Erin said. “Originally it was in development by the Kirin Tor... but someone broke into one of their transports and stole the prototypes. They were never supposed to get out onto market... but now they’re popping up in the underworld over and over again.

I can’t let him do this.”

“Who’s him?” Naomi asked.

Erin shook her head. “You’re investigating this. Got any leads? Scrying can only get me so far.”

“They’re meant to be doing a meeting at the mayor’s hall tonight at eleven.” Naomi replied.

Erin breathed a deep sigh and rolled her shoulders.

“Just don’t get in my way.”

Part 2

"I can't explain. No, I don't have time. I'm not..."

Naomi spied Erin from their stakeout point in the bell tower of a chapel overlooking the town hall, and watched as she held that peculiar rock against her ear and frustratedly shout into it.

"Look. I just need you to be ready in case I call you in. Okay? If I'm lucky I won't need it." Erin couldn't relax, even when she put down the stone.

Naomi stood there with her arms folded against the wall and reached into one of the many pockets of her coat. It was sleek and black, with a tall collar that popped up around her neck and ended just under the waist. When she reached into it, she pulled out a bar of something and chewed. Her eyes were peeled towards the town hall.

"Who was that?" She asked, but Erin only scoffed in reply. "Backup. In case things go bad."

"Things always go bad." Naomi said. "It's why I try have Apples as mine."

"And where's Apples now?" Erin asked. "She here?"

Naomi shook her head. "She's got better things to be doing."

Naomi held up a hand, eyes locked to the building across the way and through the stained-glass windows. "I see something. Movement."

Erin frowned. "How the hell...?"

Naomi didn't bother giving her an answer to that. "There's a lot of them in there. Must've come in the back door... didn't see them go in the front. They're carrying something. Something heavy, with that many people on it."

"One of the shipments?"

Naomi checked her watch. The clock had just struck eleven.

The city mayor was a pleasant man, at least as fair as the public was concerned.

Elected in as the first since the city's reclamation he had run his campaign on something that everyone could easily get behind; crushing the city's rampant crime problem.

Everyone knew Gilneas had become a hotbed for criminal activity even worse than Boralus and there were still so many tunnels and streets held hostage by syndicates or worse.

The mayor promised he would stop them. And maybe, he truly, truly believed he could.

Eight men dressed in suits came to him, four carrying a large long chest.

The first of the eight came forwards and took off his hat and shook the mayor's hand, but seemed to frown when he noticed the mayor take particular attention to the shape of his ears.

"It's inside here?" The mayor asked and came over, evidently eager to skip any further formalities, but the well-dressed man leading the criminals stopped him in his tracks.

"Just because anyone can use it doesn't mean that you can't accidentally shoot yourself in the foot. Let us."

He snapped his finger to release the arcanic lock and opened it up to reveal a series of 'wands' placed in the soft-padded container as if it was a weapons locker.

He pulled out one and the mayor could see how odd it looked, a strange imitation of technology through magic and yet it fit so perfectly in his hand.

“Find me something to shoot with this.”

Naomi had her own mission here. Evidently, she cared about not letting these weapons get into the hands of guards as they would inevitably become accessible to criminals too. However, as someone who had long believed other news outlets within the city consistently failed to properly hold their officials accountable she knew she would need solid evidence to make her case.

Erin had her route in, and she had hers too. With a bit of luck she cracked the lock for the kitchen entrance and from there was able to sneak around the hallways. If they were still in the main hall, she could stalk around undeterred.

She followed the signage all the way up the stairs and to the end of the wall. The mayor’s office would be close. But as she began to unlock it Naomi heard footsteps again. With no other way of escaping, she fired a rope arrow and climbed up to a rafter in the ceiling, and breathed a sigh of relief when a patrolling guard who walked past never looked up.

Getting into the mayor’s office was easy from there, and she snuck the door shut.

She checked the filing cabinets.

She checked his desk.

She checked the piles stacked on the floor next to where he sat.

And then she found a folder, hidden behind the dresser and the wall.

Naomi flipped through it, and found the evidence she needed.

But downstairs, she heard a bang.

While Naomi was still breaking in, Erin was cloaked in invisibility observing the town hall from a good vantage.

Evidently one of the new builds from after the reclamation it was modern and well furnished but abjectly lacking character. Eight rows of ten chairs lined up, with higher chairs at the back for special guests. It all overlooked a stage at the other end of the room with a podium with a microphone for speakers, but the mayor and the gang only bothered to stand in the aisle between the two seating areas while they did their deal.

The criminal leader lifted up the wand, and Erin saw a glimmer of blonde hair over pointed ears and grit her teeth. “No, there’s no way...”

Ze’rani replied. She was an intelligent arcane entity that Erin had recently rescued on another adventure, but it was now stuck inside her stave’s crystal and neither of them were pleased about it. *“What is it. Do you know...”*

“It’s HIM.” Erin said. “I fucking knew it... there was only one person it could be.”

“Explain yourself. Why are they significant?”

Down in the town hall, the elf pointed the wand outwards. His thugs had been dragging in stacks of crates and boxes from outside and thrown them all into an enormous pile.

He stared down the warped-wooden sights, and aimed the barrel just right.

And pulled the trigger.

Magic coursed; surging from its crystal magazine and spiralling around the enchanted rifling on the wands’ barrel before it erupted like a cannon. A huge bolt of arcane energy screamed outwards and caused shockwaves just from its presence, but then it struck its target.

The boxes and crates glowed as they were enveloped by violet light. They first turned to crystal and then in the same moment shattered into arcane dust. One shot had completely vaporised the whole thing.

“Excellent! Haha!” The mayor clapped. “Truly excellent...”

The elven criminal cracked a smile too. He held it away from the mayor when he reached to grab it and shook his finger. “Very dangerous... they used to burrow straight through things, drill through the target... but with some adjustments, I believe I have made this is much more efficient. Less collateral. More control.”

The mayor nodded professionally. “And more potency, evidently. So... how effective is it against a human target?”

The elf looked at the seats at the other end of the hall as he sensed something, and pursed his lips. “We’re not alone.”

Erin gripped her staff tightly. “I’m stopping this... I’m going down there right now and I’m stopping this.”

“Don’t! You saw what it did, you know getting hit by a shot from that wand means death!”

Ze’rani snapped back. But Erin’s aura flared for a moment, even through her invisibility. She inadvertently had revealed her position just by the sheer amount of energy pouring out of her body in preparation to harness her next spell.

“You’re losing control. They’ll sense you!”

Erin saw the elf stare directly at her and stood up. “He already has.”

Erin held Violetsfire outwards, its pointed tip thin enough to pierce at high enough speeds. It hovered just under her hand.

The elf readied the wand and pointed it outwards, sights trained on an ‘empty’ chair.

Their silent standoff lasted for five seconds, until all hell broke loose.

A massive blast erupted from the gun and fired outwards and disintegrated half of the upper seating. Crystal dust exploded and stained the wall pink.

The spear-like staff then shot out of the unseen, launched with furious intent. The elf moved an inch to stop it from impaling him through the shoulder and saw it instead rip through his arm and pin itself like a javelin in the ground.

“Grab a wand and fucking find her!” The elf shouted to his thugs, and went over to lift Violetsfire from the ground... but its inhabitant would not allow it. As his fingers wrapped around it Ze’rani harnessed the staff’s potent energies, turned them volatile and burned the elf’s hand. Meanwhile his men all collected a wand from the crate and stood around, aiming into the hall with no idea what direction the next attack would come from.

“You didn’t tell me that we’d be interrupted!” The mayor huffed. “This deal had better be worth it. Send me a letter once you’ve cleaned up this mess!” As he collected his things and scurried out the back entrance, the elf looked at his men and made a similar decision. He didn’t have time for this. He couldn’t risk fighting Her.

“I need her dead. NOW.” He began to teleport away, and Violetsfire rose from the ground and pointed at him before launching at full speed... but it didn’t reach him in time, and he was already gone.

Erin gasped for breath as her invisibility wavered, and returned the spire to her hands. All eight wand-wielding criminals pointed directly at her.

“Hey!”

A voice called from the rafters, and at the same time two arrows were embedded in the backs of the criminals who slumped over. Naomi had arrived just in time.

Naomi dove out of the way of oncoming shots, chairs and pillars of the wall turning to arcane dust all around her, and she burst out of the hall. The thugs fired at Erin too but this little distraction bought her all the time she needed. She blinked the weapons crate close to her and warped out, just before another shot would have landed which left a crater in its wake.

Part 3

Erin shivered, convulsed. Her whole body was running on pure adrenaline and she clutched herself tightly to try abate the rolling fits of nausea she felt.

“Breathe.” Ze’rani said. *“You escaped. Drink some water and pull yourself together.”*

Ze’rani conjured a simple flask for Erin and Erin drank it slowly.

She buttoned up her long red coat and stuck her hands inside her sleeves and pressed it against her tightly. She sat in the belltower, the stolen weapons crate beside, and waited for the sickness to pass.

Dark clouds swirled overhead.

Eventually, something came up the ladder. Erin jumped up and pointed her hands downwards with magic rolling forth off her fingertips.

“It’s just me?” Naomi said, and Erin put down her hand.

“The fuck happened in there?” Naomi asked. “They saw you?”

“He saw me.”

Naomi folded her arms and glared. “Can we stop with the vague, ominous comments? Who’s he?”

Erin looked up to the clouds.

“His name’s Sollan Suncrown. Ex-Kirin Tor. I worked with him on a bunch of stuff after Dalaran fell. Stopping these wands from getting into the wrong hands was one.

But I fucked up. I left him with a crate because he could properly disenchant them; but he was arguing with me saying how keeping them for ourselves could be a good idea.”

Naomi frowned. “So you left the guy who was obsessed with keeping the ultra-dangerous magic guns with the magic guns, and asked him to destroy the magic guns.”

Erin nodded.

“And now he’s actively selling the magic guns off to the highest bidder, including government officials, which means they will DEFINITELY be available on the black market within a week?”

Erin nodded.

Naomi shook her head and pressed her hand tightly into her face. "This is why I fucking hate magic. You got a plan or are you going to sit there and mope?"

Erin pushed herself up and held out a hand to begin casting a spell over the crate. Small lines of magic swirled up into her fingertips, which she then brought up close to her forehead and focused. Her lip quivered, and then her face turned resolute when no doubt was left.

"I know where to find the rest."

Naomi took her bow. "Lead the way."

Down by the docks, all was quiet.

No anchor was lifted.

The sea lapped up against the pier.

Wind fluttered a flag raised at full mast.

Two figures shadowed the blooming light of a lamppost as they darted past, and pressed themselves up against the wall of the port authority office.

Two fingers glowed brightly with blue-pink light, and then a nod followed.

One peered through the slits in the window and counted ten men in a room lifting crates to pack them all up so they could be loaded onto a boat.

The other asked a question. The answer was no.

But then she saw a door open.

"For all we know she'll be here any minute and I'm not going to risk it!" Sollan lit a cigarette in his hand with a blueish flame and tried to ease the jitters in his tone. One of his men slipped and dropped one of the crates and Sollan screamed in his ear. "WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR YOU TO FUCK AROUND! WE NEED TO GO. NOW!"

They worked themselves to the bone while Erin spoke to Naomi.

"If they're leaving who knows where they'll go... we could lose them!" She stood up but Naomi snatched her by the arm and held her back. "Wait for them to come out, we'll corner him on the boat."

Erin shook her head and teleported away. She could end this right now.

A flash let everyone in the room know Erin had arrived, and she stared Sollan down.

"We need to talk." Sollan's cigarette fell from his mouth. He reached his holster for his wand, but Erin snapped her fingers and wrenched it from him first. She held it out, pointed it at him, pointed it at everyone. "I'm ending this tonight! No more second chances!"

Sollan held his hands up; kept an uneasy smirk, sweated a waterfall from every pore.

"Langley. So nice to see you...! You want to talk? Sure... Let's talk."

She grit her teeth. "Why do this... you said you wanted to help people! To keep people safe!"

Sollan chuckled, as his men stood anxiously and waited. "I am helping people? These wands will help keep the peace! I heard about Black Saturday, Erin. What horrible, horrible

things go on in the bowels of this city. Wouldn't the law have the advantage? Couldn't they stop it themselves?"

"You're a fucking idiot if you think that! Give it three days and cartels will have their hands on these. All they have to do is kill a guard! This will kill people!"

Sollan scoffed and felt his heart race. "Come on... I always thought you were for freedom of magic... not to restrict it. To restrict progress."

"I'll restrict any petty criminal having the chance to disintegrate anything they see at the pull of a trigger. How fucking hard is that to understand?"

"I see you won't ever get back on my side. So go on. Shoot me."

Sollan held his breath, and Erin's grip wavered.

But she would never take the shot. Sollan knew that.

He threw a blast of quick, forceful energy out which flung her backwards as he escaped further into the building. Erin scrambled and picked up the wand but didn't have time as Sollan's thugs swarmed her. She fired, but the shot went wide and blasted a hole through the wall just as Naomi managed to crack the lock into the door and speed her way in.

Chaos broke out. Ten men versus two, and in the first moment Erin got a punch to the side of the head while she struggled to take aim and dropped the wand again. Naomi rushed over and kicked the wand aside, placing an arrow in someone as they came close only for her to be forced up against the wall by another. She drew her knife and slashed him through the shoulder blade and pushed him away.

Erin, swarmed by four at once, didn't have the strength to hold all of them with her magic for long. Another thug reached for the wand and fired it at Naomi, but Erin managed to blink a crate in front of her to take the shot instead. Naomi threw her knife through the cloud of pink crystal dust it made at the wielder and jumped into a spinning kick to drive the knife straight through his chest. He fell, dropping the wand, but two more came behind her and held her down before she could reach it.

"Fuck!" Erin gritted her teeth as her nose ran red? unable to hold back the hordes for long while Naomi desperately tried to wriggle free. "I can't keep this up!"

Ze'rani whispered in her ear. *"Take the staff. I'll overcharge you, just this once. Make it count!"*

Erin took Violetspire in her hand and felt volumes upon volumes of pure energy cascading into her body, then she held both hands outwards. There was only one spell, one thing she could do to turn the tides.

Her nails dug into the fabric of reality, and just as the thugs had reached her, she tore it open.

Space warped in on itself. The thugs raised their weapons. One aimed the wand inside. But they would never have time to react.

A golden blade glimmered as it thrust through, a brown coat with the emblem of the Order of Embers on her back fluttering on an invisible breeze was wrapped around her shoulders like a cloak, and in an instant their swords and clubs and knives broke in half from just three swipes of her sword.

Naomi gasped. "Alaina?"

The Hero had arrived just in time. "Don't sound so surprised. You think Erin can handle anything on her own?"

The thug with the wand fired it, and Alaina tilted her head to avoid it. It careened past her ear and blasted open a cavity in the wall behind her.

"Alaina, handle them. I'm running out of time!" Erin begged.

Alaina nodded and jumped into the fray, facing down the group all at once. She swept through them like a blazing fire where none could escape its heat, and dodged two more shots from the gun. The crystal powering it started to seethe and let off smoke, and Alaina smirked. "Limited shots, hm? I thought this might be a challenge."

Erin teleported away, darting down the hallway to follow Sollan.

Naomi looked back at Alaina and knew she would be fine, so went after Erin instead.

Sollan scrambled to get his affairs in order. He took stacks of correspondence, notes, working documents and everything else that he couldn't risk falling into someone else's hands and teleported it away so it couldn't be found. He could still leave, hire more men, he could still start over from scratch without Her ruining everything.

He felt the shivers race up and down his entire body. Just a little more time!

Then, the door burst wide open.

"Sollan, YOU CUNT!"

Waves of overflowing magic swarmed around him and snapped shut like an iron vice. He felt the pressure grow heavy around him when the nearly unbreakable telekinetic field trapped him so wholly he couldn't even move his eyes. Erin screamed and thrashed him into the wall, slammed him against the ceiling, dropped him through the desk. She came up to him and kicked him with all her strength and saw the blood fly from his nose.

"You bastard! I trusted you! We were going to fix things! Set the world to rights! We were partners and you threw all of it away! For what, for greed? Because your emasculated little ego couldn't stand me telling you what to do?"

He looked up with shattered teeth and a swollen eye. "I'm making the world a safer place..." Erin shook her head as tears welled up in her eyes. "You really, really think that?" Somehow, it would have been easier for him to admit he was selfish or cruel or a coward. But for someone to be so, so wrong. Someone she used to respect? That hurt her the most of all.

She lifted him off the floor and he could not resist it.

"You're burning too much energy again. Calm yourself! Breathe through it... focus it... a firm hand, not a fist." Ze'rani tried to guide Erin, tutor her. Erin rolled her neck and let her fingers relax and directed the magic around him rather than at him.

Sollan sputtered. He had seen first hand how dangerous Erin could be and was genuinely terrified of drawing her ire. He played his last card.

“What are you going to do? You don’t have any evidence... There’s no Kirin Tor to keep me in check. The mayor can pardon me. Are you going to try to have me trialled somewhere else? Stormwind? Silvermoon? You have nothing!” Fear rolled down him to every inch. “YOU CAN’T STOP ME!”

Sollan was right.

She knew she couldn’t do anything.

She couldn’t arrest him.

Or keep him locked up.

Or exile him anywhere he couldn’t get back from.

Her mind raced through the possibilities. All of them ended up with him escaping, getting back out, carrying on this work. She couldn’t stop it. Entropy. The march of ‘progress’.

Erin choked and dreamed that the Violet Eye was here to take this weight off her hands.

It was her fault this had all happened. And there was no way she could fix it.

For someone else it might be easy.

But Erin would never use magic to kill.

Naomi rushed into the room and saw Erin kneeling, collapsed in an empty office.

“Where the hell did he go?”

Erin never looked at her when she replied.

“He just... got away.”

Epilogue

Alaina looked over the room as the Gilneas City Guard hauled boxes of wands out from the Port Authority office. She demanded answers from the Guard Captain. How could he let this happen in his own city. How could he be so corrupt? But her judgement fell on deaf ears, and the man was inches away from having her locked up for interfering in their business. He had a vested interest in keeping these weapons for him and his men, and Alaina could tell he was already all but drawing war plans. But her reputation preceded her. Men like that knew a cage wouldn’t keep Alaina for long. He decided the best plan was to not poke the dragon and let her go, but Alaina knew as those wands fell into the guard’s hands this would not be over yet.

Naomi saw the danger of posting this story. The mayor was a powerful man and he’d have clear reason to enact retribution on anyone seeking to expose him for what he had done. She wrote her article under an anonymous moniker, stating that they had insider knowledge into the Mayor’s dealings and warning citizens of increasing conflicts in the city. Rumours spread far and wide, bringing unease and distrust especially towards a guard that was already seen as incompetent at best and corrupt at worst. The name ‘wands’ would never stick, though. In Gilneas, they would start being known as magi-guns.

Erin sat in her study with two empty bottles of arcwine next to her.

She couldn't stand thinking of what had happened.

"You know this isn't the end, right?" Ze'rani said from the corner of the room where the staff had been left. *"Nothing you said, nothing you stand for means anything if you let him go free."*

Erin put down a glass. "How the hell am I supposed to stop him?"

"You're the mage. Figure it out."

She stared out the window on a rainy night.

Her life was about to get a whole lot harder.

Act Two

The MagiGunslinger

Two figures raced through a stonewrought tunnel in the city under the mountain. The first rushed past, aiming a shot from one of his MagiGuns at the wall and blasted a wave of rubble outwards. The second warped through the rubble, and pushed herself off the wall to maintain her momentum in pursuit.

“Three shots left.” Ze’rani groaned with evident disinterest. *“Why must you keep involving me with your mortal affairs? This is beneath me.”*

Erin scoffed at her staff as she tried to keep pace, words racing in her mind. *“You think I’d bring you if I had any other choice? No. This is turning out to be difficult... no wonder he managed to rob three banks before this one. No one can catch the bastard.”*

Erin held her hand out and charged power in her fingertips before snapping them, but the spell fizzled again. *“Damn!”*

“Stop wasting your energy. He has a ward against telemantic effects. You won’t get through it.”

“Then let’s try THIS!”

The outlaw she was chasing darted through a passage Erin didn’t recognise, a long tube or chute that went deep into the bowels of Old Ironforge. With gryphonriders and legions of guards hot on his tail, he sought to lose them and his magical pursuer somewhere they could not follow.

Erin once again cast a spell to yank him back to her by force, but holding onto him was like trying to grab a stick of butter drenched in honey, and he slid back out. He fired three more shots from each gun at her as he disappeared. She blinked through each, leaving a violet trail behind her, then tried to cast her dampening ward she had prepared against him. For a moment his gun’s crystals went dull... but she could still not reach him before he escaped.

Erin gasped and held herself on the edge of the chute. She gurgled and retched a globule of blood from her lungs.

Ze’rani spoke. *“You were reckless. This frail little vessel can barely contain even arcane energy. You’ll collapse before you stop him.”*

“Now’s not the time...” Erin heaved and retched another, as those guards came closer now and spotted her, and maybe assumed it was her which had swiped so many gold ingots from the treasury at gunpoint. But Ze’rani, for once, did not solely mean to chastise her.

“I will assist you, again, and save us both from this terrible situation you got us into. I expect you to be more cautious next time.”

A gryphon landed at the spot where they had seen the criminal disappear through a grate into the old city. The clanking of marching metal boots stopped when the guard arrived too. They slowly crept down after the criminal, one by one.

Erin found the outlaw within the deep roads under Ironforge. Whether this one used to be a service gateway, transport hub or anything else neither of them knew, and neither of them cared. The air down here was dusty and stale, and the geothermal heat rising from below was nigh unbearable.

They stared each other down. This criminal didn't have anything to say to her. No remorseful words, he had no intent on showing her he was a good soul deep down, he didn't try to manipulate her or convince her to let him go. He had this situation under control.

Erin didn't even try to talk to him. She'd chased this man halfway across the city, the time for extending an olive branch was long gone. And frankly, after what happened with Sollan? Erin wasn't even in the mood for talking anyway.

He flipped his MagiGuns upside down and pressed his thumbs into the deadened crystals to pop them out from their sockets, and slid in new ones that burned with potential power. Erin twirled her staff in her hands, her strength temporarily sustained and bolstered by what lay inside her own crystal. She let it slide down in her grip and held it out at arm's length, and let it fly.

The tunnel the guards slowly crept through cracked and crumbled, low rumbles far below them sending shockwaves through the stone above. They saw the roof above them crack and shouted to retreat, then boulders blocked the passage as the lower end of it collapsed in on itself. Fate had decided they would not intervene.

