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There was a certain beauty to this place, even she could admit that. A beauty born of tragedy, of horror, but for the moment, Alleria Windrunner pushed such nuance from her mind as she stood on a high, nameless peak at the edge of Telogrus Rift. She stared out into the violet-purple fury of the Void that swirled around the shattered remains of the lost world, seeking . . . perspective. Solace.

Tell Khadgar what we learned. I will return to Dalaran in time.

Alleria's words haunted her. It was avoidance, a sidestepping of her responsibilities. Right now, the new threat to Azeroth felt too big, too abstract—yes, the Harbinger, Xal'atath, was coming, and her world faced a challenge like no other.

As did she. Through the Void, she commanded untold power, but it also went the other way—while the darkness was a part of her, she was a part of *it*. Xal'atath knew this and could use Alleria for some unseen end.

Once more, Alleria felt her connection to the darkness was more a curse than a blessing.

This, against the fact that Azeroth itself sat on the edge of destruction. Alleria knew she had friends and allies to call on, but were they really a match for the Harbinger?

This entity that had survived thousands of years, heralded the annihilation of countless worlds? Besides, at this precise moment, she wasn't sure she could face them so soon after confronting the phantom of her love, Turalyon, conjured by Xal'atath to—

To do what? Kill her? No, nothing so mundane.

It had been to *unbalance* her. And it had worked. She had played right into the Harbinger's plans. Alleria had been unprepared, and somewhere inside burned the fear that Xal'atath would win.

"I sense a troubled mind."

Alleria looked up from the view of infinity before her to see Locus-Walker slowly approaching. She took a long, deep breath.

"Locus-Walker, I need *answers*. You said you believe Xal'atath seeks for Azeroth the same fate which Dimensius delivered unto K'aresh. I must . . . I must know everything that happened here. You cannot possibly expect—"

Locus-Walker hovered, unmoving, and she knew he would remain there forever, patiently waiting for Alleria to find her center, her moment. Only she wasn't sure she could, not this time.

She lowered her head. She knew what she wanted to say, what she felt she *must* say, but . . . well, hadn't they done this dance before, so many times? She sought to forge ahead, protect her world, but he would give her nothing until she understood the lesson he wanted to impart. This was old ground, well trodden. And yet it was something she couldn't escape. The phantom of Turalyon had admirably demonstrated her need for wisdom.

"I am afraid," said Alleria, finally training her gaze on Locus-Walker. "Of Xal'atath. Of the past. Of what happened to K'aresh. Of what will happen to Azeroth." She paused. "But most of all, I am afraid of *myself*. Of the Void within me. A power I thought I made peace with long ago."

"There is no shame in fear," said Locus-Walker. "The Void is a terrible thing. I will not deny it. That the Void is part of you is something you have learned to live with, even if you can never truly accept it. Just as I must live with my own nature."

Alleria closed her eyes tight. "Perhaps Lothraxion was right," she whispered. "Once you've invited the Shadow into your heart, it ends in madness."

Locus-Walker's laugh surprised Alleria. She opened her eyes to find his ethereal form drifting backward a step, his gold-and-purple spaulders shaking with mirth.

"My pain amuses you?"

"What amuses me, Alleria," he said, tilting his unreadable, bandage-wrapped face, "is that you would remember his words from so long ago but not my own."

"Then tell me again. Speak to me now. I am open to your counsel." She felt her shoulders sag. "I know I must find my balance again, but I must also know the disaster that looms if I am to avert it."

The two faced each other on the tor for a moment, then Locus-Walker turned away. "Come," he said as he began to descend the slope.

Alleria didn't move. "Where?"

Locus-Walker didn't stop. "We have a task to perform."

"What task? Have we the time?"

At this, Locus-Walker came to a halt and faced her. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. But I believe this quest may be of great benefit to you."

"That is a lot of words to say nothing."

Locus-Walker nodded. "There is a Void revenant somewhere at large here in Telogrus Rift. It is dangerous, and it must be eliminated, but it has concealed itself. The hunt will be restorative—for you, and perhaps for me also. You may gain some perspective on your own nature. You may even repair the trust in yourself that now lies broken."

Alleria frowned. "You promise much. How, exactly, will hunting a creature of the Void help clear my mind?"

"Because while we track, I will tell you a story," said Locus-Walker.

Curiosity piqued, Alleria took a step toward him. Locus-Walker slowed to keep pace beside her.

"It is a tale about balance," he said, "and about my world of K'aresh and the doom that came upon it \dots "



K'aresh was never like your Azeroth. Never green and blue, blanketed by oceans or teeming with growing things. K'aresh was a harsh place, a world of sand and stone and dust. But there was something else—a certain magic—and perhaps aided by that magic, life found a foothold, as it often does. For ourselves, the K'areshi, we loved this hard world, and whatever it lacked, we made. Lessons of survival became our means of innovation until, some millennia later, our society grew into a great web of city-states.

Ma'nussa was the one I called my home. I was a technomancer, a noble class indeed, my life dedicated to studying energy harvest and transference. Our society was built upon oaths, from the lowest nomad to the Oracles themselves, those mighty few who led us in all facets of life. These oaths were no mere fancy; they were the sworn ties that bound us to our work and to one another, a sacred act above no other. To break an oath was to cast aside life itself and to die, alone among the sands.

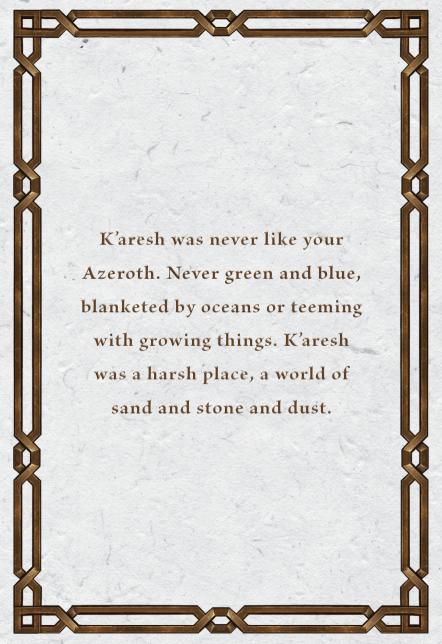
Each city-state had its ruler—thanks to my status, I was pleased to count Ky'veza, the leader of Ma'nussa, among my closest companions—but it was the Council of Oracles who held authority in all things. The council was led by Salhadaar, High Priest of the Untamed, and when the radiant visions first swept K'aresh, it was his wisdom I sought. When that terrible curse fell upon a number of K'areshi, myself among them, I overcame my fear to pursue its study. I redirected my laboratories, my observatories, my every effort to focus on the matter. I collated the data, and I made my conclusions. The problem was not a simple one, but I looked to the Oracles. They had guided me as they guided all K'aresh; I knew their advice would be a valuable jewel indeed.

How wrong I was. The meeting of the Oracles was a labor, long in duration, complex in its politics. As the hours ran on, my confidence began to leave me, and when Salhadaar called the council to order for one final time, I knew what he was going to say before he said it.

Yet I had to hear it for myself.

Salhadaar stood, motioning for the table to hush. Around him, the Council of Oracles fell silent, eager to know his final judgment.

I could see the whole council was set against me. All my work, all the data collected from my visorscopes and intrinsic lanterns and many more devices, meticulously compiled and correlated and annotated. Months of toil, all for nothing.



