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Faerin Lothar sat in her favorite of the three leather chairs situated outside Great Kyron's office. She was familiar with this one, especially the slight grooves in its right arm where plenty of Lamplighters and hopefuls alike had picked and scratched nervously at the finish. Herself included.

Beledar's light poured through the high windows on the far wall, shafts of aureate radiance carving the corridor into slanted fragments. The setting should have been tranquil, a place of shelter and peace. Instead, Faerin felt the unease that had been churning in her gut for the better part of an hour begin to slowly spread through the rest of her body. It took hold of her legs, which started to bounce, and her arm, until her fingers drummed uselessly on her knee.

Closing her eyes, she tried to focus on anything but her swirling thoughts as Anduin Wrynn's words danced through her mind. You should come with us. See the world. Let it get a good look at you . . . The invitation stuck between her ears nearly as much as the stories he told. They painted a picture in her mind's eye of the old world born anew: outlander tales of heroes and legends, myths like the very one borne by her bloodline. The Lothar name was an inheritance she'd all but renounced the day she stole away

on *Ariah's Ascent*, believing she was avoiding a destiny stuck amidst dusty histories and decrepit parchments. Plenty of legends had lodged themselves in Faerin's heart like splinters, all of them kindling for a single, burning truth: A life tending the past was not one she endeavored to live.

But what Anduin had shared about her family—how the Lothar name belonged to a great champion of the people . . . What if that past could reveal her way forward? Not in tomes but in trials faced and victories won. Those stories about heroes drawn to a calling they couldn't explain—a cause greater than they understood except they knew it was bigger than themselves—struck at something deep in Faerin. A familiar feeling that hummed at the base of her skull, similar to what had drawn her to the docks that fateful day. A duty. A charge. This was the difference between her and the rest of her family. She'd heard such a call in the depths of her very being, while they believed it to be the whims of a child.

Now, she heard it again.

Unable to contain her disquiet, Faerin found her feet to pace the length of the upper hall. The rest of the building remained blessedly silent, abandoned while her fellow Lamplighters saw to the start of their daily duties. That's why she'd picked this time: early enough that she would go unnoticed, at least for a little while. She didn't want to explain to anyone what she was planning, to face their disappointment or sadness. Most of all, she didn't want anyone to try to change her mind. Not that they could. The only ones who stood even a flicker of a chance were . . . gone.

Sadness welled in Faerin's chest, but she tamped it down, pushed it deeper with each footfall. "Calm yourself," she murmured into the silence.

For so long she'd believed the Sacred Flame had summoned her to Hallowfall. That she, blessed as she was by the Flame to fight, was *supposed* to be here. But deep down she'd always given refuge to something . . . hungrier.

A smile pulled at Faerin's face as different memories rose in the quiet. She let these fold over her mind, anything to keep from thinking too much about her plans, how wrong it could all go, and what she would have to do if it did.

Memories of the orphanage enveloped her. How empty it lay in the beginning, save for Faerin, the only child in the entire expedition for some time. Barely a flicker of a candle in an awfully large tinderbox. The building had seemed massive then, imposing. Who knew having so much space to yourself could feel suffocating?

The only thing that made those early days bearable was Sygfraed Siegepyr. He'd been selected as caretaker of the orphanage in Mereldar. The old man had been less worn and weary then. Signs of a life well lived, he'd often say. He said a lot, actually—most of it calling after her not to run there, slide down this, or climb that. While General Vaelisia Steelstrike was Faerin's official guardian, it was Sygfraed who saw to her daily needs at the orphanage. It was Sygfraed who made sure Steelstrike's rules were studied and committed to memory—which still did not prevent Faerin from often breaking them.

It was also Sygfraed who tucked Faerin in at night and told her the stories—tales from glory days past, the legendary champions who'd spurred the Arathi Empire to greatness—that formed the foundation of who Faerin would become.

"I want to hear one about a battle!" Faerin had demanded one night, freshly washed and dressed in a cotton nightgown perfect for the temperate evening. The copper-tinged winds blowing in from the north crawled through open windows to stir the curtains and loose parchment covered in scribbles from her lessons that day. Seeing as she'd given a sketch of General Steelstrike a lynx's head in place of her own, it was safe to say the day's teachings hadn't fully taken.

"Oh ho," Sygfraed had laughed while fluffing Faerin's abandoned pillows, his dark-brown face alight with amusement. "Stories are for *after* we curl up under our blankets. Otherwise, how will the Dreamers catch your wandering thoughts?"

With a huff, Faerin flopped back onto the bed, kicking her way beneath the blanket, though she didn't lie down just yet. She adjusted the covering on her head that kept her braids in place and fixed the man with narrowed eyes. "Dreamers aren't real."

"Of course they are," Sygfraed said with an affronted sniff. "Who else brings you visions while you sleep? Certainly not pixies." He patted the newly fluffed pillow and reached to lay a hand atop the heavy tome settled on a nearby table.

Faerin watched with bated breath as his fingers brushed the cover but did nothing else. They tapped, waiting. With a giggle, she finally flung the blanket over herself and tugged it to her chin. She couldn't help but smile as Sygfraed winked and plucked the book free, his hands dipping slightly with the weight of it.

It was also Sygfraed who tucked Faerin in at night and told her the storiestales from glory days past, the legendary champions who'd spurred the Arathi Empire to greatness—that formed the foundation of who Faerin would become. "Now then," the old man said while balancing the book on his knees to open it. "Why don't we try one a little less stimulating?"

"Aww," Faerin whined with practiced petulance. "But fighting is the best!" "Oh?"

"Yes! If you're strong, you fight! Everything else is boring."