Shots from the MagiGuns tore through the stone and turned the walls to crystal-glass, shattering the heaving weight of the mountain out from underneath. Erin flung chunks of the debris at the outlaw, unable to directly affect him with her spells.

She'd try to trip him up, pelt him with smaller projectiles, create shockwaves to unbalance him by flinging larger stones close but nothing seemed to work when all he needed to do was point and shoot at any threat. But he quickly grew tired, and fired a blast from both into the roof above Erin... the same which caved the tunnel.

She tried to catch it so the whole place would not fall down upon them but it was so heavy the strain soon shot into her arm, and one wrong movement twisted her arm in such a way her shoulder dislocated.

Erin whelped and blinked away, but the outlaw was still coming close and she was all but trapped down there with him. Waves of nausea rolled across her and she took magic upon herself to reset it to its rightful place, but in her desperation she had realised something. Erin did not need to affect him with telekinesis at all. Or at least, not directly.

The outlaw spun his MagiGuns around his fingers, and reloaded one final time before aiming.

Erin stared him dead in the eyes.

She squinted as she saw the flash from the muzzle.

A cloud of smoke and dust kicked up as the blast travelled and exploded through the wall, leaving a rim of crystal glass behind.

The Outlaw scoffed and blew the smoke from his gun. The dust had settled, and Erin was gone.

But she was right behind him.

Her fist burned with crackling arcane energy, swirling around that one point and condensing to its full potency.

The bastard had no time to react.

She threw a punch that rocked him from the gut and through into his chest, his rib shattering from the impact, and was so forceful he was lifted and thrown back meters into the chamber. Erin stepped over him and warped him with a clap of her hands back up top where the guards could quickly find him still carrying his stolen goods.

She lifted his gun from the floor, this thing that had caused her so much trouble, and pocketed it.

There was no chance in hell she'd take this lying down.

An Expert Opinion

A letter on expensive vellum materialises within Theseos' office just within his door, as if it had been placed by hand through his mailslot. It is written with an arcane-steeped ink, and faintly glows just enough for it to not be gaudy and unprofessional.

"To Sir Truesong,

My last meeting with you proved very enlightening and I still appreciate the guidance you provided for me on such. I do not have the time to visit you in person during your working hours nor to trans-communicate via any methods of divination remotely, but I would appreciate your assistance on a separate matter and I thought a letter would be the simplest way to do so.

My latest frustration had become the proliferation of a new type of weapon. I'm not sure if you would have seen them already, but I hope you have not regardless. They are a new type of wand, enchanted and designed in such a manner as to replicate a conventional handgun. Unlike normal wands, these are enchanted in such a manner as to require no magical potential whatsoever, and are exceedingly dangerous. For reasons I am not at liberty to share, I have good knowledge that these are now available on black markets and will be in the hands of city guard forces and criminals alike... which, as I am sure you can imagine, will not afford good safety for the citizens who will be stuck in the middle.

Let me discuss what I know about them. Would you be able to consider this and let me know what your recommendations would be to neutralising them? Having another magi's opinion will be valuable.

Originally, these were a prototype wand model developed by the Kirin Tor to enhance the capabilities of their primary forces. Despite what many expect a good portion of Kirin Tor forces were mundane, only they had been provided with a good deal of enchanted items to still ensure they were formidable. These wands were expected to be as such. However, since The Fall, these prototypes had been shipped through an unsafe area (The Badlands) due to a lack of resources for telemantic logistics and were stolen by criminals. Presumably, they have now been reverse-engineered and are now in production. Colloquially, they are referred to as 'MagiGuns'. Creative, I know.

A diagram is included folded inside the letter at this point. It depicts an item with a standard pistol shape and all the features you would normally expect, from the barrel, chamber, hammer, fan, sights, grip and trigger. But the whole frame appears to be made from some carved wooden material. There are enchanted spiral-runes scribed around the outside of the barrel reminiscent of rifling, and where the magazine should be loaded is instead a large purple crystal.

I've drawn a diagram as to what the standard model of these look like, but I've seen a few with some minor variations (more crystals, different materials etc).

Generally they're made of blackwood, aged oak or runed ironbark. The crystals are equivalent to bullets in the way that they are a consumable projectile. I have not seen them be recharged but they could be replaced.

The crystal is enchanted so that whenever someone completes a simple gesture; curling their finger on the trigger, it releases a high-energy charge of arcane energy that is directed around the barrel and fired outwards. This charge is unstable and will deteriorate after twenty-five to fifty feet (presumably they have calibrated it to behave similarly to mechanical handguns) but, due to this being an immensely high volume of arcane energy, will immediately crystallise and disintegrate anything within ten feet after striking a target.

Of course, that is to say... if this even grazes an unwarded target, it will kill them instantly.

Please see my calculations below, speculation as to how these might work based on observation.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to your quick correspondence.

A long list of arcano-mathematical formulae follows. It is mostly competent, but it is clear Erin doesn't quite have an accurate understanding of energetic transmutation theory or the processes which would govern enchanting such an item. Commendably, the runework that Erin has done to recognise which had been scribed on the spiral-rifling is accurate and would work, but she has applied her figures with an incorrect method and therefore the results of her calculations are incorrect.

Using the correct calculations, the results would imply that these weapons have a much greater potential energy output in a more versatile arrangement than previously expected. Theoretically, a standard arcanic crystal could hold enough energy for eighteen shots rather than the six Erin had predicted, and this could be manipulated to either fire more shots rapidly if attuned with a smaller output, or farther-ranging or shots with wider areas of effect if they traded capacity for power.

Of course, this is all based on standard crystalline models. If a MagiGun were, say, created with an Arkonite crystal or those with more complex lattices it would exponentially increase the potential lethality of these weapons.

It is likely understandable why Erin is concerned. These weapons being freely accessible would be deeply concerning.

A neatly folded letter arrives at Erin's location, winking into existence with a pale shimmer and a soft chiming noise. The writing is in an expressive cursive.

"Dear Miss Langley,

Let me start by expressing a profound 'Bravo!' Your telemancy mail drop bypassed my wards! I should probably have expected you to find the oh-so-cleverly hidden backdoor - the keen mind would be able to read the telltale signs - but I was nonetheless both delighted and amazed that you did.

What a fascinating device! I cannot help but marvel at the genius of it. The fusion of technological aptitude with arcane potential, but not only that, but a thought of user friendliness as well! One should never discount the worth of well functioning and easy to use items.

But, I digress. It is apparent that your fears are well founded. I am, despite my work and background, not one for either guns, weapons or warfare, so my aid will be of a theoretical nature, but anyone with an eye for it can see that such an implement should never have fallen into the wrong hands.

You pose the question 'What can we do about it?', and my immediate reaction would be to push for harsh legislation regarding the trade, construction and proliferation of such items. With the way our current government(s) are, I will only assume that such an effort would backfire massively, and we would instead end up with licensed mass-production and even further spread of these items. Our war-minded leaders would no doubt want to increase their arsenals, which is a sad state of affairs, but here we are.

I digress again! A more immediate solution would be the design of a ward of some kind, possibly embedded in an amulet or the like. An attunement to the frequency of the crystals used in the construction would allow the ward to lessen the effect of the blast, making it less lethal. The drawback to this simple gambit is that it would be easy to simply adjust the crystal focus to a different wavelength, and the ward would be quite useless.

If you want a more eclectic idea, seeding a matrix substance variation into the leylines, targeting the focusing crystals, would create an instability in the reality weave keeping them together. It would work as an arcane 'virus' of sorts, tainting the composition and making the crystal so brittle that it would shatter (and hopefully backfire) when the trigger was used. The small drawback, of course, would be the containment of such a viral destabilization of crystals. You might well end up rendering other similar crystals (potentially all the world's, should the leyline contagion be allowed to spread and mutate) brittle and unusable for mages and wizards. I can only imagine the disappointment of our draenei friends should such an event occur. It may be better not to.

As luck would have it, I had an opportunity to ask two technological experts on the matter. Miss Eraskaia, gnomish technologist and radiant magic user, pointed out that part of the construction seemed volatile. With a directed effort, one could perhaps utilize an arcane charge at range to simply blow the device up, should one ever be confronted with it. She added that perhaps a device could be constructed that could be used by anyone. A Counter Gun-Gun, if you would! Miss Era even suggested that such a method could be used on whole crates or shipments, but advised (most wisely) not to do it in an urban environment, as the resulting explosion has the potential to be both spectacular and extremely destructive. Could one target a ship at sea for instance - I am sure you can draw your own conclusions.

Professor Merrick Copergiz suggested looking into the temporal flux drift, and subtract the nonlocal volatility with special notice taken to continental variability, but admittedly, I could not tell if this was actually something worthwhile, or merely gnomish technobabble.

The schematic - akin to your rendered illusion, when I had the pleasure of meeting you in person - was of such detail that I have a very good impression of its construction. Your calculations, too, were quite impressive, but I fear you may have underestimated the effect of the MagiGun's destructive capabilities. It seems it may hold the potential for many more charges than those posited in your estimate. This would increase the wand's lethality enormously. I am neither an arcano-engineer, nor a wand specialist, so you may have to consult a real expert on the matter.

Enclosed you will find a suggestion for a simple warding spell that, if correctly attuned, will dampen the destructive effect of the crystals if used directly against a target. It is a relatively simple abjuration and can be cast quickly if need be, but the destructive power of the MagiGun will make it extremely taxing on one's mana reserves. It will likely be the case that it can be used once against a single blast, and I am sorry to say it will probably not be enough to keep you or any bystanders entirely safe. Then again, 'not entirely safe' is better than 'completely obliterated', so please make use of it if you are chasing after these villains.

I regret not being of more help. I hope, however, that your keen mind can draw something out of these mad ramblings.

Yours truly,
Theseos Truesong."

With the letter is a scroll with a beautifully drawn and detailed Shield spell, designed to counter a blast from the MagiGun to the exact specifications of the discharge as detailed by Erin. As Theseos suggested, it bears a substantial mana cost, and would likely tax a competent mage's reserves noticeably.

CORRUPTION: Gilnean Guard Captain caught in throes of deadly scheme!

-by Naomi Sato

This past friday it was reported by an anonymous source that Derek Pilton, a respected captain of the Gilnean Crown Guard, has been arrested and is awaiting trial for the crimes of **kidnapping** and **attempted murder**.

Naomi had a case, and the wick was burning out quick.

She didn't have the time to plan this one, to gather intel, to track her mark.

It fell into her lap with a cry for help and she left the moment that letter came through the window.

There was no time to lose.

Derek Pilton, a sixty one year old Gilnean native, has served as captain for eight years following the death of his predecessor Phil Harrison, and was a well-respected member by his colleagues. In the wake of the city's reclamation, Derek was seen as a bastion of stability in a new, uncertain environment.

Naomi spotted tracks through the mud that stormy night, tracks that almost melted away.

Past the barracks, past the cathedral. Going over the bridge was out of the question, too far out of the way.

But this city was hers, and she knew every shortcut there was.

A rooftop ropeline set up across the canal sped her on her way.

Derek has been an outspoken supporter of MagiGuns, the controversial new weapon originally reported to have been shipped into Gilneas through means of illegal magical smuggling. Derek has gone on record stating "MagiGuns will keep our streets safe, and normal citizens have nothing to fear."

Naomi stalked from above and spotted two figures, one knelt on the ground with their hands tied behind their back, the other holding a crystalline pistol inches from their head.

Following an altercation with another member of the guard, who also chose to remain anonymous, Derek reportedly beat, tied and stole his fellow guardsman to Crow Street (a well-known spot for murders within the city) and sought to assassinate them.

The rain muffled the sound of her creaking drawstring. She had one shot.

Twenty paces forwards. Down two marks. Eastern-prevailing wind, three knots.

She adjusted her aim, then released without hesitation.

Reportedly, the weapon was a MagiGun which the anonymous source was able to corroborate. MagiGuns have sparked an intense public reaction, not only for their lethality but also for completely disintegrating the bodies of those shot by them.

One forensic scientist claims "analysing crime scenes left behind by MagiGun shootings is impossible. There's no blood, there's no body, no way to identify the victim or time of death. Anyone wanting to completely disappear a person only needs to pull the trigger."

Derek's finger was inches over the trigger, just about to curl, when the arrow landed.

But it didn't land in him. A hardpoint smashed through the crystal and released a shockwave of arcane. It blasted Derek against the wall, as well as the person he had kidnapped. Naomi flipped off her vantage, sprinted over to the victim, and quick knifework shredded the rope bindings.

Derek is due to stand trial for these crimes by the end of the month for a minimum sentence of twelve years if found guilty.

"I'll get Derek for this." The guard said. "I told him those guns were bad business, only gonna be used against us. I guess I was right, but I didn't expect it to be by him. You can work for a guy for years and never know him."

Naomi took out her notepad and nodded. "So... you'd be willing to share your story?"

Our legal correspondent, Lyra Banks, has offered the following statement.

"It is worth noting that it is currently not illegal to possess a MagiGun within Gilneas.

The Firearms and Ballistics act of 36adp denotes that 'any projectile based weapon, whether the munitions be physical or energetic in nature, that has a capacity to slay, and may be stowed subtly on a personage or mount,' can be considered a gun for the purposes of the act. Therefore, as with standard firearms, owning a MagiGun is not currently illegal.

Mr. Pilton's case is strictly an investigation into the charges of kidnapping and attempted murder.

There is no ongoing investigation into other members of the Gilneas Crown Guard or their adoption of MagiGuns and the public need not be concerned about such.

Any crimes seen by the public should be reported through the correct channels.

Vigilanteism is still strictly illegal."

The truth can be hard to pin down.

Follow The Grey Arrow every week to stay informed on what's really happening.

A Polite Correspondance

After the long day had passed, Erin returned home. She pulled off her coat, unbuttoned her shirt, tore off both boots and both socks and sat with a bottle of Suramar's Finest in her hand.

She looked over at her mail portal and saw a letter tumble through.

It was small... an envelope unsealed with ink so freshly laid she might be able to still reach through the portal and strangle its scribe. But with curiosity, and trepidation, Erin opened it instead and pulled free the parchment.

And this is what it wrote.

"To the most affable Lady Langley...

What the hell were you thinking? Who are you to do this, what gives you such right? Thousands and thousands of gold poured into this project only for it to go up in smoke. Do you realise the damage you might have caused? Collapsing a portion of the Arcway could have sunken entire portions of the city down with it!

You were always a manipulator. To cry so much about how the Kirin Tor police magic, and in the end you only wished to police it your own way! Look how you summon the goons you call friends, knowing you misuse their trust, lie to them and beg for them to save you and do your dirty work even if it may cost them their lives. Because that is all they are to you, isn't it? A cost? One you are glad to pay if you may complete your designs.

And to throw my Foreman in an Alliance prison? It would have been foolish enough to have sent him to the guards in Suramar but to involve your people too? You do realise what they will do now? You always told me how you despised Stormwind's guards, how corrupt they were. But now you have only expedited their adoption of the very technology you claim to wish to keep inaccessible.

This reckless behaviour, this incessant bitching that you are right about everything... I never told you how much I despised working with you for all that time, and I only kept a smile because I knew you would throw a fit if I were to act otherwise.

MagiGuns... a name chosen by criminals. I wish I had coined it something better, but I cannot deny a certain primitive simplicity to its title. They are the future, Erin. No matter how much you drag your heels, no matter how much you might scream into the abyss like a child in her pram, you cannot stop this. True knowledge cannot be hidden. Progress cannot be stopped, not when the future rises as certain as the dawn.

You will read this letter and be incensed, I'm sure. I know you all too well. Have one final warning.

You do not want this war, Erin.

Do not dare to try and stop me again.

Yours politely
Sollan Suncrown"

Erin scrunched the letter in her hands with as much strength as she could muster.

If he hated her so much, he should have said it from the start. All those times they worked together she thought she had found a true ally in making the world a better place, but it was all a lie?

Erin took a swig of her arcwine, and her eyes narrowed.

This letter... he sent it because he was angry. Because he was scared of her, what she and her friends were capable of. This future he claimed to be so inevitable was so thin it was balanced on the edge of a knife... he had to threaten her, to lie, manipulate, throw people away... all projection, all because he knew he could not stop her.

She cast a spell, and noticed a unique aura about the letter...

All magical objects are infused with a portion of the caster's energy, which links back to them.

Erin felt this sympathetic link on the letter and knew she could trace it back to the source.

"You started this war, Sollan... and I'll make sure it's one you'll lose."

The Threat

Part 1

It was a quiet afternoon at the Tinkerbolt Workshop. Lula sat with a set of diagrams before her, putting as much attention that she could afford into a new project that would involve designing and installing a set of arms for her vending machine. This was easier said than done, however. A cloud hung over her mind, inspiration far from her. Alaina sat some feet away hoping that her presence alone would provide her some emotional support. Eventually, their silence was broken when someone urgently knocked on the door. Alaina went to answer it.

"I fucking found him. Are you both free? We need to go before he gets away."

Erin was the one at their threshold, and she had an intensity and unsettlement about her that Alaina hadn't felt from her in quite some time. She urged patience and said "What? Slow down, who did you find?"

"Sollan... the cunt sent me a letter the other day boasting about how he is going to win no matter what, but he was too much of a smarmy bastard to remember that I can track the shit he sends me. I know where he is. We can end this tonight. Is Lula there?"

"Aye, just..."

Erin blinked past her, not letting her finish before she came over to Lula and spoke to her directly. "Lula, I hate to drag you out but I need your help."

Perhaps this could have been a welcome break from her work for Lula if this wasn't obviously such a dire task Erin was about to ask her. She swivelled in her chair, put her goggles back on, and looked over at her friend. Lula could easily tell something was up with her... and she wouldn't ever make her do it alone.

"I heard... What do you need me to do? Capture him or something?"

Erin nodded. "Last time, I didn't have anything to capture him with... and he knew I couldn't kill him. If you have, like, a chain net or a taser you can blast him with? There's no Kirin Tor anymore to hand him over to but we can drag his ass to Outland for all I care, I just need that prick gone."

"You know where he is then?" Lula rubbed her head and watched as Erin produced a small necklace with a teardrop shaped crystal on it. "I enchanted this to follow his signature. Should lead us straight to him. Are you okay to come?"

"I can do... can probably pull some stuff together." Lula looked back over at Alaina, who now stood near her. "Are you coming too?" Alaina snorted and replied, "As if I'd let you both get into trouble without me. He caused quite a stir in Gilneas with this MagiGun business... we'll do everyone a service by stopping him. Bring your armour just in case, love."

While Lula went to get changed, Alaina stopped Erin and rested a firm hand on her shoulder. "Are you alright? You seem quite tense."

"I'm fine... will be fine, when we finally get him," Erin paced about the kitchen with her hands on her hips and said "You know its been like half a year since he started this shit? February I think. To think after all that time... working together, him promising me we'd make the world a better place, better than the Kirin Tor could make it... And this is what he meant?"

Erin snapped her fingers and the letter that was sent by Sollan appeared in her grasp. "This is what he told me."

Alaina took the letter and skim-read it, her brows furrowing more with every line.

"This reminds me of what Modi said to me... though, Modi actually ended up apologising." "That's because Modi's probably actually a good person at heart and was just frustrated... Sollan's actually insane, or close enough to it," Erin was quick to reply, all but convinced of Sollan's villainy now. "He might be right, he's changing the world but he's changing it for the worse. You'd have to be fucked up mentally to think that the only thing that matters is your own ego and pride."

"He sounds like a normal mage to me." Alaina commented.

"I know... and maybe that's why it pisses me off. I thought he was different. I thought he was on my side. Guess not. But I'll drag him back down just like I had to with Brightlane back in the day. If no one else is going to stop mages from shitting on people for their own gain, then I will."

Erin folded her arms and only fell deeper into frustration, but Alaina seemed oddly heartened by this. "You're so impassioned, it's not often I see you this way. But it's good. You must take that anger... that rage... but turn it to indignation, then action. Don't let him get under your skin, victory is revenge enough."

Erin seemed to ease up a little from here. "You're right... I just gotta prove him wrong... MagiGuns aren't the future... and when he realises that, it'll be way better than anything else I could do to him. Magic is meant to help people... and no matter what he says, he's doing this for him... not for the world."

Alaina knew asking Erin of all people this question was risky, but it was something she had been quite curious about and trusted she would take it well. "Don't you think sometimes the world would be better off without magic?"

"I do, sometimes. It's frustrating. I wonder if it's more trouble than it's worth. I wonder if it's because magic is the only thing I've ever known. But deep down, I know it can help people more than it hurts."

"And how do you achieve that? By force? By restricting people?" Alaina pressed her. How much had she considered this?

"Maybe some people deserve to be restricted... but I wouldn't trust anyone to make that call, especially not another mage. You run into issues about how a non-mage can even enforce that. Maybe I'm just an idealist. But hopefully we can get to a point where people don't need to be told what to do... they'd just do the right thing to begin."

Satisfied, Alaina nodded in agreement. "Aye. I hope so too."

Lula soon returned, donning her impressive armour. With a freshly charged energy core brimming in the centre, it seemed as if it were strong enough to withstand anything. Alaina's eyes glowed with admiration as she saw her wife and she gasped when she said "My love! How heroic you look." Erin too seemed heartened by this, adding "Feel a lot safer with you coming. Thanks."

Lula snorted. "It's just my normal armour...? But thanks... just need one more thing." She opened a dusty box on her desk and pulled out something Erin and Alaina couldn't quite make out, but Lula knew to be a set of anti-magic handcuffs. Why she had them was a mystery, but with the threat of Sollan looming on the horizon surely they would come in great use.

Erin held her enchanted necklace close as she weaved a portal for the three to step through. They could end this today, she hoped.

Stars, please let this nightmare be over today.

Part 2

A waning light hung over this marble graveyard. Towering statues of the Goddess marked with the scribings of prayers and hopes list sideways, her face half crumbled in mourning. This dedication to the moon was beautiful and grand aeons ago, but now it only stood as a monument to the ravages of time. The three slowly descended into the valley where the ground had given way, collapsing tunnels of the sprawling Arcway deep below bringing the earth above down with it. A cold autumn wind blew through the place bringing a sense of unease and unsettlement. Not all was right.

Erin regarded the ruins with a sorrowful sigh. "I would've loved to do a dig on this place... guess the only thing I'll be digging out is Sollan."

She pulled out her necklace and whispered a runeword.