I felt hope failing me as I met the eyes of each representative—there was Salhadaar, and beside him the Soul-Scribe, his closest confidante. Then there was Etries of the Architects and her lackeys, a motley collection indeed. Others I knew by name—those of the Testing I was the least familiar with, they being the least interested in my work—but among the rest I could count on my one true friend, Ky'veza, in whose city the council now sat. Of Bilaal, ruler of Tazavesh, I remained uncertain, although I knew Ky'veza had his ear. The pair sat together and had not yet spoken.

Salhadaar had at least agreed to Ky'veza's request to hold the meeting in her city, rather than insisting I travel to their customary gathering place in Tazavesh. Indeed, he'd heeded my urgent call with rare haste, had sped his entourage across the wastelands with help from the Soul-Scribe, ruler of the wild lands between. The rest of the Oracles had gathered with equal vigor—now staring down at me, seeming all too eager to witness my downfall.

The silence in the chamber was a living thing, thick and moving. I could bear it no longer.

"Forgive me."

At this, whispers raced through the assemblage. Ky'veza looked up, puzzlement clouding her features. I had clearly said the wrong thing.

"We may discuss forgiveness at another time," said Salhadaar. "First we must talk of blasphemy."

The Oracles nodded at one another, impressed with their own wisdom.

"Blasphemy?" Any hope of intelligent debate between peers vanished as the ultimate accusation was so lightly made. I felt my fists curl around the hem of my light summer robe, anger and frustration coursing through me. "The visions that radiate from the Worldsoul are real. I have heard it, and my data prove it!" I gestured to the high shuttered windows of the market guild chamber, quickly co-opted for the council meeting. "Ma'nussa has heard!" I opened my arms to the table. "You have heard it, surely!"

"I have heard nothing," came Etries's voice. Her fellows smiled. There was to be no discussion with them. Salhadaar nodded his assent, as did the Soul-Scribe and Bilaal. I turned to Ky'veza, but she would not meet my eye.

"A time comes," Salhadaar said, "when we cannot overlook your conduct. For years, the Oracles have entertained your . . . interest, shall we call it, in the Void. At first it was an amusement, a diversion. That I understood. But now, diversion has become distraction."

"You have taken an oath," said Bilaal, more confident than usual. "We have *all* taken an oath, providing each of us their place and purpose." He stabbed a finger at me. "Your oath is to the technomancers, to study the transfer and transmutation of energy so that we may master it for the benefit of K'aresh. We've not seen a report on your proposed usage of the Reshii Ribbons in months. You neglect your sacred duties, *Void-Sorcerer.*"

I blanched at the epithet. Never before had the Oracles uttered it to my face, but there it was. *Void-Sorcerer*. I had been called worse, but this was a title that filled me with dishonor, and Bilaal knew it.

And yet, I was right to bring my work to the Oracles, I knew I was. The radiant visions were the cry of K'aresh's Worldsoul; this I had confirmed, tracing the source of the visions to the deep heart of our world. I had transformed the abstract to the real, and it was precisely because of my work in decoding the mysteries of the Void that I had been able to achieve this.

My research was, I had argued time and again, an unavoidable part of my oath-sworn endeavors in energy research. One could not exist without the other; to understand energy was to understand all its forms, including the Void. And the Oracles had agreed . . . until I stumbled upon a discovery of great import. One of the K'areshi's greatest cultural artifacts from centuries past—the Reshii Ribbons—were themselves imbued with arcane power. They had such potential to aid in the transmutation of energy that it made the mind reel, if only I could find the key to unlocking their secrets.

With my discovery of the hidden potential of the Reshii Ribbons, my standing had risen among the council, at least for a short while. And so long as my research into the Void did not stray any further and interfere with my oath, they paid little attention to it.

I should have known the radiant visions would change that. To speak of the Worldsoul was to encroach on territory beyond my ken, and the council would see such presumption swiftly dealt with.

"You stand at a crossroads," said Salhadaar. "If you continue to study the Void, then your *real* work will suffer and your oath will be broken."

"And that is something we cannot countenance."

I looked aghast at Ky'veza as she raised her voice at last. She stared back at me, somehow finding the courage to support not her friend but the Council of Oracles.

"Let this be your final warning," said the high priest. "The Worldsoul is beyond the borders of your work. The radiant visions, if such exist, are to be left to those who are expert in such matters. You are to return your attention to the field of your own expertise and cease all research into the Void. Heed this command, or our next audience will be somewhat more difficult. That I promise."



The hours after that fateful council meeting were but a blur. I had loved Ma'nussa my entire life, yet I saw nothing of it as I stalked the streets, turning this way and that without thought. I found my mind curiously empty after Salhadaar's ultimatum. It was only when I heard the music of the spell-dancers drifting on the fragrant evening air that I realized just how late the hour had grown. Weary, I found my way to the market square and watched the performance of the troupe, who had arrived from the wastelands as part of the Soul-Scribe's caravan.

It was not the first time I had seen them, skirts whirling like spinning tops as their feet kicked sand over colored tiles. Indeed, their traditional dance was a familiar sight in Ma'nussa, the city an ancient resting place on one of the roads the nomads often traveled. And with the nomads came the spell-dancers, who spun for the cheering crowds while their kin collected coin among those gathered.

I had given plenty of coin myself over the years. The freedom in their movements had always been a pleasant escape from the toil of my work, but when I met Krysson, their performance became less an entertainment, more a pilgrimage. We first spoke when she wove between the onlookers to collect coin, taking the place of an absent brother, and at once there was a . . . connection. How or why, I don't think we ever knew. Some mysteries do not need to be solved.

After the night's dance, I waited as I always did when Krysson came to Ma'nussa, under the arches behind the market where the light did not reach, where the people did not walk, not while the night market was at its height. When she found me, she knew at once something was wrong. I rushed us away to a quiet corner, casting a glance here and there to be sure we had not been seen. For me—a technomancer and noble of a proud city-state—to be seen in intimate closeness with a nomad was to invite trouble for us both. Were I in better standing with the council, petitions could be made, backgrounds overlooked, but as I stood in their ire, I wished to spare her the same.

After we had conveyed our love for each other, I shared my troubled thoughts, and we talked long into the night about my work, the radiant visions, and the council.

"Come with me to Tazavesh," Krysson urged.

Her suggestion surprised me. I leaned back against the wall of the alley, and she rested her head upon my chest, her fingers gently following the contour of my face. I sighed and took her hand in mine.

"I will not run," I said.

"I am not telling you to run," she said. "The Oracles will depart for their homes tomorrow, and the Soul-Scribe is going with Salhadaar to Tazavesh."

I laughed. "You suggest I follow the very ones who would condemn this world to its end?"

Krysson pushed herself away from me, her expression stern. "I am saying you need a *rest*, my love. Time away from your work. It will do you good. You can visit the markets there, collect those parts for your laboratory you have been saying you need for weeks now." With a grin, Krysson pulled her cloak around her head and clutched it to her chest like an old crone. "We shall disguise ourselves and shop the market together! No one will look, no one will see!"

She laughed and leaned in and we kissed, and she stayed awhile longer until she knew she must leave. I accompanied her through the darkened city, the two of us playing a game of shadows, our stifled laughter echoing against the closed shutters of the market stalls. At her lodgings, we kissed for a final time, the scent of the desert lingering in the air when she left me.

I was only a scant few paces into my own journey home when I realized I was being followed, and by then it was far, far too late.