Sygfraed hummed in that way of his that wasn't exactly judgmental but still suggested you reconsider whatever you were doing. "You think so? Well, that gives me the perfect idea for tonight's tale." The old man opened the book and traced the vine detail framing the page. A gentle golden glow bled outward from the ink, enveloping the tome and flipping the pages in succession until they settled somewhere deep in the text.

"Whoa!" Faerin exclaimed, eyes now wide and wonder-filled. She'd never seen the book do that before. "You know magic?"

"I'm afraid not," Sygfraed chuckled, then bowed his head and whispered conspiratorially, "but the book does."

Faerin settled further into her spot, enraptured.

"*This* story," Sygfraed began while patting the open page, "is a special one, hidden amidst all the fighting and all the battles, nearly forgotten due to the oath that was sworn by the Secret Keepers, guardians of our most secret-y secrets."

Eight-year-old Faerin hung on every silly word, but then, that was the magic of storytelling.

Sygfraed cleared his throat a bit theatrically, then began to read. "The Ballad of Craishae the First Flame: Tale of the Lost Queen of Arathor. According to legend, Craishae was a daughter of kings, descended from the line of Thoradin.

"She was your ancestor," Sygfraed exclaimed with a wave toward Faerin.

She all but gasped aloud. "I never heard of her!"

"Few have," her caretaker continued. "This is but one of many myths about the lost queen." He read on.

"Craishae was a rambunctious child full of fire and spirit. She was bright and intelligent but often neglected her studies or chores in favor of playing games or venturing into the wilds.

"Sounds like someone I know," Sygfraed chided.

"Craishae was the oldest of her father's children, born to a noblewoman from Quel'Thalas. She adored nature and spent much of her time coming to know the forests and rivers that marked the land, making friends with creatures and all manner of folk. Despite her station, Craishae cherished her time among the people. She was afforded much respect but spurned any and all special treatment. She had a knack for fighting, and wielding the arcane was among her natural talents.

"As Craishae came of age, a terrible curse struck the land, tainting anything and anyone it touched, mutating them into vicious beasts. People turned on their loved ones, ripping their homes and villages apart. The kingdom was besieged both from without and within.

"At the height of the conflict, an army of contorted creatures breached Thoradin's wall, which had stood a stalwart sentinel over the land for generations. Witnessing the devastation firsthand, Craishae pledged her skills and power to the protection of her kingdom. She would hunt down and eradicate the source of this magical malediction.

"In the following months she fought battle after battle, winning great victories and helping others survive grave losses. It was during one such encounter—as monsters closed in around the princess and her wounded allies—that she unleashed a torrent of flame and Light the likes of which had never been seen. The smoke and dust cleared, revealing the princess now wielded her fire as a sword and shield. With her gleaming armor and blazing weapons, it was as if Craishae commanded the power of the sun itself."

Faerin had pictured this shining warrior—her foremother—with rich, dark skin like her own and radiating power.

"Though the princess emerged triumphant, time remained against her. The curse spread, and the war took a terrible turn. Some unseen force strengthened the dreadful enchantment, hastening its spread. Defenses began to crumble. All hope seemed lost.

"But one night, while asleep in her tent near the front, Princess Craishae was visited by an entity of light. It gave her a vision, spoke of a place hidden deep in the wilds. A temple where the heart of the world and the eye of the heavens met. But only she was strong enough to find it, possessing a soul true enough to wield its power.

"So Craishae set off on her own and combed the continent, facing foe and fiend alike, all the while praying her people would survive another day. When she eventually found the hidden temple, she climbed the stairs while battered and exhausted, prepared to fight whatever guardian stood in her way. Instead, in the central chamber, she discovered the being of light from her dream, whom she could now see was a woman dressed in stardust robes, standing vigil over a pool of swirling light and fire. The woman looked up, and her face changed. From elf to human to troll and back again, every time she moved her appearance shifted.

"The woman called herself the Scion and explained that she had sensed something in Craishae. Something willing to fight in defense of others. The world would need such strength in the coming age, just as Craishae's kingdom depended on it now. 'It is why I summoned you to this sacred place,' the Scion declared. 'To offer you the means to defeat this nightmare.'

"Relief nearly overcame the princess. She confessed that she had journeyed far to find the power to save her people, and at last her quest was at an end.

"Upon hearing these words, however, the Scion appeared disappointed. If power was truly all Craishae sought, then she and her people would be lost to the evil overtaking the world.

"Yet the princess corrected the woman. 'I did not come here for power,' Princess Craishae declared. 'But for purpose. Help me deliver my kingdom from this malevolence, and I will live in defense of *all* lands.'

"Pleased with this answer, the woman bid Craishae to bathe in the fiery waters of the temple. When she did, her old life and essence were burned away and made new. With eyes blazing and hair of flame, the princess emerged wielding an ember that could never go out: the First Flame.

"For you see, there were no paladins then," Sygfraed explained. "There were many mages, yes, but when Craishae returned with the ember, she wielded both the Light and fire to drive back the evil that had tried to take the land. The queen even cleansed those who'd fallen to the curse, returning them to their previous form.

"After she had won many battles and ruled for many years as queen, Craishae left the kingdom to her children, who had inherited a portion of the ember that blazed

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within her. In time, they began to spread her lessons amongst the people so as to light the path forward. Craishae then took what remained of her power into the world, trying to trace the curse back to its source so it could be purged and her kingdom, the world, could be safe forever.

"Time between sightings of the former queen grew further and further between, until none could say where she'd gone. Eventually, she passed into legend, and those legends were handed down. One being this tale," Sygfraed murmured as he closed the book, its glow brightening briefly and then dimming once more.

Faerin was not able to sleep that night. She waited until the wee hours of the morning to sneak out of bed and try to find the story herself, but she was never able to glimpse those pages again.