Nexu simili. The crystal glowed with a soft light and, as if drawn by some invisible force, began to stretch outwards in one direction. "This way."

"Have you ever been here before?" Lula asked, following closely behind Erin.

"This is close to where the Magigun Production Facility was... these tunnels are so vast it's not a surprise that he could hide down here, but if I knew I might've stopped him already. I bet he knows we're coming. We gotta be quick."

The group passed by a large cavern tunnel crystalised by a violent surge of arcane energy. It crackled with a feedback that could be heard in the base of their eardrums, but thankfully the magical trace Erin was following was strong enough to not be drowned out by the magical radiation. She continued down a different passageway, and into a large room where the sky shone through a hole in the ground above and water dripped in from what used to be an aqueduct. There were large piles of rubble here and it didn't take long for Lula, still focused on the path ahead, to trip over something underfoot. Alaina was always the first to rush over to her and helped her up, but as Lula rubbed her head she realised what she had tripped over... a crafter's hammer. "Huh... what did this place used to be again?" She asked. Erin stopped and looked back to reply. "A factory, I guess... there was a bit where they were putting together the nonmagical parts of the MagiGun, like the frame... then sections where they harvested the arcane crystals needed to power them. It was this whole big complex... I didn't see all of it... I assumed the whole thing collapsed, but maybe not? Maybe Sollan still had, like, an office somewhere..."

"And who worked on all this stuff...?" Lula asked, and Erin faltered for just a moment before she answered. "You'd think it was people... but after Alaina and I fucked up his operations in Gilneas, he moved over to golems."

"Magical or mechanical?"

Erin's gaze was caught on something else, something that wasn't there.

"What's wrong?"

"... it's fine. They're magical. We managed to get past them. We didn't attack them."

"What difference does that make?" Asked Alaina, and Lula nodded in agreement. She added

"Don't they need like... someone sustaining them?"

Erin waved the idea away with her hand. "Honestly, it's fine... they'll be gone by now, they'll be free."

Erin shuffled away, sweeping the ground to clear their path with her magic as she went. But before Lula could catch up, Alaina held her back by her shoulder for just a moment and whispered, "something's up with her..."

"Yeah... I guess this is personal for her though."

"It is. I'll keep an eye on her, don't worry."

Eventually, Erin's charmed necklace brought them to their destination. A large pile of broken stone and marble blocked their way, and so Erin looked to Lula to clear the way for them. It was seaforium charges that she placed at various points about the wreckage she needed to clear and they knew the sound alone would alert Sollain if his lair was truly close... but perhaps he already knew they were coming. Time was of the essence. Lula and Erin hid behind Alaina, their portable barricade, and Lula set the charges to explode. But it was no mighty rumble, but rather a perfectly calculated and measured detonation which blasted through the centre of the rubble pile and left them a clean path to travel to. All seemed fine... however, the rubble seemed to shift on its own even after it had settled... and Lula could see a strange metallic glint through the smaller stone pebbles left behind.

Lula came over and realised it wasn't a part of the rubble... rather, something trapped under it. The metal glint was an iron gauntlet buried underneath, and Lula saw its fingers twitch.

"Is that... wait... it moved?"

Alaina and Erin both came to join her, but as Erin saw it her heart sank and she felt sick to her stomach. Almost immediately her tone changed, intense, desperate.

"No... we have to get it out... we have to get it free! Fuck, fuck, fuck...!"

She started shifting the rubble as fast as she could, and Alaina didn't ask any questions and merely started to help. Lula continued to investigate, and spied a horrid symbol carved into the back of the gauntlet. "Is this magic?" Erin gave no response, and it took Lula tugging the back of her sleeve for her to snap out of it.

Erin had this deep guilt welling up in her eyes.

"It's the golem...!"

Alaina's stoneshifting revealed more and more of it. It was this ugly iron frame, a cage it is trapped inside, that was what shapes its body... each piece: the gauntlets, the greaves, the helmet, and breastplate were all engraved with a rune that is shaped with jagged teeth-like serifs and sharp lines made by an uncaring hand. The runes were dim, and the only light that comes from the entity is the faint blue essence holding those pieces of metal together. It shimmered weakly as it finally released itself and saw the three.

It wheezed weakly... and spoke. "Pain..."

Erin covered her mouth with her hand and nearly seemed driven to tears by it. "No...! It's been down here this whole time?"

"I can only imagine how agonising that must have been..." Alaina uttered.

Lula sought action however, and even through her own bleary eyes tried to help clear the last of its impediments., "Are you... are you okay? What can we do?"

As much as the golem tried, it couldn't heave off the iron plates from its body. "Trapped...!"

Lula promised she'd get it out but none of them there, not even Alaina, had the strength to tear away its bindings.

"It's not meant to be like this... I... he fucking told me they were going to be safe!" Erin screamed as she fruitlessly tore at the golem's body.

"Whats going on? You sound like you know something?" Lula asked. Erin smeared the tears from her bloodshot eyes and tried to explain it.

"When Sollan and I were working together, we rounded up a lot of the magical entities that broke out from the Violet Hold after Dalaran... and he handled them, he said he knew where we could keep them that they wouldn't be trapped like they were by the Kirin Tor... but he lied... just like every other fucking thing! He's bound them into golems and used them like fucking slaves!"

Alaina hurried over, knowing the only way she could support them right now was to keep Erin focused. Lula directed her attention to the golem itself. "Okay... I'm going to try something, let me know if this works...?" She pulled out a blowtorch from her bag and tried to melt the rune off as carefully as she could but even this sent such intense wracking pain through the golem, as the runes flared in hateful retribution. They were there to keep it in check, it seemed... and any attempts to remove them would cause even more torture. "Okay... sorry! Sorry!" Lula stressed to find a solution in time, knowing that they might still be on the clock to resolve this. Anything she did seemed to fire off the runes, even some of Alaina's silver didn't disrupt their magic enough...

Alaina placed her hands over Erin's ears and turned her away so she couldn't hear the torturous rattling of the golem's metal plates but even then her meltdown continued. She dug her nails deep enough into her head that they nearly drew blood, screaming "this is my fault... my fault...! I trusted him!!"

Alaina's firm words did little to compose her, even with a tight grip on both shoulders. "Steel your mind, Erin! It's not your fault, how could it be? Lula is working to resolve this situation... let us not make her have to do this alone."

Lula wracked her brain as to how to free the golem without harming it, but she did not have time to continue working on a solution. She held its hand and did her best to soothe it even though pain. "It's okay... I'm here... we're going to fix this."

Soon, Erin noticed her necklace was still humming with magic and shook her head. "It's still glowing... why is it still glowing?"

"What does that mean?" Alaina asked. "It's magic, isn't it supposed to?"

"I stopped channeling the spell...! It shouldn't still be going, it..."

Alaina looked at Lula, seeing her own frustration at being unable to find a solution to this problem... but then she heard something. They all did. A voice came from the crystal necklace.

"Why is your spell still active? You were careless, Ms. Langley."

Erin gasped as her breath was stolen from her for a moment, but it wasn't long until her surprise faded and all she had left was anger. "Sollan..!"

Sollan's sneer could almost be heard through the crystal's reverberations as he hijacked her own tracing spell to see right back through the necklace at them. "What was that incantation you used? Connection through sympathy? That connection is not one sided. I know you all too well, what you would do, what you would think if I sent you a letter leading you right back here."

Lula heard them just out of earshot and did her best to focus on the golem, but could still tell what Sollan was saying. "And you brought your friends too... do Lula and Alaina know you'll cast them aside the moment you have what you want?"

Alaina grit her teeth and looked back at Erin, who had started to break down even further. "Why are you listening to him? He's just trying to get under your skin!"

"Are you even here?" Erin asked the crystal. "I swear if I even see a glimpse of you I'll..."

"You'll do what? Capture me? Kill me? No, you're too weak. You had the chance and you could not take it because you do not have the courage nor will. You lead your friends down here to this place that will be their graves, and it will only be yourself you can blame. Maybe then I can finally be rid of your incessant interruptions to my work. And it shall be so ironic too... this golem you've tried so hard to free will be the instrument of your demise."

Lula turned to them just as she heard those last words coming from the crystal. She had no personal stakes against Sollan, she was only here to make sure that Erin did not have to do this alone. She knew he was a liar and a cheat and a villain, but there were hundreds of those in this world and maybe he was not unique.

But there was one single thing he did that drove her over the edge. This golem might as well have been a robot to her, begging for her help to free it. And Sollan was the reason it was in pain.

Part 3

Lula reached into her bag and saw the set of handcuffs she had brought to capture Sollan with and sighed before turning to the others. She stormed over and snatched the crystalline necklace from Erin's hands and stared into it intently.

"Can you see me?"

"Ah... Ms. Tinkerbolt... I've heard much about you. Erin spoke so, so highly of you when she still thought we were allies. I sit here wondering if you and I might have been allies... our expertise combined could change this world." Sollan revelled in his words, selecting them with careful consideration. Lula scoffed at his remark, and asked "your expertise in... what... exactly? Enslaving creatures with sub-par magic while hiding behind a scrying necklace?"

"In shaping the future... MagiGuns are magical in nature, but you can't deny that their inspiration is distinctly mechanical. Now I could never get such a thing working myself, but just imagine if we could combine the reliability of a mechanical firearm with the magical potency that my MagiGun enchantments provide... think of the possibilities. Think of what we could make!"

The others watched as Lula denounced Sollan in their stead, with Erin in particular watching the exchange carefully. "All this claim of an inventive mind... you speak like you have a vision for the future... and yet your future is just filled with weapons... What is your end goal? You want everyone killing each other is that it?"

"You must think further, Lula! Think grander! You have the mind too. We could let this world stagnate and die or we can drag it into the next age by hand. Do you not want things to progress? To change?"

For better or worse, MagiGuns will continue to exist... the Kirin Tor made certain of that. Someone will invent them. The future is all but guaranteed. Would it not be better if that was controlled by us? For us to bring in the next day?"

"You think progress is enslaving and tormenting robots? Torturing them? It's barbaric... and even if you're right that Magiguns are going to exist... I can't think of anyone I'd rather have control of them less than a torturous hateful criminal like you..."

A shrill and nasally chuckle escaped Sollan. He still thought... no, he knew that he had this under control. That he had the upper hand. "Calling me a criminal would imply that these acts are illegal... but they aren't. No government has passed a law on MagiGuns, and I will remind you that without the Kirin Tor no laws against creating golems exist... it's quite normal in Silvermoon, I can assure you."

But he had his fun, stirring their rage. Perhaps it was time to bring this to a close.

"But this is all a distraction. A waste of my time. You'll never agree with me. You'll never realise that Langley is merely using you, expecting your assistance with nothing in return... She's always been like that. Now, I would value you... but clearly, you have other plans. So you can rot down there with her."

"Oh... you think Erin is your problem? I became your problem the moment you started enslaving creatures..." Lula's tone grew lower, more serious and her face was almost a scowl.

"Is that meant to be a threat?"

"No..." She held up her shackles, "you know what these are?"

"How exactly do you plan on using them? You don't know where I am, you'll never even get close!"

But when Lula turned around, they realised Lula wasn't planning on using them for Sollan anymore. She placed them on the golem! A hissing sound, a feedback reverberated through the room as the magic inside the chains counteracted the bindings on the golem. One by one the runes explode off of its metal trappings one by one, causing the golem no pain as their magic was directly countered and disabled. Now mundane, the pieces of armour that formed the golem's body fell to the floor... no more mundane than the rubble they rested in. The entity inside was free, and it exuded an aura of relief... of peace. The pain was finally gone.

Sollan snapped. "You think this disrupts me? Disrupts my plans?"

I'd already resigned it to slowing you down... a role it has already sufficiently fulfilled.

You have nothing! You have no leads, no direction, you blindly scour through the darkness with no thoughts in your mind but looking for ME, when you should be prepared to meet the new inevitable future. You will lose. You will realise that my future will be made manifest, there is no other option! And you'll grovel at my feet when you realise trying to claw back the past has left you with nothing!"

Lula gripped the necklace tightly. "I don't care about the Magiguns... I care about stopping you inflicting this on any more creatures... All your reliance on magic... your obsession... but you haven't got a clue how to hide from tech... a drone scan... a thermal imaging sweep... a seismic sensor..." Lula chuckled, not in a joyous way but one where she knew she was right. "You don't possess enough magic to be able to defend yourself from the eyes of machines. And one day you'll wake up to the whirring of propellers... or the clanking of metal footsteps... and try to defend yourself... but you'll fail... and you'll find these shackles on your own wrists... you'll find yourself muted... alone... weak... pathetic... and at the mercy of the creatures you would enslave..."

Lula glared at him with furious eyes burning through her goggles. "**That...** is a threat..."

Sollan went silent for a long time, and then muttered out a reply he wished would portray him as stoic and unaffected. "I look forward to it... we'll see if your machines can resist being atomised by a MagiGun. How well will your threat hold up then?"

The crystal necklace splintered in half, and turned faint. Evidently, he wanted the last word.

Lula handed Erin back her broken necklace, but with all her attention on Sollan she didn't realise that Erin was on the verge of tears.

"You think we're gonna really stop him...?" She asked meekly. She thought she was stronger than that, she thought. She thought this wouldn't affect her so much. But when everything here seemed like her fault, because she trusted too much or she couldn't see when she was being deceived... it was just too much. But Lula looked at her with a smile, and this nod made full of conviction. She was oddly confident. But her own stress had turned to determination. He had no way of winning, she knew it. "Easily...", Lula replied. And Erin needed that. She needed that reassurance, not to be told to not let him get to her or to be strong, but to be told the burden was going to be taken by her best friend who was way more smart and capable than she was and had no chance of screwing things up like she did.

Lula brought Erin in for a big hug, and she buried her head in Lula's shoulder. Alaina didn't want to ruin such a nice moment but smiled. Eventually, Lula broke away to finally address the entity that had been turned into a golem and asked "Are you okay?"

"Freedom..." It remained there thrumming with a soft power, and Erin took the chance to say her piece.

"I'm sorry... I never meant for this to happen to you. First you were trapped inside the Violet Hold and now this... I just wanted you to be free."

She rubbed the tears from her eyes, and Lula looked up at it with a sad smile.

"It's okay. You can go now.... we won't stop you."

The three of them watched as it drifted high above them, spiralling around tethers of faint dusklight and escaped through the hole in the ceiling.

There was one thing all of them knew.

Sollan was still out there.

And one way or another, he needed to be stopped for good.

Act Three

Show of Force

A howling gale swept across the endless ice sheet.
It was at the pinnacle of the world, as far north as one can go.
Eventually, flat ground gave way to glaciers as tall as a mountain.
Sitting at its peak was her destination. The Jagged Tower.
It rested amidst frozen spines like sharp spears jutting out, encasing the fortress,
a shell formed around the surge needle which plumbed Ley from the depths of the world
itself.

And it had just been reactivated.

With every bore the ice sheet cracked, sundered by the drill which ravaged the land.
But it was not dragons or titans which sought to harness the lifeblood of the planet.
It was one single, loathsome man.
Sollan had grown desperate.

A single dot stood gazing out into the ice sheet, blinded by the hazy white glow reflecting the
midday sun. From his perch he would stand frozen to the bone and scour the sheet for any
disturbances. And there *would* be a disturbance. But as a member of the Blood Ravens,
Silvermoon's deadliest mercenaries, he was certain that his work here would at least be
simpler and better paid than what he had been ordered to do by Prince Kael'thas on Outland
so many years ago. No one could come here, surely, not to this far flung end of the world.
Not even...

He saw a dark spot move in the snow. Swiftly he moved to his position and readied the
firearm he had been provided. The MagiRifle was of a staff-like length and warped wood had
shaped it to form a long barrel, stock, trigger and sights. The barrel itself was rifled, a
swirling trench etched into the wood to channel arcane energy and focus it into intense
precision shots. Rather than immediately exploding and destabilising to create huge
explosions on contact, the bolt of light fired from it could travel great distances and strike a
target dead before they even knew one was coming.

A scrying lens mounted onto the MagiRifle presented his target, and matched the description
Sollan gave him. She made no attempt to hide her identity. Fiery orange hair stood like a
blaze against the snow.

He locked eyes with her.
And through the scrying lens, she glared straight back.
His finger feathered the trigger.
And when he had lined it up...
He took the shot.

BANG!

Suddenly, the sniper screamed in pain when the violet flash that ignited from the crystals
powering the MagiGun misfired and turned to pure flame. The woman in the snow held out

her hand and dragged him forwards, first slamming his head into the tower barricade and then yanking him down from his perch into the snow so many hundreds of feet below him.

She stepped forwards, footfalls crunching on the ground, and confirmed that she had both softened his fall and extinguished the fire.

"The arcane virus worked." She muttered to herself, and inspected the crystal. It had been melted from the inside out, igniting the wooden rifle frame, and the burned cloth on his coat sleeves showed that was where the flame spread first.

This was a risky test, but a necessary one. She had to know that her previous assault against Sollan had borne fruit. Sollan always set up his production facilities near major leyline outputs, and rather than destroying the last one she and a new ally had poisoned the supply with an arcane virus which transmuted pure energy to flame and spread to other crystals too. There was no way of telling what crystals were infected, and it seemed some of his men still didn't know. It was her one advantage right now, a way to level the playing field. She had to use every trick she had.

"In and out. Find any information on his next move. Shut down the needle."

She neared the top, all she could see in every direction a sheer white.

"I can't let him be two steps ahead again. I can't keep hitting supply lines or factories forever. This has gone on for too long."

Erin stepped into the tower.

Almost immediately another Blood Raven guard rounded the corner and spotted her.

He immediately pulled the trigger on his MagiGun to put her down, only for his own weapon to betray him and sear his palms.

Erin closed in and called out a spell. *"Leva!"*

A powerful force erupted from her fingertips and sent him crashing into the wall.

He climbed out, drew his sidesword and swung at her.

Erin caught his arm, spun around and let loose another pulse centered on the back of his elbow.

CRACK!

He shouted and clutched his arm in pain.

And she sent him hurtling back into the wall.

"Stay down."

Erin kneeled down to his MagiGun and yanked out the melted crystal before slamming her own uncorrupted one inside. She noticed a runestone on the floor, one sympathetically linked with the ones the other Blood Ravens carried, and lifted it up.

"Amaris! Are you there? Report!"

Erin held it to her lips and spoke. "Come find him," before crushing it in her hands.

She'd barely gotten up the stairs by the time three more Blood Ravens appeared. They didn't even get a chance to fire their weapons. Erin shot first, aiming at the ground underneath their feet. The ground turned to crystal-glass and shattered, sending them hurtling down into the level below. Erin crossed the gap left behind just by letting Violetspire carry her over.

By now, the whole tower was on high alert. They surely screamed at each other over their runestones to muster and stop her advance, and Erin had no doubt they'd soon figure their weapons were useless. Moving through the tower took far too long though... especially as since she invaded his warehouse in Gilneas Sollan ensured that every important facility was painted from head to toe in anti-telemancy runes.

Each room and hallway in the tower was formed from a solid, dry ice and they sparkled with a reflective sheen under a light. It was mazelike, large passages that twisted and turned on themselves in almost non-euclidean ways, and Erin found herself needing to stick to one wall just to make any progress. Some places were furnished which had been used by Sollan and his goons, and she found one place with scattered notes on the surge needle. The needle itself, found deeper inside, was formed of three floating disks. They themselves were massive runes, viaducts to mimic a legitimate leyline passage and redirect then channel massive streams of the energy away. It seemed that all she had to do was disrupt any one of these runes to bring the whole thing crumbling down, but-

"There she is! After her!" Erin turned to see another small army coming her way, each of them brandishing Sollan's enchanted armaments from powerful MagiShotguns all the way to rapid-fire MagiMachineGuns.

Erin glanced at them and noticed the crystals powering them had been removed... Something was wrong here. By the time she saw the white muzzle flash and grow brighter she had no time to question how to escape, only to work off instinct. She flung out a mirror image and hid under one of the desks, seeing a hail of a hundred energy shots hurtle overhead and blast a hole in the wall behind her. The deception soon faded, though, and they knew their target still had to be alive...

"Search every corner..." one of them said. "She doesn't leave alive this time."

Hiding would be impossible in a place like this, where any shadow could reveal her position merely by disrupting the clear reflective ice.

Footsteps crept closer to the desk... the Blood Raven knelt down, pointing her barrel in the space underneath...

Erin wouldn't be able to sneak out of this one. She had to fight.

Violetspire flew and rammed through the shoulder of the Blood Raven, causing her shot to go wide and blast open the icy floor underneath Erin. She barely scrambled up while her staff did the work, intuitively casting a bright flash of light which settled into small tiny stars that flickered so luminescently it blinded her foes like a smoke screen. She got to her feet and threw one man out and through a wall, while another turned to where he heard her breathing and fired at her. She barely avoided it in time and fired her own MagiGun into the ceiling to cause shards of glass to rain down on them, all the while she and Violetspire in tandem speared and struck down more and more foes to the ground.

Erin still had yet to reach the Needle itself, but she'd never make it past this encounter if she didn't give this her all. She summoned three orbiting stars and sent them out before squeezing her hands together, enacting a ritual cast which invoked an immense gravitational pull towards the centre.

Weapons were ripped out of her enemies hands, their bodies yanked all towards each other, and under the eye of the storm not one of them could withstand it. Erin felt a line of blood run from her nose and gazed to see all her enemies piled up in the centre, bruises and broken bones, none of them fit to stand against her.

One of them choked, and Erin pointed her staff's sharpened peak at his neck.

"I'm shutting this place down. Which way is the needle?"

He sputtered out a few words, weakened from his crushed ribcage. "I never thought you'd work with them." Not long after, he passed out from the pain.

"Who's them?" Erin asked. "Who's them!"

She had no time to lose.

Erin rushed down each icy hallway, now finding the place eerily empty.

"Who's them? Is someone else here too?"

I can't let anyone get their hands on Sollan. There's no chance in hell. This is my responsibility!"

Erin felt each shockwave stronger now. With every measure of arcane augured from the leylines, the disturbances grew larger, and Erin bared through the teeth-rattling, ear-splitting headaches they gave her as she knew she was getting closer. She reached an icy window and peered through. Three colossal structures, spinning levitating disks as large as buildings, held together by beams of lightning.

With every tunnel Erin went through, she saw the bodies of more Blood Ravens... but not ones she recognised, these were not her work. She ran down a spiral staircase towards the entrance to the needles and kept seeing more and more of the unconscious, far more than she could ever handle, and wondered who exactly 'Them' was. How could they get past MagiGun wielding mercenaries? What was their intent?