As the black bag was pulled roughly from my head, my only thoughts were of Krysson. The Void, the radiant visions, my sacred oath, the final warning of the Oracles, these meant nothing to me beside my love for her. We had been lax. *Complacent*. I cursed my hubris, the very notion that we were being careful. There were too many eyes upon us. And now the price needed to be paid.

The chamber I found myself in was bright, and I blinked to take it in. I had been dragged to a storehouse of some kind, stacked with crates and sacks and all manner of cargoes needed by the market. A quiet, dead space at this hour, the perfect place for my cries for mercy to go unheard.

I was not ready for the end, and as I wondered just how much I would beg for my life, a figure loomed before me and clasped me firmly by the arm. I blinked again, this time in sheer astonishment.

"Kv'veza!"

The smile of the friend I thought had abandoned me was glorious as a sunrise. She squeezed my arm, but I did not hear what she said, such was the roar of blood in my ears. I searched for the ruffian responsible for my kidnap as she too threw back her hood, revealing eyes that glittered like brilliant gemstones in the lantern light. I did not recognize the face, but she bowed her head in respect, before acknowledging someone standing behind me.

High Priest Salhadaar extended his hand. I stared at it—at him—and at the group I now saw gathered in an atmosphere of electric excitement. Besides Salhadaar and Ky'veza, I counted five other Oracles, including Bilaal and others too, not from the council but from my own city. There was Allash and Mideches and Darmeto of the technomancers, and beside them another group, two of whom I knew to be merchant-captains of the Ma'nussa market guild and two others I did not recognize. All present, high priest included, were clad in simple brown travel cloaks, the deep

hoods proving a more than adequate disguise.

"I see you have met Nari," said the high priest. He had the sense to look somewhat embarrassed as my abductor bowed again. "I had hoped your meeting would be under more *conventional* circumstances, but she is one of my finest covert agents. You will find in her a firm ally."

"As you will in all of us, I hope," said Bilaal. I glanced at him, remembering the cold anger he had directed at me but a few hours before.

Beside him, Ky'veza nodded, perhaps reading the doubt on my face. "Listen to the Ravel," she said, "and all will become clear."

I could only shake my head. "Ravel?" I turned to the high priest. "Is this a dream? Please, tell me what is happening."

"Before we proceed, I must impress upon you the need for secrecy," Salhadaar said. "No one can know of our meeting tonight." He gestured to the group. "We are the Ravel. A . . . collection, perhaps, of the sharpest minds in K'aresh. The sharpest, but also the most trusted."

He paused, and I glanced about the room. It was then I noticed an absence, for of the Soul-Scribe, there was no sign.

"The expertise and skill gathered here rivals none," the high priest continued, "and this alliance of friends I formed for one very specific reason."

"Which is . . . ?"

"We believe you," said Bilaal simply.

For a moment I wondered whether Nari had not black-bagged me at all, but had, in fact, knocked my mind from my body. Perhaps the bizarre meeting I now found myself in was merely a fevered imagining, as the covert hand of the Oracles carried me off, my body destined to be dumped in a city canal.

"The radiant visions," prompted Ky'veza. "The cry of the Worldsoul. It's all real. We believe you."

"We believe you," Salhadaar continued, "because we have heard it ourselves. We all have. For the moment, the visions are weak, quiet, a melody carried on a distant breeze and, for the moment, nothing more than a curiosity lingering from a half-remembered dream."

"But," said Bilaal, "they grow stronger. And so does the talk, the rumors about them. If we fail to control the situation, we risk widespread panic."

"Which is why you were deceived," said the high priest. "And why I ask now for your forgiveness." He looked into my eyes. "The council meeting was a sham, but one born of necessity. For that I am sorry."

I took a deep breath and tried to understand a twist of events I could not have begun to imagine.

And then I felt something else. A certain . . . lightness in my heart, a weight lifted. Something I had not felt in a long time.

Норе.

"You will kneel."

I gazed at Salhadaar as the high priest pointed to the floor before him. Around the room, the members of this secret society all lowered themselves and bowed their heads.

I knew what this was—an oath-taking ceremony. Once more I wondered if this was a dream, but when the high priest gestured again for me to kneel, I obeyed, my mind racing.

"We hold you in close confidence, friend," began Salhadaar. "Your knowledge is great, your wisdom greater. Will you take a new oath and join our number?"

To receive a new oath was a rare honor, for it signified that the work of my life was not only a great one but that I had achieved a level of mastery few could reach. In my surprise, I found I could not answer, but perhaps there was something written on my face, for Salhadaar smiled as he began the ritual.

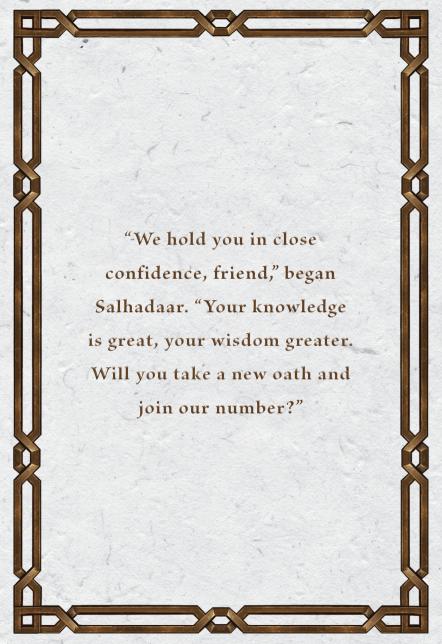
"Friend, do you, of your own accord, in the presence of your high priest, hereon swear to dedicate the work of your life to that which K'aresh calls you?"

My voice was weak, but I responded as I should. "I do."

"Do you swear to follow the path of your oath, to dedicate yourself to its guidance, until the work of your life is complete?"

"I do."

"Do you promise to forsake temptation and dedicate yourself to the work of your life, mind and body, committing yourself to seeking its meaning and understanding its import, venerating these mysteries until they are mysteries no longer?"



"I do."

"The oath is the path. Guard against all perils that strive to draw you from that path. The oath is the truth. Hold fast against all forces that strive to cast the shadow of deceit upon your journey."

At this I stood before the high priest, as around me the Ravel stood also.

"I name thee the *Locus-Walker*," said Salhadaar, "for this is your truth, as it is mine" And then he smiled

"Welcome to the Ravel."

As the suns rose beyond the storehouse walls, tendrils of light reaching down between the boards to caress our secret meeting, the Ravel applauded my joining. But as Salhadaar clasped my forearm in warm brotherhood, I heard two things.

The first was a voice inside my mind. I heard Void whispers often, could quell them and push them aside when I needed to, but this voice came louder. I felt fear grip me once more, but amidst these new tides of fate, I controlled myself, pushing aside any emotion as the voice delivered its message to me and me alone.

Beware, Locus-Walker, Beware,

But then I heard something else, and now, so too did my friends. For this sound was a very different thing. The Ravel tensed as one, searching for the source of the cries, the *screams*, the many voices joined in a chorus of terror. Within moments, it sounded as though every soul in Ma'nussa had risen with the suns, only to find some horror waiting.

We rushed outside, and in the early-morning light we gasped in astonishment at the arc of sky above us. The two suns of our world seemed to dim, their warm glow faint and growing fainter. The sky blackened, as though night were falling with impossible speed at an impossible time. At first that darkness was a purple, then it brightened.

Violet, the color of the Void itself.