Still, Queen Craishae and her legend lived in Faerin's heart and bolstered her spirit. Perhaps it was her foremother from whom Faerin inherited her need to go where she felt led, to do what she could for her people. For her faith.

A faith that had carried Faerin across the world, and perhaps, farther still.



"Faerin?"

The sound of a voice so near drew her out of her reminiscing with a jolt. She turned to find a familiar face in fellow Lamplighter Meradyth Lacke.

"Meradyth," Faerin sighed.

"Have you been up here this entire time?" Meradyth asked as she approached.

"Not for long. There is a matter I wish to discuss with Great Kyron." Faerin leaned casually against the wall as if she hadn't been trying to walk off her nerves mere moments before.

"I just left them." Meradyth turned to glance over her shoulder but stopped herself. "They have gone to speak with Anduin. I hear he is leaving soon, along with the oth—"

"I know," Faerin cut in.

Meradyth paused, her nose scrunched. It was an expression Faerin recognized easily.



"Is everything all right? You seem . . . nervous."

Faerin felt the frown pull at her face before she could stop it. "Do I?"

Meradyth only smiled. It was small and genuine. "Yes. Or perhaps a better word would be *uneasy*?"

It was a way out, of sorts. Taking it would be an admission, but it would mean Meradyth would spare her further questioning, allowing Faerin to come to her in time.

Training, rising through the ranks, and being sparked together had made the two women unlikely friends. Where once there was mistrust, now there was true camaraderie. Faerin's only annoyance with Meradyth was how well the former reservist knew her

"With what we have faced of late, anyone would be uneasy," Faerin deflected.

"True, anyone but *you*." Meradyth folded her arms. She arched a brow, her silvering blonde hair drawn back enough to make the expression pinched. "Your faith is unshakeable."

"And that remains true." Faerin made her way back to the row of chairs, retaking the one in the center. "I simply wish to discuss something that happened during the confrontation with the Harbinger."

The faint but smug smile that had started to play across Meradyth's face faded. "Out with it. What's the matter?"

Faerin dipped her head in a deep nod, hiding her face so Meradyth couldn't glean the truth. "All is well, I promise. No cause for concern."

Meradyth looked Faerin over once more as if deciding whether to believe her. She seemed to make up her mind, her shoulders sagging with a faint wounded sound. "If you insist. After you finish speaking with Kyron, you should join us later at the inn."

"Us?"

"Regald wants to tell of some mishap or another, and Nalina promised us a round after recent events. You would be most welcome."

"I'm not sure I'll have time . . ." Faerin murmured, mostly to herself.

A beat passed between them before Meradyth folded her arms. "You're not . . . leaving us, are you?"

Faerin's head snapped up from where she had been inspecting the grooves in the chair "Wwwhat?"

"Flames help me." Meradyth pinched the bridge of her nose. "You have that look on your face. The same one you wore when you went chasing after Ry—hmm."

The comment caught Faerin by surprise. She could do little more than stare, unsure of what to say.

Meradyth continued before she lost her nerve or could be interrupted. "Your faith and zeal are unparalleled. To the point where some might even call it foolhardy. But it is clear that whatever force guides you does so because you are *worthy*. You have been since the beginning, when the shadow first found us. And while I cannot trust in unknown entities, I can trust you. It was you who kindled the Sacred Flame in me after I spent years cowering in the darkness. If something spurs you on, I've no doubt it's the right path. But at least . . . at least spare us any more sudden losses."

With that and a curt nod, Meradyth tromped swiftly back the way she'd come, leaving Faerin gazing after her.

Because you are worthy. You have been since the beginning, when the shadow first found us.



Faerin remembered that night, when the Sacred Flame first burst to life within her, just as life in Hallowfall changed forever. The orphanage was less empty in those days. People had done as they were wont to do—seek companionship, make vows, have children. But there was still a war to fight. The nerubians and kobyss did not relent simply because the Arathi decided to build lives here. Lives that were still cut short in too many instances.

While the circumstances that brought new children to the orphanage's doorstep were always poor, Faerin had learned that this place was still a blessing, a home for them to go to. And she would do her best to make it as welcoming and warm as she could manage.

That particular evening she had decided to do story time while Sygfraed saw to other business. More and more the man's duties involved administerial work—

"Your faith and zeal are unparalleled. To the point where some might even call it foolhardy. But it is clear that whatever force guides you does so because you are worthy."

managing supplies, food, the education and training of young ones. Turned out it took a lot to run an orphanage beneath the world. At least, that's what Sygfraed complained of more oft than not in those days.

And it was during those days that Faerin's arc of rebellion seemed to peak. Adolescence brought forth an entirely new fire, one that balked at the thought of being seen as or treated like a child. Tending the children was some small relief in this—a new responsibility, a duty to protect the little ones—but it was exhausting. Besides, she knew she could do *more*, that her abilities stretched beyond reading stories.

Fortunately, she liked reading stories.

"This is a good one," Faerin said triumphantly after flipping through the book for perhaps the thousandth time, hoping to stumble upon the pages about the lost queen. Alas.

Instead, she'd landed on a story about a prince who learned magic from a dragon. Stories with spells and mythic creatures usually went over well, but tonight her audience was searching for something else—dinner. None of Faerin's lessons had prepared her for the task of wrangling a pack of hungry toddlers.

She settled the book in her lap, her back straight, so the tome could rest open against her chest, leaving her hand free to turn pages, playact sword fights, and claw at the air like a magical monster. Today, she was an azure dragon with glistening scales and glimmering wings. The story didn't include all that, but she imagined that if she had wings, they would shine.