She found the large icy gates leading into the surge needle. They were locked, of course, and she could not just blink through. Erin needed to use the last of her energy to get through... and worry about the rest later. She summoned as much magic as she could without passing out to generate a small, ethereal ribbon between her fingertips. She turned them, twisting it, and then tore it in half.

Of all Erin's spells save for perhaps portals themselves this one circumvented the laws of physics in the most cavalier of ways. By displacing her own matter on to a separate layer, or "phase" of physical reality, Erin could find herself unburdened by physical barriers such as these and walk straight through. She held her vomit back until she was through and she became corporeal again... but now the raw arcane power of the surge needle confronted her.

Erin's MagiGun was the only thing between her and death.

She found one final form of defence as a large member of the Blood Ravens, their final member, stood in her way. She pointed her MagiGun at him, her cloak billowing under the winds swept away by the surge needle, but his weapon was far, far bigger. In the time since her presence was revealed he had a chance to put together Sollan's crowning weapon of destruction... a MagiMinigun. Six long stave-barrels seethed with energy, levitating just in front of the frame which distinctly lacked a crystal in the large feed socket it should.

She gazed up at the surge needle, and then back down at him.

"I get it now. You redirected the leyline's energy into your guns."

The Blood Raven seemed almost proud to have discovered the idea. "It'll have more than enough power to tear you to shreds."

Erin's rattled the MagiGun in her hand, trickling blood from her nose landing on her shirt.

"Why do this? For money? Why are all you fuckers so insistent on getting yourself killed for someone else's cause?"

"Because we're not dying." The Blood Raven replied. "He told us that you aren't killing us, no matter what. So that gun?"

He spied Erin's shaking hand, with her finger far away from the trigger.

"Might as well be an illusion."

Erin breathed coldly as she saw the barrels of the MagiMinigun begin to spin and whir, and time slowed down.

He was right... she thought she was prepared, thought she was ruthless enough to finish it this time, but even with all her tricks and all her spells there was nothing she could do when she'd refuse to pull the trigger. The way to make MagiGuns might die with Sollan, a man so jealous he'd never share how they were made so that he could have the glory of their invention to himself, but Erin could not kill that idea until she could kill him.

Erin couldn't do it. Not even staring down through the eyes of death.

A shot exploded from the eye, and Erin would not escape it at this time, not without a miracle.

But it was her lucky day.

Erin saw a shadow move in front of her, and it parried the arcane blast hurtling towards her.

The MagiGun shot ricocheted away, arcing in midair until it crashed against the glacial walls of the tower and shattered a chunk of it into glass.

Before she knew it, he had slammed the man's weapon away with his shield, drove a pommel into his shoulder, held him on the ground with his boot. Though the Blood Raven tried to push him off, he found the effort almost impossible to summon, the wall too high to surmount.

"You remaining alive hinges on your usefulness to me. Go through those doors... My unit will apprehend you. Should you turn out to be useful... you may be released..."

"Wait..." Erin said. It had just dawned on her who it was. This familiarity made sense. "You're here?"

He looked around at her and scowled. "You'd do well to remember your limits, Langley."

The Alliance heraldry.

A shield with the power to resist all magic...

Erin knew exactly who it was.

The man who had saved her was none other than Lula's brother... Commander Lance Lionguard.

New Allies

Lance sat in his office, reviewing the report handed to him. In a recent string of deaths of high-profile individuals across the world, from guildmasters to members of the nobility, so-called 'MagiGuns' have come to the focus of the public eye. Citizens in every major city are terrified to leave their homes for fear that a criminal with a weapon could obliterate them in an instant... the power of the most powerful mages in the hands of petty thieves and pickpockets.

It had become a personal matter for members of the Arathi garrison too however. The commander of another regiment, Dallis, was slain in a skirmish with a group of wild trolls after even those savages had gotten their hands on this new terrifying form of weapon. The balance of power was shifting... and it was quickly speeding them towards chaos.

"Fuckin' mages..." Lance huffed, tossing the letter onto the table. It was covered with a warmap of Arathi, blue figurines in the south at Stromgarde and red figurines in the north at Hammerfell. But it seemed he would be saved from political planning soon enough.

A figure came into his room, wielding a set of enchanted armour and carrying a blade at her side. Though a mask covered her face, her respectful salute gave him no means for concern... only suspicion.

"Well this isn't a coincidence is it," He picked up the leaflet before him and asked, "you with the Kirin Tor? Violet Eye?"

"They no longer exist." The voice reverberated through her mask.

"Shame... Get to the point... I've got commanders dying to pond life with weapons of mass destruction to deal with..."

The masked figure moved to look at the report on the table. "We've come to offer aid on that very matter. Are you aware of the threat present?"

"One of you magic lot decided it would be a good idea to create and distribute fatal wands?"

The masked figure held up her hand and said, "That was the Kirin Tor's doing. We would not make the same mistake. Magic is dangerous. To let it roam freely is to invite chaos inside our walls. Fate hangs in the balance if someone does not act."

She produced a photo into her hands, and held it out towards him.

It was a picture of Sollan, clearly taken without his knowledge, as he sat inside a large tower in a place which is evidently styled in the architectural manner of Silvermoon.

"That is Sollan Suncrown, the man responsible for proliferating the use of MagiGuns. The Horde Council refuses to release a statement denouncing his actions and has allowed him to remain within their borders with impunity."

"Should've known..." Lance scoffed at the irony, considering how the Horde routinely claim to be the victims, underdogs fighting back against the oppressive Alliance. "So why are you here?"

"Commander Dallis did not deserve the fate she was dealt. She was respected by her soldiers and well loved among friends, was she not? And was it not meant to be a routine mission... clear out the Witherbark raiders who had been attacking Alliance caravans. Under any other circumstances it should have been an easy assignment... with no complications.

But even those savages had in their possession a MagiGun. Even something as primitive as that could wield it, point it, and kill a good woman.

Is that not wrong? Is the power balance of this world ready to shift in the direction of whoever carries a MagiGun? Should we be afraid of anyone who might possess one? If wild trollish tribes have them, do you not imagine how many the Horde armies would have? Are you, Commander, prepared for an arms race so deadly it would shake the very matter of this planet to its core..."

The woman stood up, proudly, a symbol of safety... the one group willing to fight against Sollan.

"That is why we are here. To make sure this never comes to pass. To end it before it begins. That is why the Leyguard was formed."

"Spare me the propaganda, you're speaking to a commander under the crown not a fucking mercenary. Those trolls will find their heads on their own spikes soon enough along with any other horde near here.

You didn't answer my question. Why are you here... Talking to me..."

"You would be an asset." She said bluntly.

"We understand that you are already skilled in anti-magical combat."

"Fighting magic with magic not working for you?" Lance asked.

"We seek individuals of quality. MagiGuns have become a threat wider than anticipated, thanks to Suncrown's efforts."

"Understandable..." He looked at the map in front of him and began to imagine his forces against Sollan's, and considered his tactics just as he would across any battlefield. "Do you have any reason to believe cutting the head off the snake will work? Or are these guns too widespread now?"

"Suncrown is the only one with knowledge on how to manufacture MagiGuns on a large scale... and his pride will not afford him to share that information with others.

He believes himself to be at the forefront of a technomagical revolution... he will be proven wrong."

Lance picked up one particular figurine from the table, a commander just like himself, like an old friend. He clutched it tightly in his hands.

"For Commander Dallis, and any other victim of this Horde conspiracy... I will stop Sollan.. I will assume full control over your forces. You do have recruits, don't you?"

"Skilled mages, spellbreakers, warriors, healers, and a scout."

"Very well, bring before me. I'll see him dragged before the courts to face justice before the season is done."

The Leyguard

"And what the fuck are you doing exactly?" Lance asked, turning to Erin, barely able to do anything but shout with the full volume of the Surge Needle behind them.

Erin sighed, pulled her hood off and threw her MagiGun into the abyss to be atomised by the stream of vicious ley energies. "Do I get to ask you the same thing, cause I think your answer's gonna be weirder than mine."

"Oh almost certainly... Your answer is likely to be akin to how you are a strong, powerful mage and you like trying to handle everything by yourself because you are an arrogant idiot with a death wish..."

Erin could hardly believe the audacity. "Excuse me? I've been singlehandedly following Sollan since he started selling MagiGuns, this is *my* mission. The fuck is a Alliance army officer doing here? They finally decided to pick up the slack?"

"You would be dead if I had not shown up... because you came with no back-up... likely no plan... no organisation and no idea what you're doing." He leaned forwards. "This is now a military operation. Get in line... or get out of the way."

He took Erin's arm and showed her outside.

Amidst the ice, it seemed Lance and his unit had managed to set up a provisional camp of sorts... furniture had been rearranged into three distinct stations, each with its own purpose. One seemed to be the command desk, though also being used as an impromptu holding for the Blood Raven prisoner. Here Erin spied two elves whose glaives and tower shields revealed themselves to be spellbreakers, as well as a man who bore enchanted armour that almost resembled the sort of thing a paladin would wear. There was also a station with disassembled MagiGuns, the MagiMinigun being one of them, and three individuals slowly took it apart... they seemed to her to be either engineers, marksmen, or both. Finally there was one group of robed individuals easily identifiable as sorcerers... except one stood out, a Kaldorei druid who herself seemed to be greatly out of place with the rest of the unit.

"I may be here protecting Alliance interests, but I'm not here with my army. This is the Leyguard." Lance said, taking her across the room. Erin had never heard of them before but decided to learn by observing. He shoved her in a chair and said, "Wait for me while I debrief with my team, and don't even think about moving."

She folded her arms and watched him.

The frontline unit stood to attention and saluted Lance. It seemed that these individuals had come from their own respective armies, serving in different battles.

Spellbreakers were common in Quel'thalas, but it seemed by their blue eyes that they were never corrupted with the same demonic energies as the Sin'dorei were. Lance could rest easy knowing that these battlemages are not going to try to stab him in the back, and they have their own reason for despising the Blood Ravens too for allying with Kael'thas during the Outland campaign. The paladin, meanwhile, wore a small pin across his tabard which signifies his presence at the Battle of Light's Hope, and during the Argent Crusade's campaign against the scourge. A veteran through and through, and he had grown tired of needing to save the world from itself time and time again.

"At ease." Lance looked at the Paladin. "Report Sergeant."

The Blood Raven had been stripped of all attire and armour from his torso. He was bound to a chair, and Lance could also see signs of cuts, bruises, and other injuries. It seemed that advanced interrogation methods were necessary... and the Spellbreakers in particular seem proud of their work. The Sergeant replied, "They were able to force him to reveal the location of this on his personage..." He held out half a cracked runestone. "We believe it to be one piece of Sollan's hearthstone..."

Lance grimaced at the raven. "Couldn't have opted for the easy option hm? Alright, give it to the researchers and see if they can trace where it goes."

He looked at the Blood Raven again. "So what do you plan to do from here?"

The bloodied elf spat to his side, but by this point had all but given up on struggling against his restraints. "It's not like I'm getting paid for this."

"You're just a mercenary then... you're not a believer." Lance looked at the spellblades. "Cut him loose and send him on his way. We have what we needed."

The Raven laughed. "And cast me out into the frost? I'd rather die on my own terms than freeze to death."

Lance shook his head. To think someone would be so flippant, after Lance had already spared his life? "So be it." He spoke to the spellbreakers again. "Dispose of him somewhere."

He was only a blood elf, after all.

Lance next went to the armoury table. The ranged unit salute him as well, though they seem a little bit more casual compared to the frontliners. "Sir, we've something that might interest you."

"Go on". Lance understood that not everyone here was military, but as long as they respect the chain of command and use proper address, he was fine with letting a little slide.

One of the riflemen presents one of each known type of MagiGun to Lance.

"Of course you read the briefing so you don't need us telling you this, but the development of these firearms has until now followed mechanical designs. There are handgun equivalents, shotguns, rifles and machine-guns too. What is interesting is that they've started to evolve past those designs too. Scrying crystals used as laser-sight, larger crystal arrays mimicking long feed-ammo belts. There are even variations. This one is a revolver-style MagiGun, with six crystals that slowly recharge off ambient energy without needing to be replaced. There is even an attachment for the rifles to turn them fully automatic. With this much technomagical progress in such a short span of time, I worry that it might not be long until they start designing MagiBombs... which could provide a similar explosive yield as the one dropped on Theramore."

"Are any of you confident enough to deconstruct one of these safely?" Lance asked.

One of the riflemen holds up a pair of heavy duty gloves. By her messy, oil-stained face and straw-blonde hair maybe she seems somewhat familiar to him. "Yes, sir. We'll get them apart and give you the details of their inner workings."

He nodded resolutely. "Deliver the crystals to the sorcerers once you are done, see what they make of them. But do not do this if there is any risk to yourselves. We can seek external assistance if needed. I don't want you blowing yourself up being hasty"

"Yes, sir. You're much kinder than the last we worked for."

Two hooded figures barely registered Lance until he addressed himself to them. These two sorcerers scried the runes on the walls with handheld orbs and were too deep into their channelling to even acknowledge his presence. The healer seemed the most sensible out of all of them here, and also the most out of place. She was a Kaldorei druid who, judging by the rings under her eyes just like the rings inside trees, could be imagined to be venerable in age. She sat with her legs crossed but stood up and bows to Lance as he came towards her.

Lance said to her, "Druidess... Please take a look at Ms Langley over there. She is a reckless mercenary who stumbled blindly ahead and she is likely drained and injured," and while Erin was being tended to he spoke to the sorcerers.

"You got something for me?"

The two of them finally turned around, seemingly surprised to be shaken from their chanting. "Sir." One of them said in a hushed tone, with nothing else to comment. They just held the orb outwards.

"The scouts may have a crystal for you to take a look at shortly." Lance's disdain for mages only began to grow.

"Acknowledged."

"This isn't a book club. Your commanding officer gave you information and the response is you stand to attention and say YES SIR! "IS THAT CLEAR?"

But the sorcerers just returned with blank stares. While Erin and the Druidess were startled by his sudden rise in volume, they remain almost inhumanly unemotional. Their blank stares betrayed a complete lack of interest in the actual meaning of this mission. Even as a newcomer, Lance seemed to carry more passion than they do who have served the Leyguard for some time now. "Yes sir." They replied, calmly, without a single inflection of their tone.

"Convene with the scouts. Help them deconstruct the gun... and don't blow us up..."

The sorcerers spoke in tandem. "Yes sir."

Lance ran his hand through his hair. It was clear taking this command would be one of the hardest assignments of his career. Between the men at his disposal, the forces arrayed against them and even just pinning down Sollan... had he taken upon himself an impossible responsibility?

Lance glanced at a figurine in his hands and remembered who he was doing this for.

He returned to his table to review the reports, but only had a few moments to do so before Erin came to him, her arms folded.

Swallow Your Pride

Erin wasn't content to just sit around, be tended to and then tossed to the wayside. As soon as the healer was done wafting petals in her general direction, Erin went over to Lance's setup and cleared her throat. Lance read for a little moment longer before putting the report down. Perhaps he knew where this was going.

"You got a moment?" Erin interjected.

"A moment."

"How'd they convince you to join them?"

"I'm here representing Alliance interests. The alignment of Magiguns is far too close to the Horde for our liking.. This is no longer a case of thugs murdering each other in the streets..." Lance frowned, as if recounting this was more painful than he let on. He kept his composure though, the ever-stoic soldier.

"One of my fellow commanders was killed by a troll using one of those things. A troll... She deserved better than to be slain by pond scum wielding lethal weapons. So I will see to it that it does not happen again."

Erin scoffed. "Kinda wish I'd gotten to recruit you first."

"Well you didn't, and frankly the way you do things I would have likely not joined you. The Leyguard may lack the discipline of an Alliance squad. However they function as a unit. They do not run off recklessly into danger."

"So the extent of you wanting to do a good thing and stopping MagiGuns ultimately depends on who asks then, does it? I thought better of you." Erin's words were quick and accusatory. Was he just another opportunist? She tried to bait him.

"Guess I'll just have to go back to asking Lula for help. Y'know, I didn't wanna get her involved because this isn't her deal but..."

Lance interrupted her and replied with a firm tone and ignored her goading.

"Ms Langley, the extent of me wanting to do good hinges on who holds the information and what the plan is. It seems the extent of which *you* like to 'do good' hinges on you or your friends recklessly storming through everything, being the centre of it all, almost getting yourselves killed and then pretending that the outcome was skill and not luck..."

He looked at her plainly, saying it to her straight. "You're no different to any other mercenary despite what you tell yourself and no you may not be paid in gold, but you don't care do you? Because all that matters to you is credit and self worth. Well unfortunately, Ms Langley, I have operational control here and there will be no further use of your services unless you're willing to get in line... which we both know you're not going to do..."

Erin rolled her eyes. The audacity. Seriously! She snapped back, and maybe didn't consider her words as well as she should have.

"I appreciate -someone- is trying to pick up the fucking slack here, but I don't accept that you all just barge in here and expect *ME* to get in line? I've been the one tracking him down, I've been the one raiding his bases, I've been the one singlehandedly putting a knife in his plans SINCE DAY ONE." She pointed a crooked finger at Lance and said, "I don't care if the entire fucking military came down, this is still my responsibility to fix and I am going to fix it one way or another. You don't just get to decide when it finally affects you to swoop in and take over... that's not duty... that's opportunism."

Lance seemed to finally be incited by her words. He shot out of his chair and stood looming some feet over her, knuckles pressed down against the oak table, and he retaliated with the same animosity she clearly held for him. "This is your problem isn't it... that you think it's **your** responsibility... that **you** need to fix things because **you're** the one who puts effort in?" The absolute arrogance is what led you here to almost being killed. And you're right, this isn't **my**. and I am not going to be the one to solve this. My **team** is... my **UNIT** is. Because one thing you seem to struggle with is realising that the universe is bigger than you. That more people are involved. More people can help. You don't get to carry every threat on your shoulder like a Martyr. Now if you can't get in line and work **WITH** others... then you will die alone when no one comes to save you..."

His attention remained wholly on her.

Erin didn't like what she was hearing, but she recognised the truth. She **does** need allies against Sollan, and for better or worse someone coming to help is better than no one. There is no such thing as 'too little, too late' when it comes to the threat before them.

What convinced her was Lance, in what in a roundabout way she read as a request for help, tells her that she'll be working with others. For someone as headstrong and anti-authority as her she'd never accept someone telling her to 'fall in line' or 'serve under another'. But she had worked in teams before. she finds no problem with working in one again as equals.

Erin took a breath and nodded, rolling her eyes for a moment, before repeating the same line she heard everyone else spit out a million times. "Yes sir."

Lance then appraised Erin for a moment, but it was clear whatever conclusion he came to was a positive one... if barely. "Attitude can use some work but it's a start. If you're joining us you can choose your squad. You can be up with the front liners, the ranged unit, or the casters. We already have a Telemancer however."

"You do?"

"Of course. Contrary to your worldview, you are not the only person in the world..."

But Erin's tone wasn't one of anger, more pleasant surprise. "No, it's not that. I'm just curious who it is. Not many of us. Could already know them. I'll go with them. Those spellbreakers are giving me the creeps."

"Very well. I believe the casters are already investigating our next lead. I expect a report from you by the end of the day."

Erin looked down. She'd been expecting to get home, shower, take a change of clothes... but at this point, she was locked in. She took a deep breath. She had a feeling she'd come to regret this. But at the same time, winning against Sollan was always going to need a sacrifice.

The Hearthstone

Three cracked pieces of stone lay before Erin within a small metal tray. She lifted a lens over her eye from the apparatus clamped to the table and carefully used a pair of tweezers to manipulate the stones, to turn them or to flip them over.

There were tiny markings on them... barely even visible, etched with machined precision, each of them about the width of a hair...

Unknown to Sollan, she knew what this was and perhaps he had thought she had forgotten, or never noticed to begin. But Erin wasn't an amateur, and those memories of the time they worked together would never fade no matter how painful.

These stones they found, one in the Blood Raven's pocket, one recovered from Sollan's warehouse in Gilneas, and one found locked deep in an arcane vault below the Jagged Tower... they weren't just mundane. After all, why would they be? Mages like Sollan, they did everything they could to avoid the simple and easy, their status dependent on how much of a normal life they could eschew, and to fill it with as much power as possible.

These were not just any stones. They were part of his hearthstone.

"I'm going to need some help."

The druidess, the kindly olden lady, glanced over at Erin. Perhaps she'd just woken up from a nap. Perhaps she didn't care for Lance's rigid militaristic orders, too venerable to bother. Perhaps, without anyone to heal, she just had nothing better to do until now.

Whichever way, Ysria's attention was directed towards Erin.

"Young mage," she said with a soft and kindly tone, "have you blown up the planet again?"

"No... I uh, need some help recombining Sollan's hearthstone."

"Oh? Haha. My bad. I suppose, it just happens so often I rather assume when something goes wrong with magic it will result in planetary destruction."

"We only did that once?"

"That's a pretty big *once*."

Erin pursed her lips. "I mean, sure. Are the others there?"

"You don't need an old Branch like me. I get it. The decrepit old lady. Or is it because I'm a follower of the Cenarion Way? Is there not enough breaking of the fundamentals of reality in what I do for you Erin? Is nurturing life itself not important?"

Erin blinked. "Well if you know how hearthstones work..."

Ysria waved her hand aside. "I'm only joking."

"Sorry, I'm focusing right now, not really uh... in a laughing mood."

She crossed her legs and put her head up on her bedroll against the wall. "You sprouts are no fun. You'll have good company with those two. They're down by the Surge Needle."

As Erin made her way through the tower's frozen corridors she blinked down each to expediate her travel, but she was so used to doing so and having no one to contend with, that the one time someone came around the corner just as she reappeared down one end of it, they immediately collided; sending both of them backwards.

Erin recovered easily enough, but the other one? He scrambled on the floor to pick up the papers that had been dropped. "No, the Commander's report, he'll...", he said, but with a wave of Erin's fingertips she collated all the pages together and replaced them back into his hand.

"Sorry about that, I..." he finally looked up. "Oh, Ms. Langley."

She rolled her eyes. "Honestly, call me Erin. It's Luca, right? You feeling better after the other day?" Luca looked down at his leg and nodded. "Ms. Dawnpetal's healing was very effective. I want to be ready the next time I go into the field."

Erin smiled briefly. "Good to hear it. Lance will be happy."

"H-he will?" Luca gasped.