Beware, Locus-Walker,

The All-Devouring comes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam Christopher is the New York Times bestselling author of Star Wars: Shadow of the Sith and Stranger Things: Darkness on the Edge of Town. He has also written official tie-in novels for the hit CBS television show Elementary and the award-winning Dishonored video game franchise Co-creator of the 21st century incarnation of Archie Comics superhero The Shield, Adam has written for Greg Rucka and Michael Lark's Lazarus series from Image Comics and Big Finish's Doctor Who universe. A contributor to the internationally bestselling Star Wars: From a Certain Point of View anniversary anthology series, Adam has also written for the all-ages Star Wars Adventures comic from IDW. Adam's original novels include Made to Kill and The Burning Dark, among many others, and his debut novel Empire State was both a SciFi Now and Financial Times Book of the Year.



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The Void roiled in the skies above Telogrus Rift as Locus-Walker led Alleria Windrunner on their chase. She was wearied by the journey, having lost track of how long they'd been on the move. Their hunt had been far from easy.

Telogrus Rift was swarming with creatures of the Void, drawn to this place by the power of the Harbinger. They had managed to evade many beings but had no choice in confronting others that stood in their path. True enough, they had all—so far, at least—been dispatched with ease, but Alleria could not deny how her mind lingered less on the battle and more on the picture of K'aresh that Locus-Walker had painted for her.

They followed a trail that was invisible to the eye, though not to the senses. At first, Alleria merely followed and listened, but as they neared their quarry, she began to feel it, the way the Void seemed to bend around their target. As though a huge boulder had been thrown into a mighty river, the energies of the Void parted around it, the current disturbed, the wake turbulent, unstable.

That sensation had grown ever stronger, and they stopped, hidden behind a shard of rock that rose like a blade from the barren ground of the rift. The rim of the shard was haloed with a bright violet light, betraying the presence of the Void revenant ahead of them.

"Remember," said Locus-Walker, "this creature is far more dangerous than those we have so far encountered. Its heart belongs to me, but it will take the both of us to overcome. Do not underestimate its strength."

Alleria tightened her grip on her bow. "And do not underestimate mine."

The Locus-Walker turned his inscrutable face to hers. "You seek the power to destroy your enemy. But Xal'atath will wield even your own power against you. You must first find balance."

Alleria's face fell. Locus-Walker had promised much would be gleaned from this journey, but right now, she couldn't see any moral or lesson from his potted history of a lost world. What struck her far more was that the powerful being before her—who claimed it best she let go of her every attachment—had once been fallible, emotional. Had once loved and fretted and feared as she now did.

"What... became of the K'areshi? Of Krysson?" Alleria asked, knowing it would needle him. "Is she like you now? Or did she fall along with your world?"

Her mentor did not answer. Alleria frowned and was about to ask again when the violet glow ahead flared brightly and vanished. Locus-Walker stepped out from behind the stone, Alleria at his side, bow raised.

The plain was empty. Of the Void revenant, there was no sign.

Alleria lowered her weapon. "Are we sure that was the one?"

"It was. Did you not feel it?"

Alleria nodded. "Perhaps it could feel us?"

Locus-Walker drifted a slow circle, scanning the landscape around them. Alleria did the same, her bow at the ready.

Then she saw it. Far away, amidst scattered boulders, a flash of violet, and in her mind, another pull, another tug of the Void.

She opened her mouth to shout, but Locus-Walker flew past her.

Alleria followed at a run.





Beware, Locus-Walker,

The All-Devouring comes.

Those words haunted me, along with that terrible day when the sky had pitched into a purple-tinged night without stars, a night that many feared would prove unending.

And yet, this was not the day of K'aresh's demise. Yes, there was unease. The markets remained closed, not just in Ma'nussa but in every city-state. People locked themselves indoors, fearful of the violet-purple glow that had cast the world into grim, unnatural shadow. Salhadaar convened the Council of Oracles, and many plans were discussed and debated as rumors grew, not just that the sky heralded the end of all things but that the Oracles were in hiding. Unrest churned among those who had seen the radiant visions and knew that action should have been taken long ago.

But it all came to naught. There was disbelief at first, morphing to relief, joy even, as the Oracles emerged and put forward a plan to banish the long and evil night. This plan was not rooted in technomancy, but in a turn to the ancient ways, which brought comfort to the minds who wished to find it. The people celebrated and then, with a resilience worthy of admiration as well as surprise, returned to their daily lives. Either the K'areshi were stronger than I had hoped, or their memories were shorter than I'd expected. Perhaps it was a little of both.

But I understood my new oath, the new work of my life. My resolve had never been stronger.

I had a world to save, and time was running out.



Although our departure had been delayed by the encroaching Void, I accepted Krysson's suggestion and we made a new home in Tazavesh. And while Ma'nussa would forever be *my* city, the months that followed among the bustling markets of Tazavesh were happy ones, and it was to Krysson I owed this joy. Salhadaar had elected to stay in the city, as did the Soul-Scribe. This meant the spell-dancers too had found a fixed abode, the first in many a season. At first, Krysson bristled against this. She and her brothers

and her sisters were nomads: a life on the road was *their* oath. To stay in one place was to build a prison for themselves, trapping the very spirits they danced to free.

But while Tazavesh was the true home for neither of us, it was here we found other advantages. We could walk the markets and traffic with the citizenry, and there were no eyes to watch us, no eavesdroppers to whisper. Tazavesh was freer in many ways, it seemed, and its people discarded the norms that had once labeled our relationship taboo.

With the Ravel, the work was as difficult as it was important. True to their word, the Ravel were eager to aid my research, but relocating my laboratory wholesale from Ma'nussa was a bridge too far. The high priest instead gave me a license to use what Tazavesh was most famous for: its market.

The market sprawled as wide as Ma'nussa itself, a town within a town, so large it had its own districts and precincts, the tables and stalls piled with every kind of ware from every corner of K'aresh. In truth, while I had been here before, it still made my head spin with both its size and its beauty—the towering spires, the colored suncloths that stretched between them, spanning impossible lengths; the rich smoke that rose between stalls, carrying the smells of a hundred cuisines from a dozen lands. Distracted as I was by the importance of my work and the doom I had to prevent, I came to rely on Krysson's help in gathering what I required, for she was well traveled and far more at ease dealing with traders and craftsmen than I, able to strike bargains with merchants to whom I could barely offer the simplest of greetings.

The work progressed and Krysson was by my side, and yet there was something very wrong.

Beware, Locus-Walker.

The All-Devouring is coming.

The voice remained.

Over the weeks and months, I had grown used to the radiant visions, had largely been able to put them from my mind as I focused on my work. Of Void whispers, there were many—indeed, from the very moment I first turned my visorscopes upon the Void, I heard the creatures there speak, but this voice was that other thing, the one from before, the one that was different, the one that had planted a seed of fear within

me, the one that I knew, I knew, had sought me out. And as it came again now in the marketplace, I froze.

Locus-Walker, heware.

I stopped, standing before a splendid stall of spun glass from Tingarla, one of the farthest city-states from Tazavesh. The goods commanded a high price indeed, the merchant careful to vet those she thought could afford it even as they approached her table.

Locus-Walker, beware.

The All-Devouring is coming.

He is near

He is the end

He is Dimensius

He is a lord of the Void, and he hungers.

It was Krysson who broke the spell. I recovered my senses and found her apologizing to the merchant, who stared with wary eyes at this nuisance blocking her stall. Krysson pulled me away in a silent daze back to our quarters, and it was there she waited patiently for an answer while I recovered my senses. I told her and she listened, and when my tale was done she considered what I had said with care, her questions and observations astute. This was the first time I had spoken of the voice, and she the first person to know of it.