Faerin lilted her voice as she recited the tale from memory. "The prince took one look at the dragon and knew he had found his teacher. 'Great and powerful one!' the prince said—Molly! Molly, don't put that in your—augh. One moment!"

Setting the book on the chair, she made her way over to the little brown-skinned girl who had turned three this past spring—Faerin remembered all their names and their birthdays. Someone had to. It made a difference.

"Moliana, come now, I'm sure dinner will be much more delicious than a block!" She knelt on the floor and proceeded to wrangle the toy from the little girl, who fought valiantly, tears pricking the corners of her eyes.

That look shot straight to Faerin's heart. "Aw, fine," she relented, smiling as the child squealed in victory. Thankfully, she played with her spoils rather than trying to eat them.

Faerin rose to return to her chair and continue reading, but movement outside the large window at the front of the building caught her eye. Soldiers from Steelstrike's army raced by. Probably a drill. Or maybe the reservists had stayed at the inn a touch too long and were now late for training.

"Someone's in trouble," Faerin sang under her breath before reaching to wriggle the block out of Molly's mouth once more. She winced as the child let out a wail before hurriedly reaching into the pocket of her trousers and pulling out a bundle.

Wiping at her brown eyes and sniffling, Molly peered at the hunk of honeyloaf bread resting on Faerin's palm. It was a few days old but still good. She'd stashed her helping away instead of eating it the second night in a row Sygfraed looked grim during dinner.

The other children noticed and gathered round; Faerin set down the cloth for all of them to share. Warmth blossomed in her chest as the children's faces brightened while they snacked. She didn't even care about the crumbs falling from their faces, knowing she would soon be sweeping the entire first floor. It was more than worth it.

"This is our secret, okay?" she said with a soft laugh, putting a finger to her lips. The children mirrored her action while giggling, as they often did.

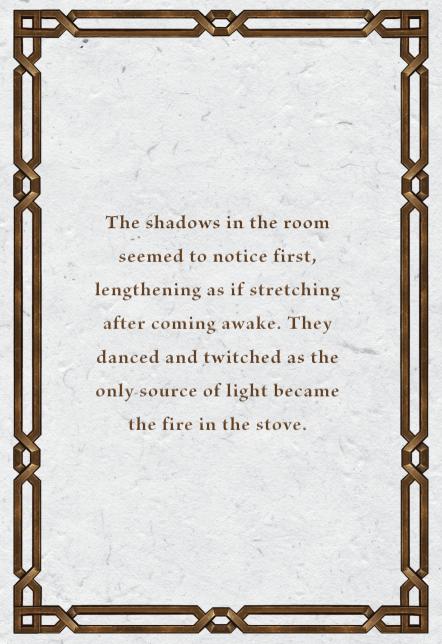
But as the mood brightened, the room began to grow dark. It happened slowly. The light fading as if the sun had slipped behind the clouds. After all these years, Faerin still remembered the sun. Barely. Remembered its rising and setting. The falling of night.

The shadows in the room seemed to notice first, lengthening as if stretching after coming awake. They danced and twitched as the only source of light became the fire in the stove. And as the light faded, so did the chatter. All the children fell silent at once. That never happened unless they were asleep.

Sygfraed moved from the stove, ladle in hand. The sound of his steps was like thunder in the shivering quiet. "Everyone just stay where you are," he called as he went to open the door and peer outside.

Faerin gestured for the children to remain still while she made her way over to the large window that faced the square.

People stood in the lane, paused in their comings and goings, some with baskets or bags in their hands. There was even a wagon being drawn by an imperial lynx. Everyone



stared in the same direction—Beledar's direction—their faces drawn in shock, disbelief, or terror

Faerin squinted and pressed forward against the glass, trying to see what they were all looking at.

"Faerin Lothar, get away from that window!" Sygfraed bellowed as he stormed across the room and started ushering children toward the cellar.

Surprise jolted through Faerin. Even when scolding her, he didn't usually raise his voice.

A protest parted her lips. *I was only looking!* But before the words left her, the window exploded in a shower of glass and wood and the shriek of metal. Screams filled the air as a paladin came crashing into the room.

He hit the far wall, then crumpled to the ground in a heap, spear and shield falling uselessly from still hands. Massive grooves in his armor were coated red and slicked black with blood. Outside, a shriek—keening and inhuman—rose in victory, and Faerin's entire body went cold.

Nerubians.

"Faerin!" Sygfraed shouted, hurrying the orphans below. They could hide in the cellar until the attack was over. Bolt the entry and wait.

But before Faerin could get to safety, a shadow fell across the room. A multilimbed monstrosity loomed in the space where the window used to be. It reared up on its legs, bulbous body a thing of nightmares, its mandibles clacking, its many eyes glinting with malice in the flickering light of the dying fire.

Secure all entrances. Find a weapon, locate a defensible position, and take cover. Faerin could hear Steelstrike's instructions for an attack driven into all the residents of Hallowfall. She ducked behind a table toppled onto its side, a hand pressed over her mouth to trap the whimper that threatened to escape. At the other end of the room, she could see a scramble of movement as Sygfraed closed the door to the cellar, saving the children he could.

There was no one else here but her, the monster, and the limp paladin.

As the nerubian stalked forward, Faerin shrank back, her heart pounding in her ears, fear surfing her nerves.

"Death draws near," groused a low voice, clicking with a rumbling hiss.

The terror sinking into Faerin's stomach threatened to pull her to the floor. She could run. Make a dash for the back stairway that would take her up to the bedrooms. Find a cupboard or wardrobe to hide in, pray the door held until help came.

A soft whimper snatched at Faerin's attention, her eyes wide. She wasn't the only one who noticed, the nerubian turning toward the sound. There, crawling from beneath an overturned chair, was little Molly. The girl whined with the start of tears. Faerin *knew* that cry, had lamented hearing it more times than she could count. Poor girl didn't know to stay quiet, that she was drawing danger toward her.