"Yeah. You're the only one here that inflates his ego properly." Erin shrugged. "I'll let you get back to it."

"Right! Bye Ms. Erin...!"

Luca ran back off down the hall. Erin scratched her head, and continued.

The surge needle, in its voluminous volley of energy, created such an intense noise at such a volume that it was a poor place to have a conversation. Erin saw two people, two hooded, mysterious magi. Phanris and Velris. They were the sort of odd twins who were joined at the hip, acting like two halves of the same whole. Erin held out the shattered hearthstone and shouted over the cascade. "It's a hearthstone! We need to repair it!"

"We know," Phanris said; she couldn't hear the words but she could see them. Velris snatched the fragments from her open hand and together they used the considerable powers of the leyline to cast a spell without even a second thought. She couldn't see all the runewords they spoke, but one phrase stood out to her.

Ex tempore restituet

Golden ribbons swirled around the pieces, clicking each piece back into place like a jigsaw puzzle, and removing any trace of any break or crack or crease at all.

Erin frowned as she gazed upon the completed runestone, and with some great distrust towards them.

The two mages spoke in tandem.

"You can report this on our behalf."

Infiltration

Part 1

The Leyguard gathered around their war table, with Lance at the head.

“Ms. Langley. Please present your findings.”

Erin placed down the runed rock in the middle of the table. “Sollan’s hearthstone. We can use it to find his headquarters.”

Lance frowned, heavy eyebrows furling. The Spellbreakers held their hands on their sheathed glaives tightly, as if ready to spring into action at any moment. Lance’s sergeant, the Knight, stood boldly, knowing from his previous battles when the tides had turned. The engineers looked at each other and nodded, already talking amongst themselves. Luca, the scout, held a pensive stare at the stone. Druidess Ysira folded her hands politely behind her, while Phanris and Velris stood in silent observance.

Lance raised his hand. He’d ask the first question.

“I would appreciate a reminder on hearthstones. It would be beneficial for any who are not fully caught up.”

Erin cleared her throat. “Hearthstones are enchanted items linked to a certain location by their users. They’re incredibly hard to make, most of them break after one use; permanent ones are exceedingly rare. Most people only know about it from the card game, but they are real. When you use them, you get teleported back to the location you bound it to.”

“So Sollan would have set this to a specific location?”

Erin nodded, and Lance asked his follow up question.

“First of all... how do we know it will lead to his headquarters?”

Can we find out where it goes?

For all we know, it’s a trap.”

Erin shook her head. “I don’t think it’s a trap. We found it in pieces, right? Why would he do that if he didn’t want us to find it.”

Luca nodded, having been one of the individuals to recover a piece of the stone to begin. “It was locked behind at least three sets of wards and magical traps...”

Ysira shrugged. “That makes no difference. All mages are paranoid like that, he’s probably three steps ahead and already assumed you’d let your guard down and try to use it if you got past the traps to find it. If he really didn’t want you to find it, he’d have destroyed it completely.”

Erin frowned. “It *was* destroyed. These runes on here are insanely delicate. He probably saw me raiding the tower and smashed the stone, hid or sealed it away as fast as he could, then left. It was only because of those two I could fix it at all.”

Phanris and Velris graced the Leyguard with their reply. “*Chronomancy facilitated by the direct leyline connection. Do not expect us to repeat the same feat twice.*”

“See? Sollan wouldn’t factor in that we could repair the hearthstone.” Erin folded her arms. “He’s making his plans around *ME* coming after him, he doesn’t know or give a shit about any of you.”

Lance’s head whipped to face her. “Cut the ego, Langley. You might still think you’re a one-woman army but you never were. We all have reasons for trying to stop him so get in line.” But Erin only scoffed and raised her hands defensively. “Oh, I’m not saying *that!* I’m just saying I’m the known factor, we still have the element of surprise... he’s expecting someone who *thinks she’s a one-woman army...*” She looked at Lance from the corner of her eye. “He’s not expecting an *actual* army.”

The Sergeant stepped in, sensing tensions beginning to rise. “That still leaves us with the matter of whether we can even tell where this thing is bound to. Surely there has to be a way.”

Erin shrugged. “Nope, runes are too complex. We’d be here a month untangling them and we need to use this opportunity now.”

“Then who will go? I’m not risking my men walking into a death trap.” Lance said, watching Erin turn a bit pinker. “It’s not a death trap, I’m telling you! Look if you’re that worried I’ll go myself.” But Lance put his foot down. “You’re not going, Langley, that’s final. You’re still new here, and I trust you the least out of anyone else. You have yet to prove you can get your attitude in check.”

Lance gripped the edge of the table and bit his tongue. “But you’re right. Time is of the essence, we have a possibility to end this before it gets even worse.”

He turned.

“Gracewind?”

Luca turned around. “Me, sir?”

“You’re our scout. You got one part of this solved already. I trust you.”

Luca smiled, beaming, young and eager to prove himself, he saluted with the vigour of a fresh cadet. “Yes sir!”

Erin scoffed and wondered to herself if that was how Lance was expecting her to react to him, to awe at his status and the purpose the army brings. Un-fucking-likely.

She raised her hand, politely, and cleared her throat when after a minute or two Lance had not noticed.

Erin bit her tongue.

“*Sir*. If I may.”

Lance wondered if she would ever take this seriously, ever do this with genuine intent, but for now he still had patience. “You may.”

“I will create an *arcane tether* to Luca if he is to go through. I will be able to pull him back, just as I pulled you back from danger the last time. We can summon him to us immediately if anything is to go wrong.”

“Very well. Are there any other questions?”

The Sergeant breathed a sigh of relief.

Ysria glanced at everyone there.

The spellbreakers gave Erin an odd, creepy look.

Phanris and Velris kept to themselves.

The engineers declined to comment.

Lance took a knife and rammed it into the war table.

“Let’s catch this bastard.”

Part 2

Luca stood in the centre of a ritual circle, a great telemantic rune scribed by Erin, Phanris and Velris. The Spellbreakers added their wards to it to ensure that it would remain one way. A faint line of arcane energy emerged from Erin’s staff, wrapped around Luca’s shoulders, and then connected the other end of the tether to the summoning circle. Ysria stuffed some petals under Luca’s leather bag strap, just for good luck.

“Are we ready?” Lance asked.

“Yes sir.” Luca nodded.

“Yes.” Erin said. Lance looked at her, and Erin corrected. “.. sir.”

“We’ve got one good shot at this. You have one hour. On your mark.” Lance pointed at him.

Erin leaned over his shoulder and whispered the phrase he would need to speak, and then stood back.

“Three.

Two.

One..”

Reversus in domum...

Light swirled from the threads on the hearthstone, enshrouding Luca, sweeping him up... And then, he vanished.

Luca opened his eyes to find himself in an office.

It was a mad, chaotic space. Tens of cabinets had been stacked around the space, filled with correspondences and invoices and summons from almost every state imaginable.

He poured over one such letter. Written in Thalassian, it was a formal call to make a statement about his work in court, made with courteous respect for his position within the magisterium but lanced with thinly-veiled threats that such politeness would not be extended if matters were to worsen.

“The walls are closing in... damn right.” Luca said, spying the still-hot cup of coffee-vodka on the table. Sollan was not here but he had been, or would be here, soon.

But he wasn’t going to engage. Not alone. The Hearthstone was a one person only, one time only trick. Luca stuck to the mission. Infiltrate, investigate, exfiltrate.

The investigation began.

Wherever he was, Luca was in the absolute heart of this facility, and there was more security here than in any other location such that it would make the force of Blood Ravens he recruited hang their heads in shame. It seemed that every single mercenary corps and hired armies he could muster guarded this place. There was not a corridor he snuck through that did not have a platoon of Scarletwings marching down it, nor was there a single entrance not overlooked by the watchful lens of a Magi-Machinegun wielded by a member of the Lynx Claw Killers.

Luca knew how to stay hidden though. Forest or city, inside or outside, urban or rural, no matter the environment he stuck to the shadows, hid in people's blindspots, knew exactly how sensitive elven hearing is and exactly how to abuse it. An elf focusing on hearing a disturbance is able to hear from three times the distance as a human, but that only means they block just as many sounds out when they are tired and underpaid and believing they are safe and in danger.

Luca quickly made his way through this hidden facility, observing every corner, every face, every banner, the routes, the keys for what doors, the words for what wards.

But he still could not figure where they were.

The architecture was undeniably elven so there could be no confusion here as to whether this was another jagged tower situation. But he had no idea what part of the world, what nation, what continent even he was on. He was not even certain he was above ground. The whole place was built like a bunker, with Sollan's chamber in the absolute centre.

If he could just get to a window, he could read the stars and tell his approximate position by that, then review the landscape for further details.

Luca checked his watch. Time was closing in.

He continued, and Luca stopped and shrunk into the shadows as he heard a voice echo outwards through the walls... that voice... it had to be!

“Attention all facility staff.

You are called to an emergency meeting in the main hall.

Now!”

Luca saw swarms and swarms begin piling through the hallways. They groaned and complained. “What's this for now?” One tauren asked, squeezing his head under the doorframe and nearly brushing his huge hands against Luca inches away.

“Fucker's gone crazy again. Just gotta do what he says.” An orc replied.

“Will he even notice if one of us isn't there?” The tauren asked.

“He'll fucking well remember you, you big cunt. Come on.”

Luca remembered Erin's words well, and grinned.

Now where was that dress cupboard he saw a few halls back...

The main hall was filled with at least three hundred individuals, mostly elves but varying members of other Horde races too. They stood up in formation, in many long lines, and they watched and waited patiently to be released.

A flying disk hovered into the room.

And none other than Sollan stood on it.

“Everyone.

We have reached the endgame.”

Sollan stood and addressed the crowd, dressed in a mockery of a military uniform. Each and every man and woman there could tell he was losing it, by the jitteriness of his speech, by his ravings... was this truly a cause they wanted to support? Was this truly the future? Whether they were opportunists, fools or genuine believers, there was one thing that seemed certain. This was happening. And nothing could stop the march of progress.

“As we speak, the construction of my greatest invention yet progresses. This Final Gambit, the most powerful confluence of magic and technology that this world has ever seen, will be unleashed at *our* command!”

Luca, hidden in plain sight among a crowd of people who would never recognise him as a real member of Sollan’s security, anxiously watched the speech of a mad scientist, a mastermind hellbent on destroying the world as they knew it. Was that it? Was that this endgame? Was Sollan building an even stronger Magigun?

“The Alliance will shudder at its might.
The Horde will cower under its great shadow.
They will realise that wars are not waged with swords, or spells, or simple firearms.
Even as we speak the void encroaches upon Silvermoon and they cry out for salvation, and it is not in the Light they will find it!
Who will be their saviour?

Not the Vanguard!
Not the Factions!
Not the Heroes!

THEIR
SAVIOUR
WILL
BE
ME!

And all of you! Will be called on to ensure that this plan will come to fruition.
In the coming days, you will...”

Luca tried to squeeze out of the crowd, barely scraping past the tauren next to him, who spied him leave and snorted. He had to learn more about this while he still had time. Ten minutes left! Would that be enough? He traced his steps, out of the main hall, up the stairs, heart racing. He still didn’t even know where he was. But he remembered seeing two, impossibly huge runesteel doors. By the time he got to them, Luca had no time to even check his watch again. He quickly muttered the passphrase.

Obliviscere praeterita, amplecti futura.

He heard the whistling crackle of energy fading, and used all his might to push the doors open, and then squeeze through.

Luca made his way through dark walkways, across banded metal sheets and across chainlink bridges down into a massive room so tall he could barely see the ceiling. It was so dark each manalight he went past seemed a reprieve, only for him to be thrust back into darkness again. The air here was stale, somehow even more stale than in the main hall, and it felt abnormally cold.

Luca finally reached the ground level.

While everyone else was in the main hall listening to Sollan exposit his master plan, Luca had delved deep into his fortress to find what he was working on.

He held up a light and witnessed reflective metal plates... massive ones... a shell, as if made for something to fit inside it...

Luca craned his head up to see its full scale.

But he didn't see the top of the machine.

He saw it start to get lighter.

That wasn't a ceiling blocking out the moonlight.

The black cloud finally passed overhead.

It revealed a shattered sky.

With two moons.

And worlds burning in the distant cosmos.

Luca breathed a ragged breath.

His watch started to ring.

"It's been an hour. Pull him back." Lance ordered.

Erin nodded and began to cast her magic, physically tugging on the thread, Luca's lifeline, to bring him back. Ysria and the engineers watched with bated breath. Erin kept pulling and pulling, but no matter how she tried she made no progress.

"Langley! What's going on! Is the spell not working?"

"It *should!*" Erin said. Lance put his hands on the thread and pulled with her but even his might could not get it to budge. "Why wouldn't it work! Did you cast it wrong?"

"I did it perfectly! I don't make mistakes!

The spell should work, it can summon you back no matter where on the planet you are. Even if you're all the way underground you'd be fine, and I've accounted for wards."

Lance looked at her with the most serious, intense stare she'd seen.

"What if he's not on this planet?"

Luca ran through the hallways, checking his watch.

It had been an hour! Why hadn't they summoned him back yet?

He needed to get away, he needed to find some way back!

He panicked, he stopped sticking to the shadows, he-

He bumped into someone.

A tauren and an orc looked down on him.

"Say... I've never seen this kid before. Have you?"

"No I haven't. You don't look like one of the architects. Show us your identification!"

"I... I...!" Luca looked around, terrified as the walls closed in on him.

Luca had wondered for a long time how he'd die.
Beaten by his father,
His head split in half by a Warsong axe,
Crushed, trapped or maimed and left to expire,

But this one certainly wasn't on his list.
Of all the places,
Outland was the one he had expected the least.

Part 3

Lance grit his teeth. He had never felt more powerless in his life; his men, trapped a million miles away on that light-forsaken planet, a living hell, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Nothing he could do himself, perhaps. He was not called Lionguard for nothing. He would show courage!

"Langley, keep a hold of that tether on him and don't let go. Phanris, Velris, get the fuck over here and help her! Use the damn leyline to help if you need to."

Erin wound her arm around the arcane tether tightly, feeling a powerful resistance that threatened to snap it in half. "Come on...!"

Luca watched as he stared down the barrels of two MagiGuns, mere moments away from being glassed. "This is- it's all a misunderstanding!"

"Doesn't look that way to us! Can't prove who you are? You're dead meat!"

Luca closed his eyes as the orc pulled the trigger on him.

Magic spiralled up the barrel and outwards...

"We don't have the time...!" Erin grit her teeth. "Fuck it!"

Instead of holding onto the Arcane Tether and keeping it in place, Erin yanked it to the side and sent vibrations rushing through it!

"Langley!" Lance shouted. "What are you doing!"

Luca saw the muzzle flash,

He blinked,

And then he was outside, back in the facility hallway. He checked himself quickly and counted all his lucky stars before rushing back off!

Lance stormed over. "Explain yourself! You were meant to wait for support!"

"It wasn't going to work!" Erin shouted a reply. "Wherever he is, I need to buy him more time to get out of there safe! I'm not strong enough to teleport him all the way back here, but I can teleport him somewhere close to where he was."

"And do you have any control over what this does? How do you know you aren't sending him into a wall, or into even more danger!"

Erin looked as Phanris and Velris continued to work on modifying the runework around them to bring Luca back. "Telemancy is my life. I know I can do it."

Luca rushed through the hallways, only to hear Sollan's voice projected through the air.

“It has been reported that there is an intruder! You have your orders! Kill on sight!”

A swarm of guards came towards him, they aimed their weapons at him and fired, and in the next moment Luca blinked again and found himself back in the main hall! Every few seconds the arcane tether vibrated, sending ripples through spacetime, adjusting his position from one place to the next. He was in the main hall, surrounded by Sollan’s security who seemed just as surprised as he was, next in the armoury, he grabbed a Magigun while he had the chance and held it tight, he blinked again and fell to his knees and emptied the contents of his stomach. Luca held onto a railing and stumbled down a set of stairs, but as he blinked again he lost his grip and fell meters to the ground, his weapon skittered away...

Lance gripped Erin’s hands tightly. “This was not the plan!”

Erin winced, feeling Lance’s hand crushing her fingers. “Stop...! I’m buying us time!”

“You’re gambling with his life!”

“Commander.”

“What now?”

Phanris and Velris quietly approached him.

“It is impossible to remediate the rune without first ending Langley’s arcane tether.”

“And if we do that, we lose him?”

“Affirmative.”

Luca scrambled to pick the gun up, his head spinning, his knees weak.

A guard came towards him through the hallway and saw the intruder in his sights.

They both aimed, and pulled the trigger.

Erin held her hand up and cast her own spell, blood rocketing from her nose as she did so, in order to yank Lance’s hand away for one single moment. In this moment, she sent one more vibration hurtling down through the tether.

Luca was still alive. Somehow. Barely.

His whole body was shaking. He’d have vomited again if he had anything left in his stomach.

He dropped the MagiGun, and fell at his knees.

There was no body.

Just a sheet of crystals, and dust falling from the sky.

Lance yanked the tether out of Erin’s hands. “We get him back... and then you are done, Langley.”

“Fine! But if you think you can do it your way, go right ahead. I’m doing what I need to to buy Luca time to escape...”

“And I’m making sure you don’t get him killed for your own pride...”

A hand waved in between them. It was Ysria’s.

“I have a solution.”

She held her hand out. “Give me the tether.”

Lance frowned. “Explain yourself.”

“Commander, Erin. Your efforts here reminded me of myself, many lifetimes ago.

I didn’t want to risk it... because it is risky... but I believe I may be able to provide you with the power you need. With the twins, and Erin, we can all get him back.”

“So you’re a mage now?”

Ysria gave a polite smile. “I was, long, long ago.”

“It’s the best shot we have now, and you’ve asked us all rather than just deciding it for yourself. We’ll take it.”

Ysria put her hands around the tether and wrapped it around every finger of both hands, down her wrist, down to her elbows.

Phanris and Velris put a hand on her shoulder.

Erin put a hand on her back.

Luca barely had the strength to stand.

His head was splitting, and he could barely take another teleportation.

His legs carried him as far as they could.

He heard the clattering boots before him, behind him.

There was nowhere left to run.

No shadow left to hide in.

“It’s been a good run, Commander.” He whispered to himself.

“I’m sorry it couldn’t be for longer.”

Luca fell to his knees.

And closed his eyes.

But he realised, even before he opened them

He heard a voice.

“Don’t apologise, private.” Lance said to him.

“You’re not dead yet.”

Note:

The following story is an upload of an in-game log exploring the events immediately after Luca's rescue. This one's too content-rich for me to condense into an actual story, so I've only minimally formatted it to preserve as much of the original dialogue as possible. It's not necessary for the overarching plot, but has some excellent character development moments. I hope you enjoy!

Bonus Story: Eye to Eye

Lance looks at Luca with a faint sigh of relief, "Are you alright?"

Ysria says: Mother Moon... thank you.

Luca says: C-commander...

Luca tries to stand up, but he's clearly weak... he can barely keep his own balance.

Lance rests a hand on Luca's shoulder and nods, "Rest..." he looks at Ysria, "Good job..."

When you have a moment check Luca for injuries..." his eyes dart to Erin, "My office..." he frowns.

Ysria nods. "I will. Thank you, Commander."

Phanris and Velris both leave without a word, their duties completed.

Luca says: C-commander, wait... Before... I have to relay... my report...

Lance looks at Luca, "Does it relate to an immediate threat?"

Luca says: I know what Sollan's plan is...

Lance nods, "Very well... we will hold a debrief shortly with everyone present... Let Ysria check you first." He looks around for the Sergeant, "Sergeant"

Sergeant Stonebridge says: Aye, sir?

Lance looks at Stonebridge, "Gather the men for a debrief in one hour" he nods.

Sergeant Stonebridge salutes. "Aye, sir. After that, I think we shall certainly need one... and The Leymaster too, when you have time."

Lance nods with a salute and goes to his office.

Erin frowns and holds her chin high as she goes in. It's no different than dealing with a magister, she thinks to herself.

Ysria says: Erin?

Erin looks at her.

Ysria says: You'll be fine. I can bake you some cupcakes after?

Erin offers her a quick, polite smile. "Thanks."

Erin says: I'm here.

Lance sighs as he rests his hands on the table and looks at Erin, "I know there is little point in engaging in proper respect or hierarchy with you... It seems you are entirely reckless... egotistical and have a severe issue with authority..." he frowns, "Your actions were negligent... dangerous... reckless and without consideration for the lives of those in your team... Your claim of 'mastery' over your magic as an explanation as to why gambling with others lives is a valid tactic is laughable...given you are by far the weakest mage who holds herself in the highest regard I have ever met..." He looks down at his table and shakes his head, "I'm surrounded by magic users with very little regard to life... or the consequences of their actions... who think them above others..." He looks at Erin, "So is there any point in me asking to explain yourself? Or shall I just have you removed from the Leyguard's employ?"

He frowns, seemingly, entirely done with Erin's shit. Her next move will determine his direction.

Erin has had the time to collate her thoughts now, and thank the Stars for that... without it, she might have gone nuclear and burned all her bridges here and now. "I understand it was a risk... but Luca was in an incredibly dangerous situation, and we had very little time to debate on what was the better option. I agree your plan was better at the start, and it worked for an hour... but the situation changed. Could I have predicted that Sollan's base was on Outland? Maybe, if I was a psychic. But *everything* was pointing to it being in Silvermoon... this plan would have worked if that was the case, but because of that one percent chance he was on Outland instead it didn't, and I did everything within my ability to buy Luca time and to try and get him out of harm's way so that the others could work a solution. I know you think I'm an egotist... respectfully, sir, I have spent my entire life having people tell me my limits... I know what I am capable of, and it did buy us time... and I passed the reins to Ysria as soon as she was the better solution. I did not fight you on that."

Lance shakes his head, "You got lucky... do not mistake that for tactical genius..." he looks at Erin, "How did you know Luca wasn't holding out in a hiding spot? And teleporting him would put him in danger? Even if we accept you wouldn't teleport him into a wall... You were blind... Puppeteering a man's life... A decision made on your own..." he frowns. "I don't care if people have told you that you have limits... If you wish to prove yourself then do it properly... Or if you wish to push yourself to your absolute limit then you can do so WITHOUT risking others lives..." he sighs as he looks at Erin curiously, "What if you had failed? Out of curiosity... What if your actions directly lead to Luca's demise? Would you be able to handle that? Accept that?"