"It must be related to the radiant visions," she said. "Perhaps your close work investigating the Void opened your mind to . . . something else."

I had no answers, of course, and she had little to say that could comfort me. Conversation then turned to her own news—the spell-dancers were taking to the road once more. Krysson told me she could stay if I wished, but even as she made her offer I knew what my answer would be. She had her own oath to fulfill, as did I.

I promised her I would not allow the fear in my mind to interfere with my work.



I lost many weeks alone. Yes, I worked and worked hard, but at such a *cost*, forgoing rest and sustenance and any distraction as the voice in my mind pushed aside this happy freedom I'd found with Krysson, replacing it with a fear—and yes, it was fear, despite the promise made to my love—of the mounting danger facing K'aresh. My instruments told me Void energies were accumulating around our world at a truly alarming rate. One day—and soon—these Void energies would do more than strike terror into the K'areshi. They would tear our world apart, laying bare the Worldsoul itself, and our fear only spiced these Void energies as one would prepare ingredients for a meal.

Beware the All-Devouring.

But my toils had not been for nothing. In my weeks of research I had found an answer—indeed, it had been there from the start, but only now had I begun to see it. I could devise a means of protecting K'aresh and its people.

I could save my world—but I could not do it alone.

I needed the Ravel and the full extent of the world's resources to pull off this feat. I met with them regularly to keep them abreast of my progress, but as time passed I saw how they looked at me, and perhaps I could not blame them. I was exhausted but possessed of a feverish intensity even I could recognize as unnerving. The data was complex, decipherable only to myself, a poor salesman on my best day. And the work was not yet complete. Perhaps that was my greatest failing, that I did not give them the solution from the start.

But I wanted to be sure. So I waited, and that wait cost me.

And all the while, the voice, the voice! What was once a simple warning was now a strange poetry that pulled at my every thought.

Locus-Walker, beware.

The All-Devouring is coming.



After a long stretch of sleeping in my laboratory, barely emerging for meals, I returned home to find Krysson waiting for me. Seeing her was a glorious balm for my troubled mind. She embraced me and held me, and all I could do was stand there and weep.



When I was finished, empty, she pulled away. I moved to kiss her, and she pushed me back with a laugh. She prepared a bath, which was long and hot and wonderful, and I did nothing but succumb to her attentions as she scrubbed and washed the lost weeks away. Then she drained and drew the bath afresh to join me in it, and for a time I forgot about the Void and the Ravel. Krysson even managed to drown out the voice in my mind.

I felt . . . complete. *Whole.* For the first time in weeks, I felt like *myself.* Wrapped in linens, we sat in the warm evening air and drank wine, and she told me of the places she'd been and the dances she'd danced. Why she loved K'aresh, even under the dark Void-touched skies, and why she loved life, and why she loved *me*.

Reunited and restored to my former self, I felt emboldened, certain of my work and my data. Certain that the solution I had found was the right one.

Tomorrow, they will listen, I told myself. They will have no choice.

Krysson saw my mind wandering, of course. "You must tell me what weighs on you," she breathed, a whisper of love and warmth, not of cold echoing darkness.

I took a breath, and Krysson squeezed my hand.

"Time is short," I said. "And I know the name of the threat looming over us."

Krysson cocked her head, concern evident upon her features, but she did not interrupt.

"It is called Dimensius," I said. "It is a void lord, and it is trying to pry apart K'aresh. That is why the Worldsoul cried out to us in the radiant visions. When this being will finally crack open and consume the world I do not know, but it is soon. That is what my data show. The world will be torn asunder, and the K'areshi will die in darkness and pain and terror."

I saw the change in Krysson's features, a hint of that fear I knew so very well, now taking root inside her. I grasped her hand close to me.

"But I can save K'aresh."

Her eyes were wide with wonder. "You can stop a void lord?"

At this I shook my head. "No. And I believe nothing can. Dimensius will pry the planet apart. It is an unstoppable force."

"But you said-"

I squeezed her hand. "I said I can save K'aresh, or . . . most of it. The K'areshi will live. Whether the void lord will retreat from his meal, seek another target, I cannot know."

I felt my love for Krysson grow in that moment. I watched a transformation in her, her faith—her pride—in me and my work and my oath imparting a strength to her being as it did to my own. She even laughed, softly.

"What do the Ravel say?"

I laughed myself then. "I have yet to tell them."

Krysson pulled herself away and stood, her expression stern. "Time runs out and you have yet to tell them?"

I sighed. "It is . . . complicated, my love. We are a group divided. Some believe in me, but others call me Void-Sorcerer, saying it was a mistake for me to join their company." I felt my shoulders slump. "They are tired of problems and want for a solution. But they would smother such an answer in its cradle if I am ill prepared."

Krysson folded her arms tightly and began to stalk the room from balcony to bedchamber, her feet kicking at the carpets as a spell-dancer kicks at sand. I watched in surprise, awaiting a judgment I knew I deserved.

"If they want a solution, give it to them!" she said, not pausing in her strides. "If your calculations on the power of the Reshii Ribbons are finished, then present them." She stopped then and faced me, but this time her expression was warm. "You forget who you are. You are the Locus-Walker. *That* is the oath you swore. *That* is your truth." She walked to the balcony and opened her arms to the darkened city beyond. "We K'areshi are strong, all of us. But the Worldsoul, it called to *you*. You listened, you worked, and you have the answer. You have championed K'aresh even as the greatest among its number humiliated you, then turned to you in secret for help. *You* are the answer."

I did not know what to say. No being had ever made such wild declarations about me, had possessed such unshakeable faith in my worth. Krysson took my hands, pulling me to my feet. She kissed me gently. "You can save the world, my love. That is your truth."

I stared into her eyes and she into mine. I shook in her grasp, barely able to keep myself upright, and yet Krysson stood firm and proud, her strength a wonder of the world.

"But the Worldsoul, it called to you. You listened, you worked, and you have the answer. You have championed K'aresh even as the greatest among its number humiliated you, then turned to you in secret for help. You are the answer."

And she was right. Too long I had lingered, self-absorbed and full of doubt and fear, while the Ravel waited also, their own doubts and fears multiplying by the day.

Enough. Enough. I was Locus-Walker, and I was ready.

Let the Void come, for K'aresh would be ready also.



On the way to the Ravel with my final report, I found Nari and Ky'veza. Of the illustrious group, it was these two to whom I was closest, and I greeted them heartily in the market, only to see their open faces clouded with reluctance.

I pulled back the hood of my cloak—the improvement in my form must have been obvious, even to my companions, as both beheld me with some measure of surprise. Yet I saw a grimace pass across Ky'veza's face, and I felt suddenly nervous. I clutched tightly the bound findings I was due to present.

"There is *talk*," said Ky'veza, and then she stopped, her eyes falling to the dusty street. I knew this look, the same I saw at that last meeting of the Oracles, so long ago now.

"There are some among the Ravel who wish to distance themselves," Nari said. "From you and your work."

I searched Nari's face, as though the answers to any questions I had were etched there.

Beware the All-Devouring.

"This I know, Nari," I said. "But what has happened? Why the warning now?" Beware Dimensius.

She paused, seeking the right words. "Your research is hard for the council to understand. You also say that the approaching Void energies will soon begin affecting the planet itself, but we have not seen it; we rely only on *your* data, *your* findings. There are some who whisper that the old ways have been working, that technomancy has nothing more to offer K'aresh. And there are some—"

"There are some who want you out," Ky'veza finished. "They came to us last night. A delegation of those who wish to retract your oath. Those who think of you not as Locus-Walker but as Void-Sorcerer. They will be waiting for you."