Faerin's mind raced as her heart wailed in her ears. There was no one else here. If the monsters had breached this far into Mereldar, the soldiers would be busy fighting. There was no one she could call. And Beledar's light no longer shone bright enough to shield them from the perils in the dark.

Nothing.

No one.

I'm here, something inside Faerin protested angrily. She had promised Molly and the others she would look after them. Had insisted that the Sacred Flame would always show up for those who needed it most, like it did for the heroes in their stories. Like Craishae had shown up for her people, in the midst of war, in the midst of carnage.

As long as there is someone to carry it forward . . .

. . . a torch will always burn in the night.

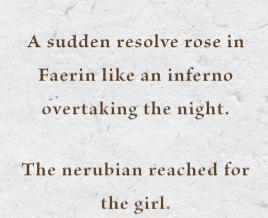
Clenching her eyes shut, Faerin took a hard breath. The heat in her center intensified, burning away the fear that had frozen her. She pushed to her feet just as the nerubian loomed over Molly, who finally lifted her little face. Her dark eyes went wide with dread. A sudden resolve rose in Faerin like an inferno overtaking the night.

The nerubian reached for the girl.

Faerin rushed forward.

The howl in her throat burst forth. Her vision went bright as she flung herself between those outstretched claws and the child. The creature shrieked. She braced for pain.

Nothing happened.



Faerin rushed forward.

She blinked her eyes open, and shock lodged itself in her throat. A dome of radiance shimmered around both her and Molly, the source—her raised palm—now glowing gold. The nerubian beat against the shield uselessly, but the Light prevented the attack from landing.

The monster screeched its frustration of a meal denied, its warbling cut short by the bladed end of a spear erupting from its chest. Thick ichor splattered across the floor and sizzled against the dome, the monster sending more tendrils flying as it scrabbled at the blade, slicing its appendages to ribbons. It clacked and clicked in its death throes, then crumpled with a wet *thump*.

Standing over the body, braced against the other end of the spear, was the paladin who had come crashing through the window. His panted breaths rattled from behind his faceplate, his gaze fixed on Faerin. There was confusion in those eyes as he took in the scene, then slow understanding dawned, followed by the first of many impressed looks she would receive over the coming years.

"You're . . . doing that on your own," he said, his voice low and pained.

Faerin could only nod, slowly lowering her hand. As she did, the dome and the Light at her fingers faded.

Molly whimpered where she'd clutched at Faerin's leg.

"Incredible," the paladin said before a chorus of shouts drew his attention. He turned, hefting his weapon, only for his entire body to sag with relief.

"Forward!" cried a familiar voice, one Faerin often heard softly expressing disappointment in her studies.

General Steelstrike, backed by a contingent of soldiers, swept forward in a methodical rush of blades and arrows. The nerubians still in the streets fled shrieking into the darkness or were felled.

"Thank the Flame." The paladin sighed, then removed his helmet. She recognized him. Ryton Blackholme. He was one of the younger members of the expedition, a talented fighter and just as skilled at molding blades as wielding them. Faerin didn't know every soldier who reported to the general, but she knew the ones who'd made names for themselves. He looked to Molly, then Faerin. "Are either of you injured?"

Faerin managed to shake her head, but little Molly simply remained pressed against her.

"Good," he said, sinking more as the soldiers' shouts drew nearer.

Seeing him relax, the fist of fear around Faerin's heart began to loosen. She'd done it. She'd held fast against the monsters in the dark.

"Faerin, right?" Ryton said, his voice a touch raspy.

She nodded. It was no surprise he knew who she was. As the first and only child in the entire settlement, most were aware of her reputation for giving General Steelstrike no end of trouble.

"You have heart," he continued. "And something more, it seems."

Suffice it to say, neither Sygfraed nor the general were thrilled to hear of Faerin's bravery, both insisting she was not adequately trained for combat and should have stuck to the protocol. But there could be no doubt that more than one life was spared that day due to Faerin's bravery. Because of this, and her blossoming skill in wielding the Sacred Flame, the general begrudgingly let her begin a proper warrior's training.

In the ensuing months, as the orphanage was repaired—the shattered window replaced with fortified wood to form a wall—Faerin found herself spending less and less time there. She was set on a new path now, one that led her to where she stood today.

Her mind continued to bounce from memory to memory, from her first day as a soldier in training, to the day Ryton fought by her side one last time, to the moment she swore the oath to become a Lamplighter, to take the Light with her into the dark.

And now here, where she would ask to take the Light farther.

"Faerin, have you been waiting for me?" called a voice.

For the second time today, she found herself caught off guard. Great Kyron stood a short distance off, their expression amused and curious but pinched with a touch of concern.

Faerin bounded to her feet, nodding her respects. "Great Kyron. I . . . sorry, I didn't mean—I'd hoped to speak with you, if I may."

"Of course." They gestured for her to follow them into the meeting space. It was sparsely decorated, mostly with maps pinned to the walls, each drawn and redrawn to depict enemy and troop movements, both the Lamplighters and the general standing forces.

Faerin had spent much time in this office, for good and not so good reasons. It pricked at something inside her that this might be the last time she and her commander would convene here.

"Is everything all right?" Great Kyron asked as they made their way around the desk to take a seat.

"Yes. That is to s-say, nothing is wrong. *Actively.*" Faerin began, then had to clear her throat when she felt her voice start to crack. She took a slow breath.

Faerin was no stranger to fear. She had known and faced it many times, conquered it many more, but it always managed to rise again. An undefeatable enemy. An immortal foe. But while fear may have often spurred her into acting, it was faith that ever guided her. It would be no different now.