Erin says: You remember what happened on Outland. I recall every single person that dies because I wasn't good enough to save them. Olivia died because of *me*... and I couldn't let Luca go the same way on that damn planet... So if I had made the wrong call, if I couldn't save Luca? I do not think you would appreciate the thoughts I am having, sir. They are not appropriate for a professional environment.

Lance gestures, "No please... go on... Tell me... If your actions decided by yourself had lead to Luca's death... How would you deal with that?"

Erin says: I would find the balcony outside the tower where the sniper was perched over the entrance... and swiftly embrace the gravitational equation.

Lance slams a hand onto the table and points at Erin intently, "And THAT... is why the decisions regarding people's lives are NOT YOURS..." he stands up straight, "There is a reason I am in command... and you are not... It is because you do not understand what 'command' is... what it means..." he frowns, "You think it's all about just barking orders and controlling people... But it's far more than that..." he rests his hands on the table and looks at Erin, "It's realising the gravity of the situation when peoples lives are in your hands... It's being able to save people... and lose people... without faltering... It's the ability to carry the weight of the death of your men on your shoulders and KEEP MOVING FORWARD..." he frowns, "THAT is what people expect of me... THAT is why the chain of command exists... and THAT is why without it... the team would fail..." he frowns.

"The burden of decisions... and the cost... falls to me and me alone..." he looks at Erin,
"Because you... cannot handle it... and you... are not expected to handle it..."

Erin takes a breath, and turns her head and finds an uncontrollable smile come across her face. It's hilarious, really... that wasn't the right answer? She's NEVER going to convince him... in fact, it really only solidifies her opinion of him as authority, no matter what you can't please them... he did not call her here to have a discussion, to understand her reasoning, he did not even call her in here to chastise her... he came here to prop himself up, to reinstate his own superiority, because that was the problem here. Erin undermined him. It was not her intention, of course, all she cared about was saving Luca... but Erin had proven that Lance could be defied and that was a problem that needed to be corrected. Even Alaina was never like this, not in any of the times Erin had worked with her. Nor had Aerilyn been. More and more, Lance reminded her of the mercenary captains and 'archaeologists' and caravan owners that dominated her early twenties. But there's no point in arguing, there's no point in having a good faith discussion. There is no possible outcome where continuing to talk would ever be beneficial. So she makes a tactical decision. She closes her lips. And unfolds her arms. And she speaks.

"Sir. I understand your point now, thank you. I would like to continue serving under your command, and I promise this incident will not occur again."

Lance looks at Erin, "What is my point?"

Erin says: Your point is that I made a risky decision guided by emotion, rather than by logic, and that I would have been better suited to stick to the plan. Ysria's idea was better because... she made a calculated decision that she discussed with the team first.

Lance looks at Erin, "If Ysira had failed... That would have been my call... and my fault... and if you had asked... and failed... again... my responsibility..."

Erin says: "Because you are willing to bear the responsibility of command?"

Lance looks at Erin, "Because I am able to..." he peers at Erin, "Would you like command?"

Erin says: No.

Lance says: Why?

Erin raises her hand. "May I ask you a question, sir. It is relevant."

Lance grimaces at the obvious tone, "You may."

Erin says: Have you ever fought with Alaina?

Lance raises an eyebrow, "Lula's wife?" he ponders, "Yes... we fought near Stromgarde together... She was an excellent soldier..." he nods.

Erin says: I have too, a lot of times. One was at a town in the Hinterlands called Eagleroost... it was attacked by the Void. We did everything we could, everything possible... but Alaina wasn't able to save one child. And she puts the blame solely on herself. It crushed her. I've never seen her broken like this. Not firsthand.

Lance nods..

Erin says: I think there are some people who are built to handle that, Sir. I am not one of those people. She's so much stronger than me... if I was in that position... I do not think I would have been able to carry on.

Lance looks at Erin, "Do you think Alaina suited for command?"

Erin says: I've got no doubt she is.

Lance shakes his head, "I do not"

Erin says: Is it because she's reckless, too?

Lance ponders, "She is... but that is not the issue... It is because she radiates hope..." he nods, "She could bolster a squadron... Be a flag carrier that could rally the men to 'glory'... without a doubt..." he nods, "But could she be the one to command a battalion... end up having hundreds of men die due to her decisions... and still stay the same and do the same again?" he shakes his head, "The burden of command is not for those who seek glory... it is for those willing to do what needs to be done... and make the hard decisions... even if the cost is life..."

Erin bites her lip and nods. "Yeah, that's right. Leave the big moments to Alaina... I don't like the idea of something dulling her shine."

Lance looks at Erin, "Given that... She followed my command without issue... and she is a far greater fighter than you are... so I am curious... if no ego... what drives this... anti-authority?" he gestures at Erin, "Do you wish to duel me? Test my skills to see if I'm worthy of following? Because you clearly don't respect experience... Nor knowledge... So maybe strength? What...?"

Erin takes a breath. She thought she had managed to change the subject... "I don't, Lance... you'd crush me within two seconds." She looks and tries to appraise him. What sort of manner is Lance asking in, what is his general demeanour, is he combative, is he tired, is he high strung, is he letting his guard down? Is he at his wit's end, maybe, is he leveling with her genuinely?

Lance seems tired, genuinely curious. It should be obvious by now that if he didn't hold any semblance of fondness for Erin, either due to Lula or Alaina, he would have had to have the spellbreakers throw her out into the cold for dissent and not waste his time with this. But his patience is wearing thin however, and he is struggling to find a reason to keep her around. Her dissent is not worth the loss of unit cohesion.

Erin purses her lips. It's time to come clean. Had she misjudged him? She'd have to wait and see. She takes Violetspire off and blinks it somewhere else to recharge. "I'm not good with taking orders. I guess I've been working on my own for so long I've had to get used to trusting my instincts. I can have Alaina, or Lula, or even Apples on my side... but that's different than this. And I'm not used to passing off responsibility of the situation onto someone else. I've been training myself -not- to do that, actually. So I'm sorry, I'm working against what I've been doing for a couple years and I guess it's a bit of a culture shock." She clears her throat. "Besides, it doesn't help that Phanris and Velris are... complete dickheads... Ysria's alright though."

Lance nods faintly, "Phanris and Velris are on thin ice... Their skills are great... But I will not tolerate dissent... As you saw in our last debriefing..." he nods, "Ysira is far from military material... Her manners would get her thrown out of bootcamp... However she knows how to respect the chain of command..." he nods, "It is not just for my benefit... While you may get nothing from a commander... many people find solace and safety in unit cohesion... Luca... the engineers... They are not fighters... They rely on a strong leader to look after them.... direct them... and keep them safe..." he looks at Erin, "And regardless of whether you think you need that or not... every time you... or those two other mages disregard my command... you hurt unit cohesion... which shakes the confidence in the ranks..." he nods as he rubs her

temple, "You have no military training... I do not expect you to act like the sergeant... But speak to Ysira and ask her how to function under command... Follow her lead... I think that's the best either of us can hope for here..."

Erin nods. It's in her best interests too that this unit is strong enough to face Sollan too, of course. It's just taking her a bit of time for her to realise that she's part of this team too... and wasn't that what she wanted this whole time anyway? For other people to care? For other people to have a vested interest in taking him down? Not just on request like Lula and Alaina, but people who are willing to put down everything to prevent this horrible future from coming to pass. "Thanks. I was a bit worried you were going to make me salute you."

Lance shakes his head, "Saluting is military..." he nods, "Just work on the respect and tone... at least in front of the others..." he rests a hand on the table, "And no more decisions without asking me or the sergeant... unless you are absolutely unable to reach us and have no choice that to use your own initiative"

Erin nods. "Okay." She checks her watch. "It's been an hour. Shall we check with the Sergeant? He was going to pull us in for a meeting."

Lance nods, "Dismissed"

A Lifetime Ago

The Jagged Tower was a bleak, cold place.

And that was not just owed to the howling gales which would rush through its glacial halls carved through an enchanted ice shelf, but by the lack of character.

Sollan's headquarters here had been stolen from its previous draconic owners, but it seemed neither groups had made much effort to make this place a home.

Nor did the Leyguard, it seemed. They were here for war, for all intents and purposes.

But Erin found a few of the people making this place a little warmer day by day.

Just like when Ysria came and delivered a freshly baked cupcake to her, and set it on her desk.

Erin snorted. "You didn't *actually* have to make me some. I thought it was just motivational."

"It is motivational, and it worked. You survived the tyranny of the Commander after all."

Erin shrugged. "Yeah. He got pretty tilted... but, I guess he has a point."

"Finally coming around to seeing this his way?"

"More like coming around to see it the way I should have been." Erin was still reluctant to throw herself headlong into the soldier's life, but she had realised that her actions were incongruous with her own ideals. Sollan must go, at all costs. Petty bitching about authority should have been much lower on her list of priorities.

"Ah, that's how they get you." Ysria snickered. "But this is how *I* get you, and it's getting cold so don't let it be for nothing."

Erin unwrapped the cupcake from its paper case and stuffed the whole thing in at once, and felt her lips rise from the sweetness of its sugar icing and the light pillowy texture of the cake. Erin never denied that she loved sweet things, from strawberries to chocolate to little fondants that really ruined her diet. But for a moment she forgot the stress, and the worry, and it was lovely.

She wiped her lips. "Just like my dad makes." She said.

"Being likened to family baking? That's just about the best compliment I've ever had." Ysria said. "And now you've fallen into my trap." She feigned a maniacal, evil laugh and demanded her prize. "Go on then. Tell me, what made you join if you hate authority so much? It's not the first time I've seen you argue with the Commander and not even The Twins draw his ire like you do."

"Sollan has to go." Erin said, plainly and openly. "He's a menace and MagiGuns will destroy the world. I'm willing to put aside my personal grievances with Lance for this. What about you?"

"To stop you sprouts from killing us all. Mages already have it once on their record, don't need to let them win another point."

"Hey, it wasn't us that did the Sundering, that was *your* lot. Weren't you a mage?"

"And why do you think I've learned how to hate them so? We might have blown up the world once ten thousand years ago but we never had the Dark Titan himself land a blow.

I'll tell you, when I saw that Sword coming down... I really thought it was over."

"I didn't see it at all." Erin shrugged. "Was too busy on Outland trying to stop *that* planet from tearing itself apart."

"Why do you do it?" Ysria asked. "Why do you put this much weight on your shoulders?"

"It's my responsibility. I have a friend to who told me, it is the duty of people who have the power and the opportunity to help others to do so. And I look around me at the world, and I think, well the Kirin Tor aren't doing anything - definitely not any more. The rich aren't doing anything. The factions aren't doing anything. Most magic users are greedy or self serving or weak. And I was weak but, I don't think I can count as that any more? So I have to help."

"Who said you have to do it alone?" Ysria asked.

"No one. It's just that I've never had that much help before I suppose. And some of the people I thought I could trust fell through."

Ysria sighed dotingly. She thought, because she wanted to help Erin, that telling it to her straight would not work. Erin was smart. Maybe a story would work.

"Now, back in my day..."

"Oh *here* we go." Erin snorted.

"Don't give me that, I'm your elder so be glad that I'm talking to you and not taking a nap.

Now back in my day,

I lived many lives.

I would change hats, oh, every five hundred years or so?

I tended to generations of Nightsabers in one life.

The next, I believe I took up fishing.

In one much later in I learned the art of smithing,

A cobbler, the one before."

Erin chuckled. "I bet that one was a hit."

"Shush!" Ysria put a finger over Erin's mouth.

"Then I think I did alchemy in one..."

I became a mother, and onwards a grandmother.

I've lived,

Loved,

Celebrated,

Mourned,

Owned a bakery in Hyjal,

And countless more that I will not bore you with.

And you, Erin, with your short and precious time.

You may think you must do everything all at once.

But you will also wear many hats.

And you will not always be this."

Erin thought about it, and said, "but I will always have magic. I'll always be a mage."

"Do you have to? Have you ever thought about living without it?"

"Never. Not seriously."

"Do you even like it? If it puts this much responsibility on you?"

Erin found she could not answer.

Ysria dragged her close and said,

"Your life can always start again, whenever you want it to.

The future is not set in stone.

And until then, please know, you are never alone."

The Leymaster

Lance awoke to find himself floating down onto a great runed stone ring amid a sea of stars. There was no air here, no subtle current. There was no warmth or cold.

In fact, there was no sun or moon at all.

Space felt different. As Lance landed, each movement was slow as if he were caught in molasses, but once he willed himself to move he found that he could do so easily with little to no resistance even from gravity.

This strange realm did not seem to exist on Azeroth at all, and yet it was for one purpose he came here. It was not to dream. It was for duty.

He stood up straight and saluted the night sky.

"Leymaster... I have a report..."

The stars moved above him, swirling into a constellation. Piercing eyes gazed down upon Lance, and every word shook the fabric of this reality.

"Speak."

"We now know Sollan's base location appears to be a place in North East Terrokar in Outland. We estimate his contingency count to be at least three hundred men, fortified with turrets assumed to be magical. We have also discovered that he is creating some sort of object which we believe to potentially be a bomb, hailed by him as 'The Greatest Magigun'. Some of our team believe his next move will be to use this weapon as a show of force to trigger a revolution... with him at the forefront."

"The folly of mages is clear... and cyclical..." spoke the voice in the sky.

The Leymaster's words echoed, reverberating through Lance's essence.

It was not deep and tonal as much as it was guttural, primal, and the words almost had physical weight, their gravity a pressure upon Lance's shoulders.

"Do you have a plan to prevent this terrible outcome?" It spoke.

Lance shook his head.

"Not at this moment. I will require time to create a plan. Our team is effective, but attacking such a fortification would be exceptionally dangerous even if we were to use subterfuge."

Lance stepped forwards, even though in this place distance made no difference for whether the other could hear. "Another option is to simply erase the entire fortress...if that is within your power..."

A low, rumbling passes across the entire plane... rattling the very stars... It almost sounded like a laugh.

"Would you have me eradicate the Horde in its entirety, 'if it is within my power'?"

"I would. But if that was in your power then you would not have needed to create the Leyguard in the first place."

"It would simply... Not send the correct message..."

"The correct message being?" Lance asked, as he tried to figure out what it was himself.

"Magic is not the solution. The mortal races have a reliance on magic that borders on addiction... they cannot function without it, but they must learn to on their own.

If I were to destroy Sollan and his MagiGun empire, it would only show that Magic is the prime superior..."

"I understand," said Lance, and there was no need for what The Leymaster meant to be spelled out clearly for him, "and there is a reason why we have our own mages. Unfortunately the best counter to magic at this time is more magic. However I will attempt to retrieve Sollan and dismantle this weapon without it."

Lance then asked something he had wondered for some time.

"What is your ultimate goal in regards to this man?"

The Leymaster spoke with gravity, once more. "To make an example of him."

"How so?"

"You will learn in due time. You cannot see the whole picture."

"You wish him taken alive?" Lance then asked.

"He will be taken alive."

"Very well.," Lance saluted, "if that is all"

The Leymaster had one final thing to say to him.

"Sollan will not wait for you to come to him before he is ready to unleash that weapon."

I am aware of the urgency," Lance petitioned, "but what you are asking is us to potentially siege a fortress with a small team or figure out how to make spies of us all. I will do it, but I will not risk my team in haste..."

"I called upon the most talented young Commander the Alliance had to offer. You **will** succeed, for the world will plunge into chaos if you do not."

"Understood..."

The Leymaster blinked once, and set Lance hurtling back into the abyss.

He woke up with a start at the desk in his office, and saw that no time had seemed to pass at all.

Note:

This one's another uploaded in-game log, which helps flesh out some of the side characters but again isn't necessary for the whole story. Please enjoy!

Bonus Story: Off-Duty

When Erin knocked on the door of Lance's office and asked if he was busy, she was rather expecting him to be excited for her idea. After all, unity between the members of the Leyguard was something he had been hoping to improve.

That conversation went a little like this.

"What can I help you with?"

"Getting you out of your office. Luca, I and Ysria were thinking of going somewhere... call it a teambuilding exercise, if you want. I know we haven't got much time but it's not like we're going to Outland tonight, so..."

"I don't recall sanctioning leave in the middle of an active mission?"

"That's why we're getting permission first."

"Is this your way of asking permission?"

"Yeah, but even if we didn't we weren't going to go without you anyway. That would be really rude."

Lance was slightly amused... but only slightly. "Hm... Well either way... Permission denied... We have to be focused on the task at hand... And I'll need everyone's input when the time comes... I can't afford them to be distracted now."

"Alright then. Am I dismissed?"

"Don't know if... I'm allowed to just, leave."

"The room."

"If that was all."

"Yeah."

And then about fifteen minutes after Erin had left, there was another knock on the door.

"Enter." Lance said. And Ysria came in straight away.

"Commander, why don't you want to spend time with us? Is it because I'm old, decrepit, and turning to dust as we speak? Would you think I'm a bore? I'm deeply hurt by the suggestion, I truly am."

"I refused leave... That is all... There is a mess area for you all to gather."

Ysria was relentless. Terrifying, even. And Lance could see that any enemies she made would be in dire straits with them in her sights. "Well will you come and meet us there then? It's not healthy for you to spend so much time inside your room. There could be mold growing here for all you know."

As our team medic, I formally request that you come in, and take off that breastplate for once... we're on a mission but we're not in battle."

Then Lance planted his palms on the table and stood up.

"Fine... though I'm not being caught off guard without armour..."

"You're not off guard. I've no doubt that you're the strongest of all of us, armour or not."

Still. I think it should help. I'm not sure if you've noticed, but both Erin and Luca lionise you in different ways... if you can ignore the pun."

"They what?"

"Erin sees you as a piece of wrought iron, and Luca sees you like a statue. It would do them well to see you humanised a bit?"

"I don't think that would help command... People want to feel safe under the watch of someone they feel is strong and stalwart... They do not need a friend... They need a commander..."

"Is it so impossible to be both? Some of my greatest friends were the Sentinel Captains I served under in ... oh, what was it. My third Lifetime?"

"I will yield to your millennia of experience in this matter..." Lance shrugged.

"I'm glad. What else is an old lady like me good for?"

Come, then. I'll see you in the Mess soon, Commander?"

The men seem to think you're good for cupcakes... Where did you even get those?"

"Oh, I found some ingredients in the pantry. Not ours. From the last 'occupiers'."

"You're feeding our men food from a hostile pantry? Did you at least test it?"

"Of course! I'd know if it was spoiled or rotten or poisoned, after all. The Cenarion Way is a path to abilities many consider unconventional..."

He gave a faint smirk and said, "Mmmm I'm sure they do...", before joining them at the mess hall.

Erin was gobsmacked to see Lance budge and join them, seeing him stride through the door. Ysria's face was stricken with confidence and subtle pride as she sat down. Luca was stunned, and stammered out his rank and stood and saluted, but Lance would not have it and set him at ease.

Erin blinked away and summoned some drinks for them. Lance took hard water, Ysria moonberry juice, Luca took a glass of milk, and Erin cranked out a fizzy arcberry soda for herself.

"Are you serious?" Ysria asked, laughing.

"Maybe those Blood Ravens had some taste after all~"

Erin took a sip and then began the games.

"So, let's start this thing off. Truth or dare!"

"No!" Ysria interjected.

"Uhhmmm..." Luca wobbled.

"Awhh, why not?"

"I've played that one thousand six hundred and forty seven times in my life.

And it was never fun past the first." Ysria muttered, never skipping a chance to gloat about her age.

"Truth or Dare, let's start with... did you blow up the planet?" Erin sneered as she asked, leading to Ysria laughing and Luca rather awkwardly laughing along with them. Lance watched, stone-faced.

Ysria shrugged and said, "I'll take the dare then." And because Erin was mid sip, she spat out her soda and nearly choked on it. "HUH? You're kidding."

"I did say I was a mage once..."

"I knew you were old but... *that* old?" Luca asked.

"You sprouts really know how to compliment a lady!"

Yes, actually, I am.

And I know you see it often. Highborne Archmages, Archdruids who have somehow learned the Way for as long as Malfurion, Illidari born before their namesake...

Well, there may be more of us old folk than you'd think. I suppose once you past the four thousand mark, if life hasn't killed you yet it has no other way to surprise you."

"Yeah, sometimes it seems like every other Kaldorei I meet claims they're ten thousand years old." Erin said. "Dracthyr, too." Luca added.

"Well they've cheated. They slept through it all. Same as the men, actually." Ysria spat.

"But I lived it. I breathed it. For most things I stopped counting, admittedly. But playing Truth Or Dare? I hate it enough to count every time I've been pushed into playing, just like now!"

"If you played it over a thousand times, seems like you've enjoyed it more than most people." Erin grinned and held up her hand.

"I'd say that's a truth squeezed... Langley always gets her way one way or another~!"

"And thank Mother Moon for that..."

Erin threw down a point at the Commander. "Lance, you're up next."

He sighed longingly, surprised to have been embroiled in some child's game. He drank straight from his carafe and asked to tell the truth.

"Now with army guys," Erin prattled on, "I get that a lot of stuff is really depressing and kills the conversation real quick. So I'm going to try avoid that. And of course, spicy is crossed out because we're still at 'work'. So, instead, give us some fun facts about your life! Like, do you have hobbies?"

"No." He said bluntly.

Ysria added to the jest. "He works for fun." But Luca was the first to his defence. "Serving the Alliance isn't a hobby. It's a sacrifice." Erin knew that Luca had a thing for the Commander no matter how much he may try to hide it, but did he have to be so exceedingly suck-up-ish to him about it?

Lance seemed to agree with the both of them, and said "I have my duty."

But Erin wouldn't let it go. Langley always gets her way! "Come on. You have to have something you do in your spare time! Between campaigns or, when you're kept up awake at night or something like that? You seem like a whittling sort of guy to me."

"I maintain my equipment and take care of my hygiene in my down time."

"Is that where your long, luscious, flowing locks come from?" Erin asked, and to her surprise, Lance agreed! She pressed him. "Some would call that prince charming, you know."

"Lance isn't a prince, he's a King..." Luca interjected.

Lance looked to him and said, "Lance is a Commander", forcing Luca to scramble so that they may never have a disagreement. "Of course, but what is a King if not the Commander of a nation?"

And that answer seemed good enough. "That's one way of looking at it."

"Alright! Let's squeeze in one more... hm, Luca! Truth or dare!"

"Truth is the... only appropriate thing I think?"

"Great. What's your backstory? How'd you get into scouting?"

"The Leyguard is where I started..."

"Huh. Really? I didn't know it hired people without experience."