I shook my head, but Nari's urgent tone bore into me once more. "Listen! There is still time to right the course, but little of it. You have supporters—we are fortunate to count Salhadaar among them—but even their patience begins to run dry. They need solutions."

I had learned to take Nari's counsel seriously, even more so than that of my old friend Ky'veza. As both a covert agent of the Oracles *and* a member of the Ravel, Nari saw and heard more than any other. People confided in her without even realizing it, and there was none with a better understanding of the current state of play than she.

Beware the All-Devouring.

"I have the solution," I said, and not without a little pride. "Here. Look. The work is done. I am ready."

I began to sort my papers until Nari stilled my hand with her firm grip.

Beware Dimensius.

"You are certain?"

Beware this lord of the Void.

I nodded. "It is why I called the meeting today."

He hungers.

"I can save K'aresh."

Nari and Ky'veza exchanged a glance. If they spoke, I could not hear them.

For I was listening to another voice entirely.



At Krysson's urging, I had issued the summons later than usual, and to the Ravel's credit, they responded in kind. As I made my way to the guildhall with Nari and Ky'veza at my side, I thought of their warning. Perhaps the speed of the Ravel's reply was not due to an eagerness to hear my solution, but rather, enthusiasm to witness my downfall.

And despite the detour of my conversation in the market square, we three arrived at the meeting place well before the remaining members of the secret society, as I had intended. Casting aside my customary traveler's cloak, I welcomed my peers one by one when they arrived, noting with some pleasure the shock on their faces at the sight of

me, bathed and proper, attired in my finest technomancer robes of gold and purple, the coronet of a nobleman of Ma'nussa sitting on my brow. At this even Bilaal, leader of Tazavesh himself, could not resist a smile, bowing low but with good humor before me, despite the difference in rank between us.

Yes, there was a change in me, and all could see it. It was now on my shoulders to make that change worthwhile. I had spent the preceding months demonstrating the problem to minds that were increasingly closed to me. Now, I would open them once more and show the solution.

"My plan is both a simple one," I began, "and the most complex undertaking K'aresh will ever see." I did not need the binding of parchment I had brought with me, for I could recite every detail of my scheme like a well-loved song. But I had brought something else to aid in my argument, and I took it out now. It seemed light as nothing, a mere strip of silver cloth, smooth, billowing with motion like a gentle river. But when I moved it in my hands, a light shone from deep within, casting arcane beams across the guildhall, pale yet otherworldly, leaving none in doubt as to the nature of the power woven into the very fabric itself.

"The Reshii Ribbons are something we all know," I said. "They are held by most of K'aresh's leaders, symbolic of our ties to the ancient ways. They form part of our history, a reminder of our past. But I say to you now, they are also the key to our future. We know the arcane lives within them, but it is I who have found the secret to calling upon that power." I held the strip up above my head. "Through devices of my design, these sacred artifacts can transmute *any* kind of energy into pure arcane power. This power can be harnessed, funneled through the cores of great reactors, the plans of which I have also drawn."

Bilaal stepped forward. I lowered my hands, showing the Reshii Ribbon to him, and he studied it although at a pace removed, as if he were perhaps afraid to touch it himself. Finally he looked upon me.

"Reactors?"

"Indeed," I said. "It is with these that we will power vast barriers of arcane magic. These barriers can be erected over every city-state across K'aresh. Impenetrable, inviolable, they will shield us." At this, I turned my gaze upon the rest of the council.

"Through devices of my design, these sacred artifacts can transmute any kind of energy into pure arcane power. This power can be harnessed, funneled through the cores of great reactors, the plans of which I have also drawn."

"Make no mistake, the Void readies for its great strike. My research tells that this threat that darkens our skies arises from a void lord, Dimensius. This terrible being will crack open our world when it feels the time is right, and we move quicker to that doom with each passing moment. That cannot be prevented." I held up the simple strip of cloth again. "But he will find no matter to feed on. We the K'areshi will survive, safe beneath our barriers."

The Ravel sat in silent contemplation of my proposal. As Nari smiled in her alcove, Ky'veza too made known her approval. She stood from her seat and stalked through the assemblage to grasp my hand in hers.

"It will work." I said. "I know it."

Salhadaar's expression was dark, but I could see he was deep in thought. "The construction of the barriers is work that cannot be concealed," he said at last. "It will require the labor of many."

I nodded. "Then it is time to tell the people. More than us few now see the radiant visions. It scares them, and the Void grows strong upon this fear. You are the high priest. The people look to you and the Oracles for answers. You must tell them everything, and soon, because if we are to protect K'aresh, the magical barriers must be built quickly."

Bilaal sighed loudly. "The planning alone will be substantial, and the only one of us who truly understands what we are to build is *you*." Bilaal glanced at Salhadaar. "To coordinate such a project, I—"

"Let Locus-Walker lead."

The group turned as one to Nari as she stepped from her alcove and into the light. "The Ravel *needs* Locus-Walker. That is why he joined us." She circled the room, gazing upon each member. "We have no time to waste in argument, in debate. We need a leader. Someone to direct our efforts and prepare our world for what is to come."

She stopped before me. Our eyes met and she repeated her conclusion. "Let Locus-Walker lead. If we follow his command, we can be prepared."

There were mutterings around the group. Etries's guffaws were the loudest, but I ignored her. The others bore frowns, but others nodded and soon more were in agreement.

Like me, they accepted Nari's advisement with a noted weight.

Still Bilaal scoffed. "Ridiculous." His eyes appraised me as though I were scrap from a junk stall. "A technomancer of Ma'nussa cannot command the High Priest of the Untamed."

Salhadaar winced, as though in pain. "And yet—"

"You cannot agree!" cried Etries. "The Oracles-"

"The Oracles obey my command," said Salhadaar.

"Perhaps . . ." It was one of the merchant-captains, Gez'her. He spoke rarely at our meetings, but always with caution and careful thought. "Perhaps if we study these plans Locus-Walker brings with some care . . ." He turned to me. "If we could perhaps be better educated in your methods, the responsibility of these Reshii Ribbons could be shared."

Ky'veza cut in. "We waste time! You have heard Locus-Walker speak. The Void comes for us, and Dimensius with it. We must act, and act now." She stepped up to Salhadaar, so close he flinched back from her forceful approach. "Say it, High Priest. Give the word, and the work can begin."

Bilaal laughed again. "The people of Ma'nussa must be congratulated for their patience, Ky'veza. But here, your manner is less appreciated than you think."

"Enough."

All attention was on the high priest. His countenance stern. He looked to me, and so authority was conferred with but a simple command.

"It is done already. The Ravel is led by the Locus-Walker. As he commands, so we obey. My final instruction is that the work must begin at once."

Silence reigned, but then, one by one, the Ravel stood and joined my side. Soon only Bilaal and Etries remained stubbornly in place, but with my supporters behind me—high priest included—I stepped forward and held out my hand.

"We do this for K'aresh," I said. "We do this for the K'areshi."

This was enough, for Etries nodded to herself and then took the hand that was offered. Perhaps her decision was enough to convince Bilaal, for as the ruler of Tazavesh sat and stared for a good while longer, finally he joined us. The glare he unleashed upon me as he did so, I did not like, but I put it from my mind.

There was much to do.