"There is nothing wrong," she reaffirmed. "But I would like to put in a formal request. Anduin, Alleria, and the others will be returning to the surface soon. I would like to go with them."

The look that crossed Kyron's face wasn't what Faerin expected. She'd braced herself for disappointment, perhaps some incredulity or even anger—though she'd never seen Great Kyron express either. Instead, what she saw was a slight furrow of understanding.

"I had a feeling this conversation was coming."

Faerin couldn't keep her own surprise from dawning. "You . . . you did?"

"Oh yes. For some time now." Kyron bid Faerin sit, which she quickly did. "Having witnessed you these past weeks rally to the defense of not just Hallowfall but the whole of Khaz Algar? Your request is not surprising."

Faerin felt the familiar fist around her heart tighten, but the ache this time wasn't from fear. "Serving my people as a Lamplighter, under you, has been the greatest honor of my life."

"But . . ." Great Kyron coaxed when the silence between them stretched.

"But there is something . . . . *more* I must do," she finished. "I'm not entirely sure what that something is, but I know I have a duty to fulfill. Out there. It is a calling I heard even as a child. It's what drove me to leave my life, my family behind. And for a time, it bid me stay here. But now—"

"It draws you elsewhere," they finished.

Faerin lifted her chin, meeting Great Kyron's steady but not unkind gaze. Silence descended once more, and this time Faerin felt she may drown in it.

Now comes the disappointment, she thought.

But Kyron merely regarded her before finally speaking into the quiet. "Faerin, you have been one of our best. That will not change with your location. I have trained many Lamplighters in my time—and I do not believe flattery serves any purpose but to dull a sharp blade—but I have seen your faith bring you this far. If what drew you across the world and into its depths now calls to you again, I believe you would be ill advised not to answer. And while I have no idea where this path may lead you, one thing I am sure of . . . is that you will be missed."

The smile that pulled at Kyron's expression eased a tension in Faerin she hadn't realized she'd been holding. With its release she felt the sting of tears. Immediately she wanted to fight them back, to swallow the emotional response for the inappropriate display it may be, but the look on Great Kyron's face told her that wouldn't be necessary.

"Fitting, that one of the empire's most prominent houses is poised to rise in a time such as this. Still, Hallowfall will be that much dimmer," they lamented, bittersweet.

Faerin blinked rapidly as she finally allowed the tears to fall in a mix of joy and sorrow. "But the Sacred Flame burns ever on."

Faerin was dismissed to make preparations, which meant the part in all this she was looking forward to the least: saying goodbye.

Most of her fellow Lamplighters were easy to find at the inn where Meradyth said they would be. The whole way there Faerin debated how she would break the news, whether she would take them aside one by one or say her piece to all at once. In the end, she decided to simply get it over with, like setting a bone.

After the words were out of her mouth, there was more silence and staring. Then raucous cheers went up. Everyone congratulated her, offering well-wishes. A few playfully and teasingly groused their jealousies at not getting to go and ultimately decided to drown their collective sorrows in blessed brew. And why not? Though their comrade would be missed, a great victory had been won, with allies from across all Khaz Algar. If there was a time to allow for a little extra frivolity, now was it.

"It is a calling I heard even as a child. It's what drove me to leave my life, my family behind. And for a time, it bid me stay here.

But now—"

"It draws you elsewhere," they finished. Though there was a brief moment where Meradyth pulled Faerin aside to murmur into the rim of her cup, "I knew it."

"Yes," Faerin sighed, amusedly put upon. "You did."

Meradyth aimed a finger at her. "I always do. And while I'm not happy about this for me, I *am* happy for you. And proud to say I know you and call you friend."

Warmth blossomed in Faerin's chest, and she felt a wide smile break across her face

Then Meradyth's arms were around her, tight and strong. "Thank you for your honest courage. And for everything else."

Faerin returned the hug as firm as she could. Then it was time to let go.

That night led to another day of goodbyes, amidst packing her meager belongings. She chose to face General Steelstrike next, who was quick to point this out as yet another incident in a long line of undesirable behavior.

"Know that this stubborn refusal to heed protocol will likely lead you into other dangers, dangers beyond . . . my reach." It wasn't said with anger or the usual irritation the general held for Faerin. "Not that you've needed me to save you much at all these days," the general eventually relented with a sag of her shoulders and a heavy breath.

It was in that moment that Faerin got a glimpse of the woman beneath the warrior. The exhaustion that came with the weight of carrying the well-being of an entire community on your shoulders.

"I've needed you from the beginning," Faerin offered from where she stood at attention on the other side of the large table. "I will no doubt need you again in the future, but know I take your lessons with me. Your teaching and guidance have meant the world to me. I just . . . I wanted that to be known."

The two women regarded one another for a moment. Then, surprisingly, it was Steelstrike who broke first. She crossed the space between them and pulled Faerin into a hug so tight she felt lightheaded from it. Faerin returned the embrace, fingers clutching at the fabric draped over her former guardian's armor.

"The strength of the Arathi shines within you," Steelstrike murmured before drawing back to discreetly swipe beneath one eye. Then she straightened and nodded. "Go forth and show the world."



Faerin's next goodbye took her to the stables, where a huge lynx lazed in the doorway, chewing noisily on a dented-in child's ball the orphans had either lost track of or had thrown to the big cats in an attempt to get them to play.

Stepping past the creature—which barely flicked an ear in her direction while it continued to chew—she made her way to a pen in the back, calling in singsong as she went. "Blaaaazeclaaaaaw"

Ryton's lynx lifted her head from where she'd been lazing about. The great cat, more than used to Faerin's comings and goings by now, began to rumble loudly with a purr as the Lamplighter lowered herself to scratch and rub everywhere she could on the creature.