"Oh I've... got experience..." Lula mumbled, and maybe Erin was too dumb to notice the signs of impending doom.

"Oh, just not in any official capacity, or...?"

"The Leyguard was looking for someone who was good at hiding, moving fast, and noting details... and uhm... well, when you... when your dad is chasing you around the house

threatening to... uhm, with a belt, you learn all those things pretty quickly... how to stay out of view... how to get out quick... where the exits are..."

The room went silent. Ysria was the first to speak up.

"Poor child... I'm sorry..."

"Damn... is he still around, or...?"

"Mhm..."

Part of me is glad Sollan wasn't in Silvermoon or... might've run into him."

Luca evidently didn't want to talk about it much, and quite understandably so. He was eager to change the subject. "Uhm... when are we going to Outland again, sir?"

"When I have plan in place."

"Is there anything you'd like us to be working on in the meantime?"

Lance thought on it for a moment. "If any of you have any ideas... I'd like to hear them at the next daily meeting."

"I've got some ideas brewing, don't worry." Ysria said.

"How to not get evaporated by a Nethergale for one..." Erin added. "Two, how to not get stuck on Outland considering the Leylines are fucked... three, how to not be crushed by a meteor, tumble off into the abyss because of the ground falling out from under you, being eviscerated by demons, slaughtered by fel orcs, bones picked apart by arrakoa... oh sorry, you said next meeting didn't you?"

It seemed Langle did always get her way, if that way was killing her own fun.

"Game's over, then?" Ysria asked.

"Yeah, think so. Getting late." Erin said.

"Is it? I can never tell what the time is here. It's so white.

"I think that's because we're in the time of year where it's eternally light outside."

"Really? Are we that far north?"

"Pretty close to the pole, yeah."

"If we're north of northrend then what's south of Southrend then? I mean, the southernmost..." Luca muttered.

"Well, Unga Ingoo is the Southernmost Point of charted territory... a hozen island, if you'll believe it, right at the bottom of Pandaria. Sailing beyond that? No idea. Conveniently Titan maps never seem to show landmasses we aren't aware of. Maybe they try not to spoil the surprise for us or something..." Erin conjured an emery board and filed her nails...

"Some say Azshara's empire stretched to all the corners of the world..." Ysria noted.

"... some say? Didn't you... just... say you were there?" Luca asked.

"I'm part of 'some', aren't I? Besides, that was the world. If it wasn't in the empire, it wasn't the world. And, well, of course, there were the Troll lands but we allowed them to be there because we couldn't be bothered slaughtering them all.

Sorry, Commander. We could have saved you all some fuss."

"Well there's a reason the elves follow us now... We'll get things done, don't worry..."

"But do we follow you, or are we more like caretakers making sure you don't all blow yourselves up? I'll leave that for you to decide."

Lance smirked. "You could even stop your own tree being blown up, simmer down...' though he doesn't say that.

"Well I shall turn in... Meeting at 0900 tomorrow..." Lance slapped his knees.

"A diurnal schedule... how cruel, for a woman of such a venerable age as I... how cruel..."

Ysria snorted, and finished her glass. "I'll see you all there."

"Okay, commander, thanks for joining us... it was fun." Luca smiled.

Erin grinned. "We'll drag Phanris and Velris in next time.."

"Could you imagine?" Ysria shook her head.

"As you were..." Lance said, and took his leave.

The End Lies Ahead

The entire Leyguard stood for Lance as he came into the war room.

The Spellbreakers held their shields and gave a stoic salute.

Sergeant Stonebridge stood with his head held high.

Even Phanris and Velris gave him their attention,

While the engineers ceased their chatting and remained silent for his approach.

Luca gazed at his Commander, ever at awe,

And Ysria took the tray of cupcakes from the table to set it clean.

Even Erin, briefly, gave him a quick *sir*.

Lance approached the desk, and his voice boomed with clarity and command.

"Today will be the day we stop Sollen.

We will be going into the heart of hostile territory.

If possible, we will extract him.

If not, we will end him.

This will be no easy feat.

If anyone has any suggestions on how to achieve this?

Speak now."

The entire Leyguard raised their hand.

"Very good."

An unfathomably icy wind scoured the glacial sheets in the deep north.

On this flattish plane no life could survive for long. There was no warmth, no movement, just a bitter stillness.

Except for the roaming undead.

Yogg Saron's blood had spread to all corners of the continent, even to this frigid shelf, drawing restless corpses to bask in its power.

The Spellbreakers came to steal it.

They never bothered giving their names to the Leyguard. They weren't people, just weapons. But to the Leymaster, and to Lance, a bit of their history might have been

explored. Golarian and Enerys may not have been bound by blood but they had been, it seemed, by the red string of fate. After the Sunwell had fallen, these spellbreakers refused to be party to allowing the corruption of the fel take them, and in each war they fought they saw how each magic was just as destructive. The powers of death, the void, and yes... even the arcane too. They had trained to resist the pull of the unnatural, to restore the natural order where it had been disturbed, and they knew that this was-

Enerys' blade swept through a ghoul, bisecting it, black blood trailing from its guts.

Golarian crushed the skull of a skeleton under his boot.

They moved in perfect unison, two partners of the same dance, a sweep of steel across the battlefield.

When the abomination swung its cruel hook, Enerys stepped in and parried the thing up and high while Golarian moved in. The twinglaive sparkled in the moonlight and carved through the gore and sent its entrails flailing, but this had just been the distraction. The monster's cleaver came in and he parried it, and held his shield above his head to grant a stool from which the other could come, spring off it, and rend the undead's head from its body.

They slammed their shields down in unison and erected their ward, just as the bile and gasses bubbled and ignited to their breaking point, an explosion screamed outwards.

From the crater it formed, Enerys reached deep into the rubble.

Black veins shot into his head, maddening whispers.

Kill!

Kill!

Kill the mage!

Kill the enchanter!

Slaughter them!

Your heart sings for the torment.

Enerys wrapped his gauntlet around the stone and held it, showing it to Golarian.

Golarian nodded resolutely, and saw the sacrifice the other was making.

Because for Enerys?

There comes no resistance from Saronite for the living.

There is no overcoming the madness.

There will be no comfort for him.

The whispers would tear at his mind until the mission was done.

Hammers beat like tolling bells, driving nails into wood, and the sails were hoisted to the rigs. The motor was rusted and old, but a little elbow grease made it roar to life once more, spinning those great propellers to life. From the battlements, Commander Travers observed the culmination of years of repairs and finally found the inspiration to pen the letter he had been meaning to.

"Just like old times, isn't it Stonebridge?"

It's like it's been both only a day and an eternity since we stormed the gates of the Black

Temple. My life's been boring since compared to yours, and I can't lie, I'm just a little bit

jealous. It seems yet again you'll be fighting the good fight while I'm looking after the Hold.

Still, we all have our duties; and maybe mine is making sure you make the most impressive

entrance possible. We'll have the airship ready in no time, have no fear. We've been waiting for this!

Phanris and Velris silently gazed into a crystal ball, and saw its surface turn misty, and then clear once more. They saw through into a place fitted with flashing violet lights, beams of energy cascading through tubes, and one burning figure looking right back at them.

"We call upon our contract, Section Thirty Six - Z", the twins said in unison.

The figure on the other side then seemed to laugh. "Oh, mortals are so adorable... go on then, what would you request of me... and make it quick and simple, because I only have two cycles before I need to move location..."

"We require the power to harness a Nethergale, and pass through safely."

"What is it with mortals needing to get past Nethergales?" The figure sighed and tapped his metallic fingers upon a console that he was looking more at than them. "I'll see what I can do, but this will complete the terms and I'll have absolutely nothing to do with the either of you after. Do you agree to these terms?"

The Twin Sorcerers nodded. "We will meet you in Shattrath."

The orb went dark for them, and on the other side the figure seemed to sigh.

He gazed at a cube on his desk and traced his fingers along its edges.

"Rani... wherever you are... I will never forgive you for getting me involved in mortal business!"

She adjusted her goggles and gave a toothy grin, knowing that her idea would turn the tides. Working with The Leyguard was certainly more interesting than her other jobs, but that quick stint in the Undermine University of Ordnance had certainly paid off. It wasn't anything like a mana bomb, but studying MagiGun crystals had given her and her partner an idea. They were held at the precipice, the volatile point just before cascade failure, and all it needed was a push. To make sure Sollan's weapon never made it to Azeroth, the pieces they were welding together created the shell for a massive explosive... one that, in one fell swoop, could send half of his facility blasting out into the great dark and beyond.

Luca held on tightly to the feathers of his hippogryph and barely had the air in his lungs to scream. Ysria could only look back and laugh as they soared over the crystalline canopies of Terrokar, but made sure to comfort him with a hand on his shoulder.

"It won't be long 'till we're there, Luca! Just keep your head straight and don't look..."

Luca looked straight down, and his stomach began to gurgle. "I don't feel so..."

Ysria quickly opened up her bag and let him deposit the contents of his stomach inside. "It's a good thing you're a good scout. How have you never flown before? This bodes well for the airship."

"Don't blame me, I've been grounded all my life... literally and figuratively..."

He looked at Ysria with a worried glance. "Going back in there... you don't think it's a death sentence, do you?"

Ysria scoffed. "Look, you're my distant grandchild somewhere along the line so let me give you some advice, hm?"

Their hippogryph swooped down past the thorny ridges of the stalker den, and passed through cleanly enough to prove Ysria's coming point.

"You will live for a very, very long time. And all this worry is just because you're basically just a tiny little baby... but you'll get cranky if you focus on the past, and you'll be terrified if you

focus too much on the future. The trick is to focus on the right-now. And right-now, you're doing okay. Aren't you?"

Luca chuckled. "I guess, but right now I'm still worried about going back in there."

Ysria snorted. "It's only natural, I suppose. Alright. How about this. When this is all said and done, I'll take you and the Commander and everyone over to my place and I'll bake for you. How does that sound?"

Luca smiled and nodded. "That gives me something to look forward to. Thanks."

"It makes all the difference, doesn't it?"

The future doesn't have to be all bad. Not when there's a reason to fight."

"Are you certain you can't?

I need this!

I'll pay you anything. A hundred gold. A thousand!

Just don't-"

Sollan heard his Soundstone turn quiet, and screamed.

"HRAAAAAAAAAAGH!"

He threw it against the wall, and had turned his attention to the table before seeing it shatter to pieces. He scattered papers, upturned the whole thing, smashed his chair against the window...

There were no more allies he could call on, no further companies would lend him their men, he had no backup base to run and hide in... Sollan was like a feral animal, backed into a corner, with nothing left to lose.

But men who have nothing left to lose are sometimes the most terrifying.

Sollan grabbed a MagiGun from his drawer and loaded it with a crystal.

"I don't know how they got in here..."

And I don't care.

Langley,

Or whoever else,

The next person who appears in front of me,

I swear to the fucking Sunwell,

I will blast them into a million fucking pieces!

The Time Is Now!

Everything was in place, but the hourglass was running dry.

An airship loaded with a tonne of Raw Saronite sailed over Firewing Point, coming into view of Firewing Point. On the freshly erected battlements, eighteen anti-air MagiCannons turned their sights towards the sky vessel. The guards rushed to their positions, loaded the huge crystal arrays powering their station, and let loose a volley of surging arcane energy so great it could have levelled a city. But two Spellbreakers risked their sanity to harness the antimagic properties of the blood of an Old God, and as they raised their hands so too did a spherical shield raise itself around the hull of the ship. Those projectiles collided with the barrier and dispersed on contact, the force of the impact absorbed.

Sergeant Stonebridge saw the results and was pleased, steeling his resolve. "The field is working! Everyone else, report!"

Luca rushed towards the Sergeant, holding the map of the facility he had drawn up. "The weapon is on the northeast quadrant!"

Ysria infused each of her potions with natural energies, to restore both life and stamina, and called out. "All good here!"

Phanris and Velris did not reply, but the large Nether Antennae they had procured hummed with a strange sort of resonance, glowing as if it were ready to be unleashed at a moment's notice.

The Sergeant nodded, and then looked at the Engineers.

"And what about you two?"

"We've managed to insulate it against the Antimagic field, but as soon as we drop it, the shell will come off." They held up a remote. "And setting it off will be as easy as pressing the big red button."

"Let's hope it does not come to that. The threat will be enough."

They watched as the cannonfire struck their broadside endlessly, held back from destruction by The Spellbreakers. But how long could they hold?

Sollan's ears twitched as he heard the crackle of arcane energy form an instant before they arrived, remembering all too well the telltale sound She made when she teleported in.

He twisted around from the window and let a blast rip straight from the muzzle, but it would never hit its mark. Lance beat the blast aside with his shield and sent the shot flying, crashing through the wall and creating a hole large enough to fall out of... but he didn't stop there. He leapt over the table and slammed Sollan to the ground with his shoulder.

Sollan struggled and pointed his gun up, only for Lance to snatch his wrist and crush it until he dropped the weapon. Erin came around the other side and pointed the tip of her staff at him.

In a matter of moments, Sollan had been captured.

"I was... expecting Langley... but who the fuck are you?" Sollan asked, genuinely bewildered. "And how'd you get an airship?"

Lance threw the MagiGun across the room before getting to his feet, pulling Sollan up to his feet by his collar. "Commander Lionguard of the Alliance. I'm here to make sure your insanity and weapons of mass destruction don't end up in the hands of the Horde... or anyone."

Lance held Sollan up against the window and commanded him.

"This is going to go one of two ways. You tell your men to stand down and you leave with us our prisoner, or I kill you... and destroy this entire complex."

Through the window they could see the airship continue to stand stalwart against the constant rain of MagiCannon shots. It passed closer to the tower, now flying directly overhead, and Ysria waved them down from the edge to try to draw their attention. Soon, Lance's tuned buzzbox hailed him.

"You should... probably get that... ekhheh..." Sollan smirked, only to see a moment later

"Sir, an urgent report for you! We have a visual on Sollan's construction" the Sergeant said. From his vantage, the airship had a full view of the exterior yard of the facility, and they finally got a clear view of Sollan's Final Gambit, his greatest invention yet. The spherical object that Luca described was only one part of this great construction. Those metal plates had now been bound together, not by welded steel or by ropes and chains, but by magic. The height of it stretched nearly as tall as the one Sollan's office was in. It stood on two feet with two arms... both equipped with MagiGuns of titanic proportions. This was a reason Sollan needed to hide on Outland. It wasn't just to escape judgement; it was to have all the room he could get to make his Final Gambit.

"Sir... it's not a bomb, it's a golem. It's... a MagiMech!"

Erin looked over at Lance with a face of sheer horror. "It's a what?" Yet again, her nerve had been broken. But for Lance? He just scoffed, pointed his sword at Sollan.

"The bomb has legs. Choose your option.

Sollan held his hands up and looked at Erin with the most prideful grin she'd seen him with yet. "Come far from the Manadrinker, haven't I, Erin? You've got to admit... It's damn impressive... the Kirin Tor might have made the prototype... but I PERFECTED it."

"I've got nothing left to say to you..." Erin hissed, but that only drew his ire more.

"But you'll sic your guard dogs on me still, hm? Realised you couldn't do this without help, again? Realised that you're a FAILURE?"

Lance kicked Sollan with the sole of his boot, sending him to the ground again. "Sergeant... Stand by to release the nethergale. Last chance before I drive this sword through you and level this place..."

Sollan held his hands up and grinned. "Alright... I'm coming... I'm coming... I've had my fun... I just wanted to impress her one last time..."

The buzzbox crackled. "C-commander? Could you repeat that?" A static hiss began to release from the buzzbox, as well as... whispers? A dark-blue glow began to shine through the window.

Lance chucked some cuffs at Erin and told her to slap them on Sollan while he tried to speak to the airship again.

Erin wrestled with Sollan, having to force him up against the shelves with her telekinesis to get him to stay still, and while she managed to get the cuffs on him the lights outside distracted her from seeing him tuck a scroll under the back of his shirt...

Lance watched through the window and saw the airship crackle with deathly energies. "Commander! The Spellbreakers, they're holding as well as they can but the Saronite... it's too strong!" Their minds began to collapse in on themselves for daring to tap the power of the cursed metal, causing the barrier to flicker. A crack formed in it, and one of the turret's blasts screamed through, barely missing the airship and threading its rotors.

"Langley! Are you able to port onto the airship?"

Erin whipped her head around to reply to Lance. "Between the shield and the saronite, I'm more likely to get my particles scrambled just for trying...!"

Black lightning streaked outwards, carving lines through the roofs of Firewing's various buildings and across the landscape. One struck Sollan's tower and made it rumble. It was as if the Saronite was still sentient, fighting off the effort to harness it. A crackled, garbled voice spoke through the buzzbox. "COMMANDER!"

Lance had to fix this, here and now. He grabbed Sollan by the collar and demanded, "if you want to get out of this alive, command your men to cease fire!"

"But Commander, I need my hands free to cast the spell to speak to them all... they can't hear me from here..."

Sollan grunted as he was forced up against the wall, a blade at his side and Lance's hand driven tightly into his shoulder. There were just moments left, and then...

Time ran out.

The Spellbreakers let out a horrible, maddened scream, their brains melting in black fire. Though they clutched at their skulls to try to break free from it they were being consumed. Luca and Ysria ran over to give aid, but just touching them sent the same shock reeling into new victims. Luca even saw black burns on his palm after touching Emerys' shoulder, forcing Ysria to drag him away with a vine. The sergeant shouted over the buzzbox, but it was too late. The shield had fallen. A bright ball of arcane energy exploded from the cannons on the ground and cut through the darkness. It wobbles, slowly accreting into a sharp bullet like shape from the sheer speed it flew at, and just as the sergeant screamed at them to get down...

Lance, Sollan and Erin watched through the window as it made contact.

The shot tore through the lower decks of the airship and rocked it with such an incredible force that it shredded the vessel in half, turned it to glass, and then shattered it to pieces. The front half of the ship, where all the Leyguard were, quickly turned to a nosedive and fell, crashing into the facility yard next to the MagiMech where they were flying over.

It was in this moment of disarray that Sollan used to snatch the scroll from his back pocket. *Via!* He shouted, and in an instant, teleported free from Lance's grasp and disappeared.

When Your World Falls Apart

Erin tore open a portal down to the ground level and let Lance charge through shieldfirst. Her mind ached, pulsing in angry fits of self excoriation.

*I should have seen it
I should have known!
I let him escape. Again!
This can't keep happening!!*

The only saving grace so far seemed to be that no one had died. By the time they made their way over to the crash site, smoke billowing from broken engines, they met Luca and Ysria and the Sergeant outside. Though their bodies had been covered in many bruises, the Sergeant especially seeming to have a particularly painful gash on his forehead swiftly bound with a bandage and some poultice, they were otherwise in good health.

“Status report!” Lance said, always with a clear mind even in a crisis like this and it seemed like everyone needed a bit of that right now. Luca could barely talk, he was hyperventilating and Lance was only able to calm him down with a hand on his shoulder.

Luca held his racing heart for long enough to squeak. “Phanris and Velris... they’re trapped..!”

“Show me to them.”

The Sergeant added a quick reply. “Sir, Sollan’s forces will be upon us at any moment!”

“I know. Langle, Ysria, cover us. Sergeant you’re with me. Luca, show us the way!”

Erin watched the three of them leave and gripped her staff tightly.

“Why does this always happen..!” She shouted, begged the universe for an explanation.

Somehow, Ysria seemed completely unbothered by it all.

“I know, best laid plans, hm? But Erin. You don’t have to do it alone anymore. We’ll stop him, together. Okay?”

A swarm of MagiGun wielding mercenaries poured out towards them from the yard and from the walls. Ysria threw seeds and grew them into root-like barricades to buy her a few more moments with Erin.

“You just have to push through it, one last time. For all of us.”

Erin tried to focus and clutched Violetspire close.

“What good is magic if it’s not going to protect the people who need it?” Ysria asked.

“It’s no good at all.” Erin said in reply.

She held out her arm and curled her fingers inwards. Metal plates from the airship, the exterior hull, they creaked and they bent and they folded, crushed by an inwards force that pried them from the shell of the ship... and when it was ready, Erin hurled it towards the oncoming army.

Luca raced down through the halls of the wreckage, sliding under a half-collapsed doorframe without losing a single bit of momentum as he showed Lance the collapsed Nether Antennae.

Phanris and Velris had been trapped underneath it, their arms and torso crushed by the weight of the giant aetheric steel frame. There was no way it could be used now, not even if they had the time to make repairs with it being technology beyond any of their

understanding. Stonebridge gripped one end of it, and Luca took Lance's weapons and placed them onto the side so that he could also kneel down and help lift it off of them.

"On your mark, Sir!"

"Mark," he hefted.

"Light be with me!"

The Sergeant's arms glowed and he used the strength of his faith to lift one half of the steel antennae, though even still it did not match the sheer force of Lance's efforts! With the two of them though, the metal yawned, creaked, and yielded. When it was high enough, Luca rushed in and scrambled to pull both of the sorcerers free. But it wasn't over yet. The sound of massive collisions and even more MagiGun explosions popping outside could be heard...

By the time Lance got outside, he found a warzone. The Engineers had managed to crawl their way free already and Lance spied one of them throwing a MagiGrenade out into the ranks of Sollan's army of three hundred, instantly blasting six of them to smithereens. Ysria mended the roots where she could, and dolled out potions to Erin, who was already at her limit judging by the bloodstains on her nose. By some miracle, a pile of rubble on the ship exploded and The Spellbreakers came stumbling out, having used the last of their strength to free themselves. The saronite's mindshredding effects had taken their toll though, and at the makeshift barricades they finally crumbled and passed out.

"Sergeant! Get the wounded to shelter and try to find a way out of here with Luca and Ysria!"
"I know an exit! Follow me!" Luca said.

The next few moments were a blur.

The Engineers held their ground, using their own MagiRifles to carve through the ranks of the guards, but their makeshift defences could only buy them so much time from the overwhelming force bearing down upon them. Phanris and Velris casted together to hurl a huge fireball that explodes in the middle of the group, incinerating twenty of them in order to buy them time to escape.

Luca watched as he looked back to see two familiar faces, an Orc and a Tauren, incinerate and turn to ash. Could he make it through this battlefield, shots flying and detonating inches away from him, a thin layer of arcane dust marking every corner? He needed to get to a gatehouse on the north edge of the compound. If all the guards had been drawn here then they might stand a chance, but they had to leave now!