To say that K'aresh would never be the same again is to understate matters more than the mind can fathom, for the transformation of our world was both rapid and shocking. By order of the Council of Oracles—driven in secret by my leadership of the Ravel—all effort was made to build my proposed arcane reactors, the K'areshi taking new oaths to commit their paths to this great work.

As the world labored, the voice from the Void continued to speak. At first I tried to ignore it, then I came to embrace it, for I knew I heard it for a reason. It was foolish to ignore the warnings it provided, which also served to strengthen my resolve.

It was the voice that told me the time was coming, that Dimensius was close, that soon the Void would caress the shores of our world before the void lord swallowed us whole.

In truth, there had been dissent among even the people, though perhaps that understates the feeling. Tazavesh and Ma'nussa, Gastalt and Dervashna, and every city-state between was changed forever. The streets and canals, market squares and plazas became a maze of conduits and channels, pipelines and aqueducts that carried not water but the throbbing, humming arcane energy of the Reshii Ribbons from one great reactor to the next, the entire system a great web powering the barriers that defined our skies.

But public mood was quick to change, because one day, the Void shook the foundations of our world. It was precisely as my calculations had shown and just as the voice had promised. We had completed the job without a moment to spare.

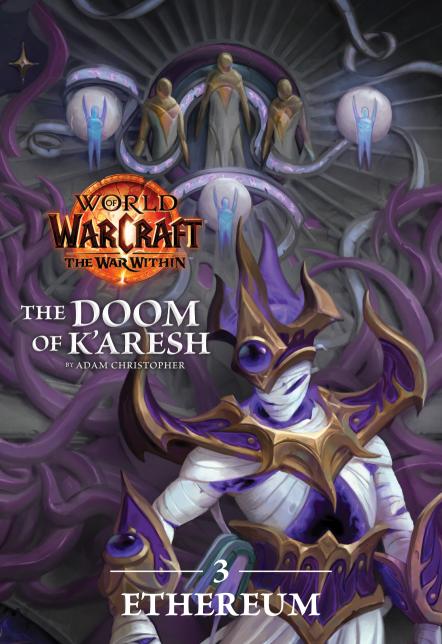
The arcane shield rose above, crackling to life and holding strong whilst the dark power of the Void crashed upon it like grains of sand in a dust storm. The barriers worked, and the K'areshi rejoiced, safe in their homes, in their beloved city-states.

For the first time amidst the backdrop of the Devouring War, it seemed K'aresh could win.

Little was I to know, the survival of my people would come at a terrible cost, and while I had saved the K'areshi from one doom, I had, in fact, condemned them to another fate entirely.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam Christopher is the New York Times bestselling author of Star Wars: Shadow of the Sith and Stranger Things: Darkness on the Edge of Town. He has also written official tie-in novels for the hit CBS television show Elementary and the award-winning Dishonored video game franchise Co-creator of the 21st century incarnation of Archie Comics superhero The Shield, Adam has written for Greg Rucka and Michael Lark's Lazarus series from Image Comics and Big Finish's Doctor Who universe. A contributor to the internationally bestselling Star Wars: From a Certain Point of View anniversary anthology series, Adam has also written for the all-ages Star Wars Adventures comic from IDW. Adam's original novels include Made to Kill and The Burning Dark, among many others, and his debut novel Empire State was both a SciFi Now and Financial Times Book of the Year.



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The years that followed were terrible and dark, both in the hearts of the K'areshi and for K'aresh itself. For while the barriers held and held firm, their dim arcane brilliance and strange warmth were now the only thing that kept our world alive. The twin suns of K'aresh, Meter and Ti'meter, would never again cast their light upon this land nor any other. They had been taken, eaten, *consumed* by Dimensius in his insatiable hunger. K'aresh itself was now alone, trapped in the Void, a prisoner of its terrible lord.

There was, though, something still shining bright within our people, even if our future remained dark as the skies above.

We had hope. Hope in ourselves and in the Council of Oracles.

And the Ravel had hope in me.

The Void beyond our barriers raged as though a living beast, but the K'areshi found another kind of strength; not content to spectate, they fought back, all aspects—the Untamed, the Exchange, the Testing, the Architect—united as never before, battling against the unknowable Void with spell and incantation, machine and ingenious device. The Void was a shapeless and fearful horror. But the K'areshi spirit was fierce and undying, something Dimensius the void lord could not anticipate.

And so the barriers held . . . and what started as war soon morphed into siege. Yes, we were protected. Yes, life went on, as best it could.

But how long would we last?

Because the truth was that the very protection we now relied upon came with a terrible cost. Those magical barriers of arcane might had saved our cities, but they were flaving our people alive.

It was called many things at first, but soon all came to know it as simply the Wasting.

I had seen the signs early, and I can only curse my hubris for not taking action sooner. As the barriers were built, so those who worked upon them began to wither and weaken, their skin peeling away, scorched to ash like in a great fire. Perhaps my work, my calculations *should* have been questioned—by myself; by Nari, who was ever-present at my side; by the Ravel, who looked to me for leadership and guidance. Perhaps if they saw what I saw, knew what I knew, and suspected what I *hid* from them, I would have found a solution.

The facts were simple: the vast domes may have appeared solid, but their power was in a state of constant flux, demanding a flow of magic so great it was almost beyond comprehension. My calculations, although terrifying, were correct, and were judged to be an acceptable cost to maintain the barriers over a short period of siege.

But Dimensius had a patience measured not in months or years but in eternities. The longer the siege went on, the more terrible the fate of the K'areshi became.

I consulted with technomancers and mages to find an answer, but as the sheer scale of the problem became more apparent, they began to cloister themselves. They buried their heads not in my data but in crumbling tomes lifted from ancient crypts, in spells and magics from other times and places, as they turned to superstition and ritual to find the answer I could not give them.

The Wasting soon spread, away from the laborers who had the closest contact with the arcane, to the people of the cities themselves. Bodies burned, twisted, shriveled, the flesh charred with no heat as the unending flux of the barriers beat down on the people with the power of too many suns. All the K'areshi, from the Oracles to the nomads of the wastelands, began wrapping their disintegrating forms in layered bindings. In time, the barriers protected city-states populated by faceless, featureless beings.

The K'areshi were strong—but not *that* strong. This was a test like no other, and I feared the Wasting would prove our undoing. The society so carefully governed by the Council of Oracles began unraveling like the bindings that now held our bodies together. Those whispers of dissent arose once more, but now with a violence previously unseen among the city-states of our world.

First the Wasting, and then . . . chaos. Some who fought the Void lashed their magics against their own kind. Parts of Tazavesh and Ma'nussa, abandoned to the arcane reactors and the conduits that fed them, became battlegrounds, and I watched with sorrow as we descended into a sort of madness. The Oracles, for their part, did exercise a firm hand. It was thanks to them and the K'areshi's deep commitment to their oaths that true anarchy was avoided. But even on peaceful days, there was a tension in the air that could be unbearable.

But perhaps it did not matter, for I had made other errors in my calculations. The truth was the Reshii Ribbons were perfect in their ability to transmute any and all energies—including those of the Void. So while they powered the barriers, channeling energy between the network of arcane reactors that now covered K'aresh, their very nature meant the process was, of its own volition, happening in *reverse* as well. Such was the power of the Void that every attack by Dimensius fed the reactors themselves, the energy absorbed by the barriers and transmuted by the Reshii Ribbons through no design of my own. At first, I was overjoyed; then my elation turned to despair as I realized the fate I had doomed my people to. To be exposed to ever-increasing arcane energy over so many, many years . . . it was *this* that was the true cause of the Wasting.