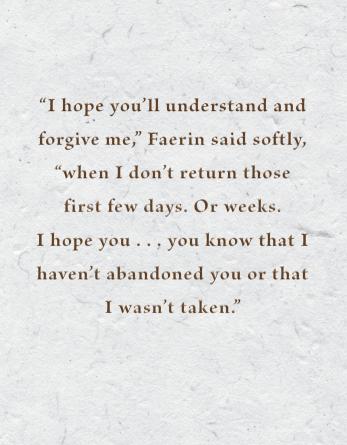
"Who's a good girl? That's you, yes? Yes, you are." Despite her presented aversion to cats, Faerin had come to rather enjoy the great beasts. They were intuitive in a way most people were not.

"I hope you'll understand and forgive me," Faerin said softly, "when I don't return those first few days. Or weeks. I hope you . . . you know that I haven't abandoned you or that I wasn't taken." Her fingers clutched at a patch of fur, and the lynx rumbled a complaint that made her loosen her hold. Instead, she wrapped her arm around Blazeclaw's neck and buried her face in her fur. "I pray you are comforted. That someone still brings you fresh-caught fish and spring grasses."

She felt the sting of tears again but did not cry. No, she had one more goodbye to get through after this one, and she would need all of her tears for then. So she straightened her back against the wood of the stall, the cat's head resting in her lap while she scratched between its ears.

After an hour or so of more petting and scratching, and at least three helpings of treats, Faerin lifted the strap of her pack and slung it over her shoulder to make the slow trek to the grounds of the priory, where she kept her head bowed and only acknowledged those who greeted her first. The whole of her felt dragged down, as if her legs were made of lead and a stone had fallen into her stomach.

She trod along the paths that just days before had been overrun with misery and



shadow, ascended nerubians striking from the dark. The Harbinger had taken their most holy seat of power, and Faerin—along with Alleria, Anduin, and many other champions from the old world—had battled to drive out those last vestiges of the Void's influence. Alleria and her people were blessed to be given back a dear friend once lost. Anduin had finally taken to hear what Faerin had been telling him all along, that the Sacred Flame does not abandon those who need it. And yet, walking down this familiar path, she felt a twinge of bitterness.

It was human, as the saying goes, to feel such things. To know the pain of loss and sorrow as keenly as one would the pain of a knife. But it was not the way of the Arathi, the Lamplighters, to wallow in those feelings. Acknowledge them, yes, but find the courage and strength to move ever forward.

Alleria's friend—Khadgar—had been restored, and for not the first time Faerin found herself wondering why not *her* friends. Why not Ryton or Andari or Molly's parents or any of the numerous others stolen despite the best efforts of her and the other Lamplighters?

She shoved these thoughts aside when she reached her destination, a rise of rock near the bridge to the Dayspring Fields. Faerin stood, staring out at the view, listening to the groan of the waterwheel behind her, watching the airships drift overhead. This had been one of her and Andari's favorite spots. They'd come here for brief moments of respite, to play round after round of Light's Gambit, or sit and talk not as Lamplighters or soldiers, but friends.

In this moment, knowing it might be the last she'd ever set foot here, Faerin felt Andari's presence as if they stood beside her. She tightened her grip on a pair of recently carved and painted Light's Gambit pieces, and the tears she'd mostly managed to tamp down for days flowed free.

"I'd give anything for you to be here," Faerin whimpered into the wind, her head bowed and her arm wrapped tightly around her middle. Her palm ached where her hand fisted around the pieces, wood digging into flesh. "Part of me knows you'd pack my bag and send me off yourself if you were. Maybe even . . . come with me. Maybe I would even ask you." A faint laugh escaped her, and she stepped forward to kneel in the grass, reaching to set the pieces there.

Her fingers brushed the earth, and she thought again of all they'd shared, the time they spent together. Their sacrifice. Their bravery.

"I carry you with me always," Faerin whispered. "Your memory a light unto my feet. Watch over them for me. Protect them where I can't. Flame keep your spirit." Her vision blurry, she pushed herself up onto trembling legs and turned.

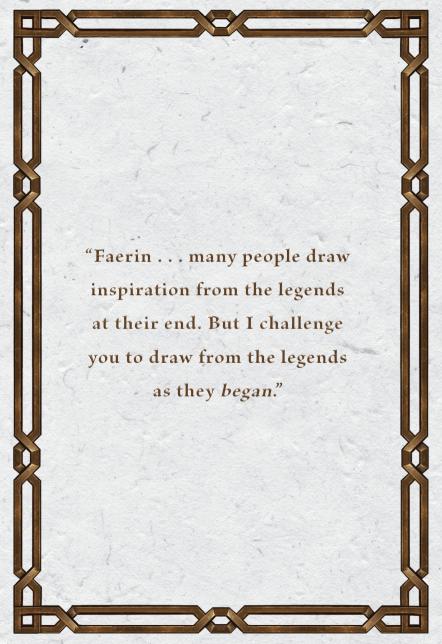
Each step fell heavier than the last in some ways and yet lighter in others. This was it. While she knew this was what she was meant to do, and the process had been smoother than she'd expected, it brought into sharp relief the pain of what she was leaving behind. She missed Ryton, who would know what to say or do to assure her. She missed Andari, who would have helped her process everything over a game of Light's Gambit. Knowing the path was one thing, walking it another, and walking it alone . . .

She had often wondered if Queen Craishae had missed the people she left behind when she embarked on her journey to safeguard the world, knowing she may never return. When she bathed in the fiery waters and everything she'd been before burned away.