Erin hurled her staff out and shouted "*Leva!*", creating a repulsive blast of force which sent ten more guards slamming into the walls or into the air, and she dragged her breath.

She hid behind huge airship walls that were moments away from cracking under the power of the enemy's fire.

She looked around desperately, feeling her lungs begin to bleed from the strain of harnessing so much magic. "Ysria, I need..."

The Druidess handed her a potion

And at that moment, a MagiGun shot ripped through the air.

It was not by skill. Or even intention. But by pure luck, at that instant, the defences Ysria was hiding behind failed.

At that exact moment.

The shot's explosion carved through the steel plate, then into Ysria.

She died instantly.

Erin blacked out. The world seemed to pass her by, in a sense. She was detached from her body, couldn't control it, couldn't move. She watched her body uncontrollably hyperventilate, a potion bottle covered in dust rolling towards her. Through the dulled sounds, she could hear Lance calling out "*Langley! Port us out now!*" over and over again but she had no way of replying to him. Eventually, he had to drag her away by force. She couldn't even feel his plated hand on her shoulder leading her through the line of fire, shielding her from the same sort of thing that killed Ysria. It was all so surreal. She couldn't have been dead, could she? This was all just a dream?

The Engineers had stayed behind to help Lance find another place to barricade themselves into. By now, Luca, the Sergeant and both the spellbreakers and sorcerers had gone their own way to evacuate through the north gatehouse. In this old storeroom, they had a fragile few moments to breathe, and Lance recognised they still had one trump card left.

"Is the bomb still armed?"

"It's armed but if we set it off..."

"Speak!"

"With that blast radius, we'll be caught in it too..."

"Can we get out of range before detonating it?"

If we all leave, they'll chase us, sir.. I don't think we can get away from that in time."

Soon, the ground began to shake... in slow, rhythmic shocks... something massive was coming towards them.

Lance looked down and saw Erin was still unresponsive, and the Engineers out of their depth. He looked at them with stoic resolution. "Hand me the remote and flee. I'll hold them off. Will that buy you enough time?"

"Commander, if you do that you'll..."

"Will it buy time?"

"It will..."

They held out the remote. Lance took it from them.

One of the engineers held her tears. "It's been short Commander, but it's been an honour." But their farewell was cut short.

A massive hand reached down and ripped the roof off their building.

Sollan looked down on them and cackled with sinister glee, commanding the MagiMech from the highest point.

"BEHOLD!" He called. **"THE GREATEST MAGICAL INVENTION IN HISTORY!"**

Lance shoved them out of the room. "Go, now! That's an order!" And watched as the Engineers carried Erin away.

Lance would face Sollan and the rest of his army on his own.

His Final Gambit

Sollan leans down from the seat of his MagiMech.

"Do you think I care about you anymore? Or anyone?"

I've won. I've finally won!

Silvermoon awaits, and then the world will be changed forever.

So who do you think you are? A soldier? Some Army Commander?"

Who will even dare to try and stop me!"

Lance clutched his sword and shield tight. A steel blade, forged by human hands, and a shield enchanted not to bestow magic but to deny it. He alone stood before the might of the arcane, the 'ultimate' advancement, modern and manufactured to kill, wielded by the hand of the Horde. He boldly looked up at the mech and at Sollan's men, belted out one final "For the Alliance!", and tore into the fray.

A wall of MagiGuns ripped loose towards him, and Sollan aimed the MagiMech's right arm towards him.

Three orbiting crystals harnessed their power together and spun rapidly to conjure a continuous laser of pure MagiGun energy that obliterated the ground behind him. Lance could feel the force of consecutive concussive explosions shattering the earth just a meter away, and through the hail of gunfire he charged forwards with his shield at his fore to repel the blasts one by one. The ray of arcane energy emitted by the golem was so strong it may have been as powerful as a leyline itself, and Sollan watched as the walls of Firewing crumbled away like a magnifying glass held over an ant when he aimed it so. It streaked back and forth, chasing Lance as he grew closer, but the weight of the thing was so great moving it in such minute degrees was near impossible.

Lance swung his shield outwards as another shot soared his way, ricocheting it towards the Right Hand. It was not powerful enough to destroy the weapon, but it did provide enough force to swing Sollan's aim wide. It carved through and instantly obliterated fifty of his men, leaving a wide gash in their ranks, and caused many of them to lose their nerve and scatter. The beam continued and cleaved through the construction frames and the armouries and the great hall too, bisecting Sollan's tower in half. By the time Sollan had recovered and steeled himself, more so about his facility than the lives lost, Lance had made it to the base of the golem.

He saw deep grooves form runes on each metal plate to bind the arcane energy inside, which made makeshift handholds for him to scale.

But Sollan was not going to let him do so easily. The whole, monolithic frame of the golem lurched from side to side as he used everything he can to shake the human off, ultimately bringing its Left Hand down to yank him away force. This proved to be a mistake, however. Lance leapt upwards, barely dodging the grasp of the hand for long enough to pass his shield through the billowing streams of arcana filling the golem's body. For a moment they thinned, narrowing from the interference, and when Lance withdrew the energy overflowed and cascaded into itself. With this disruption, the Left Hand fell and crashed onto the ground.

"No! You can't do this. You won't!" Sollan reached his hands out to try forcibly realign the arcane pathways inside the mech, using everything he had to try get this back under control.

The runes on the great metal gauntlet from the Left Hand finally seethed once more, reconnected by a stream of arcane. Lance had now finally crested the rim of Sollan's control seat, however. He snared the defenseless mage by the hair and drove his gauntlet into him, immediately shattering his jaw from one strike and bruising his eye from the other. Sollan would not give up though. Not when he was here at the precipice. His willpower had to be stronger! He dug deep and threw a punch, this time from the Mech itself by its Left Hand, and struck Lance dead on!

The ground cracked from the impact Lance made with it. He could feel his ribs breaking just from the force of the strike. When he tried to stand, his legs gave way. He crawled, staring down the barrel of a hundred MagiGuns, away from Sollan's mech. Sollan would not afford him the chance to escape. The Right Hand charged up, gathering a bright dome of energy around it, and Sollan shouted out to him. "I'm not letting some Alliance dog stop me... not after everything I've worked towards... NOT AFTER ALL OF THIS! SAY HELLO TO YOUR KING FOR ME!"

At that moment, a barely audible *click* could be heard... and then, a few silent moments later, a white flash erupted from the ruined airship. It roared, inflating like a balloon. It ate away at the ground. It obliterated the walls of the facility. It rose high into the sky and consumed the area with explosive arcane energy.

Sollan turned around and looked towards it, reflexively throwing the MagiMech's hands to shield himself, but the blast is so powerful it melted the metal frame and shredded the arcane energy holding it together, sending pieces of rubble crashing down atop Lance. An incomprehensibly large cloud of crystal dust rose skywards... and even as far as they were, Luca and the surviving Leyguard members watch on in terror from the mere sight of it.

When the smoke cleared, the rubble shifted... And out came crawling Sollan.

Against all odds he had survived. Against everyone else's efforts *he* was the one who prevailed. He crawls from the rubble and stands to his full height, grabbed his MagiGun, and revelled in madness. He was overtaken by his own genius, his own superiority! No one knew what had happened here. There was no one left alive to tell the tale! He has finally won, shaken his pursuers, he was *free*! With the portal to Silvermoon still open Sollan trudged away to find it and enter. His future could not be stopped... not even by the force of the world upon him.

Sollan might have thought he was dead, but the world was not done with Lance. He found himself coming to as two familiar faces lifted him from the rubble just as he had done for others. The Engineers created levers with broken poles and chunks of steel to heave the crumbling metal pieces of the mech from him which had shielded him from evaporation. When it wasn't enough, a third set of hands came to help. Erin had finally come around, and together they pried Lance from the clutches of death.

“Check the pilot’s seat...” Lance wheezed and held his chest, but did not give himself any time to relax when the mission was still in progress.

One Engineer climbed up. “He’s gone... not even any blood, but...” she adjusted her goggles, and found a single set of footprints traced through the crystal snow. “He got away...”

“Damn it. Regroup... we rendezvous at Shattrath.” Lance said, but saw Erin already beginning to follow the footsteps.

“Langley! We need to go!”

She just turned around to him and looked at him with a deadened expression, and a monotone voice, numb to everything around her.

“I’m pushing through it, sir.

Just this last time.

It won’t let it be for nothing.”

Silver Moon Mirage

From Moon and Star, From World to World...

Sollan limped through the streets of Silvermoon, bloodied, with shredded clothes, his gait laboured, a MagiGun hidden beneath his shirt. Even after all the destruction; his plans interrupted, his army dismantled, his facility destroyed... Sollan could do nothing but laugh. It was a shrill, cackling, crazed sort of laugh that made the citizens around him gawk and stare. He didn't care how he looked to them now. So absorbed in his own mania was he that he ignored every injury, every broken bone, his fractured jaw and weeping eye, all of it. It did not matter to Sollan now. Only one thing did.

He had won.

With this escape, he had won his freedom. His pursuers had been killed in the blast, they did not have the resources to come after him again! And though his plans had been halted... they had not been prevented. He could garner more support, move more product, build his finances up again. What was a few years to an elf? What was a decade to the inevitable future? And he knew now the weaknesses with his design; the MagiMech, constructed in haste. With real time spent developing it, closing its weaknesses like those arcane seams, he knew he could make it unstoppable. Perhaps he could weave in the same sort of magic as a *dome of impenetrability* into the runes and make it functionally invincible. Yes. Yes! That was his plan! All he had to do was get to a place he could lay low, a place he could rest...!

The crowds shifted behind him, and Sollan saw something.

A glimmer of red hair passed by.

He chuckled to himself, and kept moving. Of course, he was tired and drained and had just recovered from the battle of his life... nothing would stop him now though. He kept moving.

And then, he saw in the reflection of a window.

A black headband in the corner of his eye.

Sollan's pace accelerated. Could it be? She escaped, didn't she? But she was too traumatised, too weak! The last time he had seen her she was barely conscious! Was it just a ploy? Surely she couldn't follow him, there was no way she found the portal, she was on another world! He had escaped her!

"I'm coming for you..." A whisper drifted down his neck.

"No... no! You're not here! I won't let you take me. I refuse!"

Sollan scrambled through the gates into the Court of the Sun. "Try follow me now! The likes of you aren't allowed in this quarte-" he stopped, long ears twitching. He heard it.

The arcanostatic hum of a Violet Crystal...

Sollan broke into a full sprint. He had to get away. He had to! There was no way she followed him here!

He sprinted towards a guard, a Blood Knight. "Guard! I need your assistance, now!"

The knight looked down at him with a grimace, seeing the state he was in. "What hole did you crawl out of?"

"I won't be demeaned... it is your DUTY to assist me! I am Sollan Suncrown... and I will not be denied!"

"I know you." The knight stared down at him.

"Yes, yes! You know how important I am! My family are well known magisters!"

"Oh you're known... known for being an arms dealer who sells to corrupt officials, whose weapons have ended up with the criminals of The Row. A lot of people would like to see you face justice, Suncrown."

The Knight reached his hand out to grab Sollan's arm, pulling it out from under his shirt.

"No! Unhand me, damnit! NO!"

Sollan's hand was yanked outwards, the same hand holding his MagiGun. And in his mania, the only solution was clear.

BANG.

Screams erupted from the crowds.

The heavy-clanking of boots marched towards him.

Sollan looked at the crystal dust covering him and sprinted away.

"Stop! Don't let him get away!" Another group of patrollers called.

He was backed against a corner, it was at least a twenty foot drop down into an alley below.

Sollan closed his eyes and fell.

He landed in a pile of trash, in a tiny alleyway.

Sollan held his pained cries until the guards disappeared from the view above, presuming him dead, leaving him to rot.

And he began to cackle again.

Yes, again, he had escaped... again... luck was on... his side!

His strength was his tenacity, to keep going no matter what, to hold onto his ideals, to believe in the future he would create!

Sollan pulled himself from the rubble, crawled away...

His broken legs could be mended, all he needed to do was find a place to rest.

He always made it out alive and challenges only made him stronger.

It proved his conviction beyond all others.

He had gotten away, once more.

And nothing could ever stop him.

Thuk.

The heavy base at the end of Violetspire landed in his path.

Nothing, except for that...

Sollan dragged his nails through the stone with such fury they cracked and bent and broke and made the tips of his fingers bleed.

He looked up and he shouted.

“LANGLEY!

ARE YOU HERE TO GLOAT AT ME?

TO TELL ME YOU FINALLY WON?

I KNOW YOU!

YOUR EGO!

YOUR ARROGANCE!”

He spat on the ground, saliva pooling in his mouth, dripping from the corners of his lips.

“You still can’t kill me.

You have no chance!

Go on! Turn me into the guards!

I’ll only bribe them!

You cannot stop the future Erin!

YOU CANNOT STOP ME!”

He breathed, and breathed, and breathed. Like his chest was about to explode.

“What are you going to say then?

ANSWER ME!”

Erin held out her hand, her face shadowed by her hood in the faint moonlight.

Frigus Funiculus.

The air froze around Sollan’s hands and whipped into icy chains which pinned his hands behind his back.

“Is that it? IS THAT ALL YOU CAN DO?”

Seeing him like this, among the heaps of trash in some random alley...

She leaned in close towards his ear,

And whispered the last thing she’d ever say to him.

“Why are you surprised?

Hunting rogue magic users is all I’ve been doing since The Fall.”

Sollan held his breath for a moment, and then screamed.

After all that,

After all his terror,

After all his fear,

After everything he had done to her,

And everything that she had done to him,

He had not spent a single day without thinking of ways to impede her,

And now he would learn,

That to her,

He meant nothing at all?
He was just another job?
A nobody?
And she would live with a clear mind and forget he existed?

As she teleported him away, Sollan felt the rushing tide of all his pain hitting him at once.
This future may not come to pass after all.

Epilogue One, Justice

Lance once again found himself falling through the astral realm, surrounded by a sea of stars. He landed on two feet, and found that Sollan was resting beside him in his chair. Sollan had not escaped the Leyguard's punishments, nor their interrogations. Through some particularly advanced tactics employed by the Spellbreakers, eager to take revenge, Sollan had given up everything; the locations of his bases, the names of his allies, those he had contracts with, and a rough estimate of how many MagiGuns were still in production. And now he had been dragged here- bloodied, impaled by iron rods driven into the skin by hand, and still unconscious.

The Leymaster, from the crown of the cosmos, looked down upon them with his divine gaze and watched Lance salute him. "Mission accomplished."

When The Leymaster spoke, the whole firmament resounded with every word. "Commander Lionguard, you have defied all odds. A great threat to the stability of the world has been vanquished, and in doing so proven that martial skill alone may overcome magic. Thus, MagiGuns and their ilk will never conquer the world... and the warmongers who planned to wield them will be brought to justice.

Starting with him."

When The Leymaster blinked, Sollan woke in roaring pain flaring up all across his body as those same iron rods drove in far deeper. As he was bound, he had no way to escape its torment other than to writhe about like a fish dragged from the depths of a lake.

He panted, barely catching his breath, and looked up to see his surroundings. When The Leymaster spoke again, it shook the world so greatly it seemed like the stars might fall.

"Sollan Suncrown,
You have defied the natural order,
Proliferated the use of magic to all mortal hands,
Honed it into a weapon to act on their darkest desires,
And done so for your own greed and pride.

The arcane is a dangerous thing,
And you would have everyone control it?

Your true sentence will await you,
But until that time,
Suffer as they suffer."

Lance had expected Sollan to cry out in response, to excoriate someone who would judge him and his plans for the future. But Sollan had gone quiet.

Sollan went quiet because he no longer had a mouth.
Nor did he have a body.

He had been transmuted, transmuted into a fleshy, pulpy, gurgling mass with six eyes staring out into the cosmos, twitchy limbs contorting onto themselves, a smelly heap with his gases slowly exuding from his body. But through this, he was still conscious, and experiencing the most incredible pain that he possibly could. But at least he was doing it quietly.

Lance couldn't help but clench his jaw in sheer revulsion from the horror on display. But still. This was right, wasn't it? A fate worse than death was what he deserved.

"Brave Lionguard," The Leymaster said. "It is only right that I repay your efforts. What do you wish?"

In this realm, anything you dream can become reality."

"We lost a member of our team, killed by a MagiGun... Is it within your power to return her to us?"

For a moment, The Leymaster did not respond.

"I can return her physical form, but she will not be the same. Her soul has been claimed by a greater power." Lance had expected this answer, and maybe it was better this way.

"No.. I shall let her be at peace..."

"Then what will you do, Lance of Stromgarde? The Leyguard's efforts have only just begun. Your continued assistance, your Command, will be highly valued. But I shall not stop you if you wish to return to your duties. Your true heart lies with the Alliance, after all. You will remain with us in good standing regardless of your choice."

"I serve the Alliance, but should the Leyguard and Alliance interests align again in future... I will answer your call."

The Leymaster said one final thing to him before he left.

"The tides of fate are stirring, Commander.

I can see the whole picture; I can see the countless choices that can be made.

The future Sollan wrought will not come to pass, but there will be countless others who dare to do the same.

The world is counting on us to guide it down a better path.

Make sure you are ready to do so with no regrets."

With Lance's salute, he was thrust back into the waking world.

What sort of future would he make?

Justice Served! MagiGun Inventor Reportedly Arrested!

- *By Naomi Sato*

A public statement made by one Sergeant Stonebridge of a neutral mercenary group known as The Leyguard has just announced their capture and custody of Sollan Suncrown, inventor and proliferator of MagiGuns.

At a time where MagiGun deaths have reached a record high (exceeding 600 people in the last month alone within Gilneas City) public outcry against these dangerous weapons has never been higher. With lawmakers and politicians stalled on their banning, and with the Horde and Alliance reportedly both making contracts to add them to their arsenals, it had seemed like there was no one willing to answer the will of the people and bring those selling these weapons to justice, until now.

This past Friday afternoon at 18:00, Sergeant Stonebridge announced with a regiment of his men that the inventor of MagiGuns had been captured and taken into their custody. Sergeant Stonebridge, a Veteran of the Argent Crusade and Legion Invasion previously awarded with the Medal of High Valour from Tirion Fordring, claims to have taken part in a neutral effort to take down the inventor in the absence of action from the factions.

A transcript of his speech is as such:

"We are not affiliated with the Alliance nor the Horde, and this action should not be considered as an incitement of war.

In these dark times, both the Horde and the Alliance have proven to be ineffective when it came to stopping MagiGuns. Someone had to do it. So the Leyguard did.

Sollan acted on greed, he wanted to be the man who changed the world. But did he ever consider if he was making the world better? He asked himself this question, came up short, and decided to do it anyway.

Under the authority of The Leymaster, Sollan remains in our custody and we will not be answering further questions.

But rest assured. We will not stop until every single MagiGun is eliminated.

Not when people are still afraid to leave their homes,

Not when criminals and the corrupt still leverage them for control.

When no one else stands with you, Good People,

Know that The Leyguard does!"

It has been reported that a similar speech has been made in several other alliance territories, and presumably in Horde territories as well.

Intelligence on the identity of The Leyguard, or its numbers, is limited- as well as the identity of this 'Leymaster'

From Stonebridge's speech, it seems they claim to be a neutral organisation working independently from either faction and made specific note to not escalate already high tensions between Alliance and Horde. Despite this, several faction officials from both sides

have reportedly reached out to The Leyguard to demand for Sollan to be extradited to their lands on the basis that The Leyguard is not a recognised authority.

Suncrown is a Silvermoon national and was reportedly captured within the city after shooting a guard, but several high-value crimes committed in Gilneas, Ironforge and Bel'ameth have spurred for members of the Alliance to also seek retribution.

This is an evolving situation, and details of the future for MagiGuns, Sollan and The Leyguard are still coming in. Further articles will be released when more information is available.

The truth can be hard to pin down.

Follow The Grey Arrow every week to stay informed on what's really happening.

Epilogue Two, The Future

Erin climbed out of bed.
She felt the cold wood underneath her feet as she stepped into a shower.
When she turned the valve, she held her head under it and let the water wash over her.
She lathered soap in her hands and spread it across her arms.
With a razor, she carefully stripped herself of the stubbled hairs growing.
When she was done, she climbed out, and dried off with a towel.

She opened a drawer on her dresser,
Picked up a hairbrush,
And began to brush.
Even though the mirror was all fogged up.

It had been days now, and Erin still felt empty.

Was this really what her life had to be?
She thrust herself into conflicts beyond her ability, over and over.
She had seen her friends killed before her eyes, over and over.
And somehow, this one was worse than all the others. Because those other times, she had an excuse. She could blame someone, usually herself.
But this one ran deeper. There was nothing she could have done here. Things had happened so quickly, so stomach-churningly fast, done and gone in the blink of an eye, that she could not imagine anyone having the strength to stop it. Not even Lance.
All she could do was push through it, but she could feel it in the pit of her stomach and knew something like this would happen again because it always had.

And she was so, so tired of it all.

Erin was even only doing this to begin with because of her own moral code.
This blessing, this gift, this curse. It had to mean something. It couldn't just be the product of chance, something to have and squander. It meant she could help people.
It let her see the world in a sixth sense, to reach out so much farther than she could with her own two hands and it was beautiful but she could not reconcile herself if she used it selfishly.
Like those magisters, who seem to be able to divorce themselves from responsibility, to lavishly wrap themselves with the arcane and play so freely, to frolic in their spellcraft and ignore the problems of the world which would be fixed if they just lifted a finger.
She hated them more than anything, and she hated the idea she could become them.
But that was the root of the problem.

To use magic means you must serve or be evil,
And Erin could not be evil,
So what was the solution?

Someone had died, in this horrible and pointless conflict all for the greed of one man.
And she didn't care about his betrayal anymore, not personally.
But the world as it was, was broken.
And she couldn't do anything to fix it.

If magic can't fix what's broken, then why have it?
What can you do with it instead?
Do you just decide to not fix your problems at all?
Do you dismantle the world and put it back together?
Or do you forego magic all together and find another way?

These were all questions larger than she should ever have to worry about, Erin knew. She thought back to those old days, when all she had to worry about was the Kirin Tor and nearly cried because she would give anything to have them back now. Of course they weren't perfect, but they were something! Better than what they had now. This really was the worst timeline, and she could not stand to see things continue to get worse over and over.

She could not keep going on, not like this.
Erin had pushed through one last time, and she begged that this would be the last time.

Erin saw the fog in the mirror clean up, and her hollow eyes stared back at her.
And then she looked down at her hands and was disgusted by what they could accomplish.