"Of course she did," Sygfraed had assured her one night when she'd posed the question to him, having spent the better part of days pondering over the parallels between that story and her own. The man then frowned a little. "But sacrifice is not an aspiration. It is an acceptance. Craishae still fought to live, and she lived fully in honor of those who fell before her. Faerin . . . many people draw inspiration from the legends at their end. But I challenge you to draw from the legends as they began."

And as Craishae had begun her legend full of hope and determination, so Faerin felt the same burn within her. And with that flame she could take each step farther and farther from her and Andari's special place, from memories of Ryton, the Lamplighters, from the stable and Blazeclaw, from General Steelstrike, from the orphanage and the children there and Sygfraed too, whom she couldn't say goodbye to. Not really. With any luck, the little ones would think of her and know she was off on a grand adventure, like the ones she read to them about. And who knows, with time, perhaps she could bring them back new stories of her own.





The journey to Dornogal was one she'd made before, only this time it felt different. Maybe the sky seemed clearer without the surety that she would be returning to a home underground. Perhaps the air felt crisper now that she knew she would leave these familiar lands and their ways for new places.

Whatever the case, it caused her to quicken her step as she approached the gathered number who would be making the trek via portal to the old world. Excitement thrummed in her veins, burning similarly yet so very different from the Light, which also hummed eagerly within her.

She spotted Anduin amidst the throng and approached him, and a smile pulled wide at her face when she caught sight of the grin he wore. He seemed . . . brighter, less heavy in a way she knew but could not name.

"Faerin!" he called. "I was beginning to worry if, well . . . "

"If I'd changed my mind about leaving behind my oath, my friends, everything I've known for adventure in a wide new world?" she asked, arching an eyebrow in what she hoped was only *slightly* accusatory.

The way his expression flattened sent delight rolling through her. She laughed and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Easy. I'm still going, with the blessings of everyone I care for and gratitude for all they taught me."

The relief that washed over Anduin was equally amusing. "It's only that I would understand! If you had, that is—changed your mind. I say this while realizing I'm only just now returning from my own adventure into the world."

"And was it what you needed?" Faerin asked, a touch of doubt creeping in just so. "This adventure, I mean, did you find what you were after?"

There was a pause as the man frowned, dropped his gaze briefly, then returned it to her as his smile softened. "I have."

"Faerin." Jaina Proudmoore came to stand next to Anduin, peering at him and then at her. "Good to see you. Anduin was worried you wouldn't make it in time."

"Is that so?" Faerin asked, smirking as the king seemed to lose his tongue a moment.

Anduin cleared his throat. "I-I was just concerned you would have to go through the portal on your own. I wasn't sure if you've traveled by magic before, and it can be disorienting at best your first time. I didn't want you to have to experience something like that alone "

Jaina smirked but said nothing, letting a knowing look do all the talking for her. "In either case, I'm glad you're here and that you've given him a taste of his own medicine."

"Pardon?" Anduin asked, recovering from his brief fluster.

"Now you know what it's like to look after a headstrong noble, prone to doing what they want rather than what they've been counseled."

He huffed faintly. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

"You know very well what it means, Jerek."

The bit of color that crawled up the king's neck didn't go unnoticed, but it went unremarked upon as Jaina mercifully changed the subject. "Faerin, you should know, it took some convincing for Danath to agree to this. There is . . . a lot going on back home he'll have to see to almost immediately, same for us. But know that you will still be in the best of hands, and we will be there should you have need of anything."

Faerin nodded, her smile still in place from her previous humor. She had to admit she was disappointed that it wouldn't be Anduin showing her more of the old world, having been the one who shared the most about it. But she understood that he had duties to see to, what with his return and the Harbinger's whereabouts unknown.

Offering thanks as Jaina moved on, Faerin turned her attention to Anduin. Her smile eased a touch higher at one corner. "Jerek?"

He coughed into a fist as the faint splash of red reached his cheeks. He turned, glancing every which way except Faerin's. It was endearing. "That's a story for another time, I think. We're set to leave any moment now. Where is Danath?"

As if summoned by the mention of his name, Danath Trollbane emerged from the gathered number. An old king and soldier, battle worn and ready, he dipped in reverence to Anduin, who quickly returned the bow, then angled around to Faerin.

"You must be Lamplighter Lothar." Danath offered a hand, and Faerin took it. "It's an honor."

"Likewise." She stole a last look at Anduin, who seemed to have recovered well enough.

"I hope the old world lives up to your expectations," Danath said.

"In truth, I don't know what to expect," Faerin admitted. The old world was unknown to her, full of new wonders and dangers alike. But Queen Craishae's story still echoed in her heart, and that pull at her center settled any and all doubt. The calling that she would answer, same as her ancestor had done. What she didn't know, the Sacred Flame would guide her through. So she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. "But I am eager to find out."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Named one of *The Root's* and BET's 100 most influential African Americans, **Leatrice "Elle" McKinney**, writing as L. L. McKinney, is an advocate for equality and inclusion in publishing and the creator of the hashtags #PublishingPaidMe and #WhatWoCWritersHear.

Elle is a lover of comics, anime, video games, sci-fi, and fantasy, and strives to push these mediums toward representation that better reflects the diverse world we live in. An adamant HeiHei stan living in Kansas City, she spends her free time with her family or plagued by her cats—Sir Chester Fluffmire Boopsnoot Purrington Wigglebottom Flooferson III, esquire, Baron o' Butterscotch, and Lord Humphrey Blepernicus Zoomerson Wailingshire Toboeans Chirpingston IV, Breaker of Things I Love. Or Chester and Humphrey for short.

Her works include the Nightmare-Verse books, the award-winning *Nubia* graphic novels through DC, Marvel's *Black Widow: Bad Blood*, and many more.