The barriers would survive; those trapped beneath them would not. Even if Dimensius were one day able to penetrate our defenses, the world he consumed would be a dead one.



"I am afraid "

Krysson lay upon the bed, her face turned away from me. I knelt beside her on the floor, a fresh spool of bandages ready by my side, the shears I used to cut the old bindings away from her body poised over her back. For a moment I remembered the skin beneath those bindings, remembered the feel of it under my fingers, the softness and the warmth, and I wondered if I would ever feel it again.

"My love?"

Krysson adjusted to face me. I looked at her eyes, two glittering jewels shining between the thin slit of her bindings. Her eyes were all I could see of her then, and mine were all she could see of me.

Her words surprised me. Oh, she had spoken before of her fears, as had I. But there was another meaning now. Something I felt too. Krysson feared not for herself, nor even for me, but for the fate of K'aresh and the K'areshi. The thought that all of what we had done was for nothing—that the barriers that had taken so much work had merely prolonged the inevitable—provided another agony. They had condemned our people to a living death, destroying them body and mind before Dimensius came to consume us anyway.

Krysson glanced away again. I resumed the task of changing her bandages. I cut the first binding, and Krysson sighed. The bandages were a requirement, but even after all this time, none among my people had grown accustomed to wearing them.

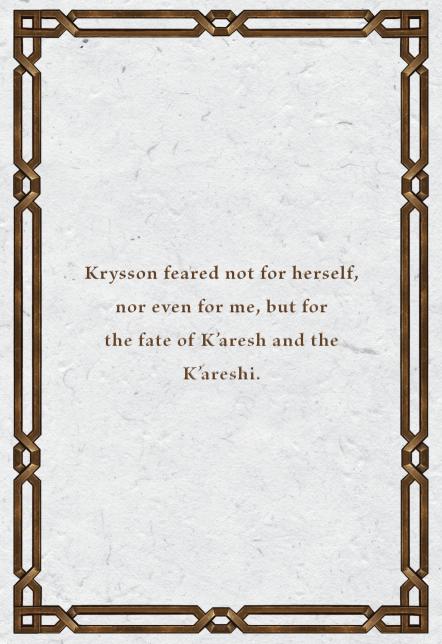
"If we die," said Krysson, "at least we die together."

I kept cutting.

"And at least we die fighting," she continued. "You have served K'aresh well, my love. The barriers have worked."

I stifled a laugh, and, surprised at my own reaction, I paused in my work. "I have protected the K'areshi, only for us to fight among ourselves, to die beneath the source of our protection. And in the end, the inevitable is but delayed. All of what we have done . . . I sometimes wonder why we did it."

"We did it for us." Krysson turned on the bed and reached out with a bandaged hand to take my own and squeeze. "We die as K'areshi, not as some terrible corruption



of the Void. *That*, my love, is perpetual torment. You have saved us from that fate, and for that and many other reasons I have long loved you."

I heard something in my mind then. Not the voice—that I had not heard in many a month—this was a simple sound, a single note . . . no, a single *thought*, drowning out all others, ringing like a bell in my mind. I was fixed to the spot, unmoving, my eyes no longer on hers, but on her back, where the last layer of binding had been revealed. The cloth should have been dark, stained by the decay of the flesh beneath. But instead there was . . .

I could scarcely believe it.

Krysson moved to rise, but I motioned for her to stay where she was. I let go of her hand and she called out in surprise, but I was on my feet at once. I doused the lantern, plunging the bedchamber into sudden darkness.

No, the room was *not* dark! There was a light, and it shone from Krysson herself, pale, faint but present. As my eyes adjusted to the gloom I saw the way the light moved under the bandages, not just on the portion I had exposed but shining through other parts of her body.

It was a light I knew. It was a light all the K'areshi had learned about over these last terrible years.

It was the light of the arcane barriers. Krysson's wounds were no longer physical—they were *magical*. The transmutation powers of the Reshii Ribbons had surpassed some threshold, something beyond my calculations, yet again.

No longer beings of flesh.

I froze where I stood, the arcane glow from Krysson's body a ripple across the room, across my body.

Something more.

I listened to the voice in my mind, resisting the urge

Yes, you know. It is the answer.

to turn and face a presence I felt suddenly at my shoulder but

You know it.

which was not there.

But will your people listen?

For the second time in my life, I knew how to save my people.



Salhadaar stared at Krysson. I was ashamed to have asked her here, to show us her glowing flesh, to become nothing but an object of scientific curiosity. But she readily agreed to the task, and I was glad she did, for she was the proof that there was a future for the K'areshi, if not for K'aresh.

Salhadaar waited alongside the rest of the Ravel. We were a smaller group now: many of our peers had succumbed to the Wasting. Those who remained stood wrapped in their bandages, their robes and clothes of office their only true means of identification.

As Salhadaar watched, Krysson withdrew her unwrapped back and, as further demonstration, unwound her left arm. Her blackened tendons were crisscrossed with cracks like one of the ancient stone roads her people used to walk, and from those cracks shone the light of the arcane.

"You are confident in your calculations."

This was Ky'veza, and she did not say this as a question, but a statement. As always, she and Nari were by my side. I could not see Nari smile, not this time, but I imagined the warm expression was still there, beneath her bindings.

I bowed to them, then turned to Salhadaar.

"The Reshii Ribbons are powerful artifacts indeed," I said. "And they have one last secret to unlock." I looked upon the blank, covered faces of my friends. "Do you not see? If we are beings of energy, we will not need this world. We may go wherever we like, anywhere in the Great Dark Beyond. The Reshii Ribbons will not only allow us to survive, they will enable us to become something *more*."

Salhadaar flinched at my words. He glanced at Bilaal, but the two did not speak. While their expressions were unreadable, their body language was as obvious as an open grimoire.

I pressed my case. "The Wasting is unstoppable. It is a by-product of the barriers, an inevitable end to our people. But what if this was not to be? What if we could live



on? Transmutation of energy. Transmutation of the *K'areshi*! I say to you now, it is possible!" I held up my hand and tore the bandages from it. The flesh beneath was almost mummified, barely clinging to the brittle bones, but . . . yes, there it was. The glow of the arcane—fainter than Krysson's, but there nonetheless. "We need not be tethered to our physical bodies. With the Reshii Ribbons, we can transmute our very beings into ones of *energy*. We can live on—all of us, and our world too. We can forge a new K'aresh and a new future, free of the barriers, and beyond the reach of Dimensius."

I stopped, and around me the Ravel remained silent. I cursed the bandages we were forced to wear, preventing me from seeing the true reactions of the group. The fact was, I had no more to say. I knew the Reshii Ribbons were the means to our salvation—yet I did not know how. In my mind, I felt ashamed, for I knew the precise mechanism would take time to solve.

And the patience of my peers had worn thin.

Then Nari intervened.

"It is a desperate stratagem," she said. "The final gamble of a dying race."

Salhadaar and Bilaal stirred, glanced at each other once more.

"But," Nari continued, "it is our only hope. For the K'areshi to survive, we have no choice." She gestured to me. "Locus-Walker's efforts have preserved us thus far."

There was muttering at that. Whispers. I felt Krysson take my bare hand in hers, and for the first time in so long, I felt her skin against mine—burned, dry, fragile skin, yes, but for a moment I was lost in happy memories of distant times spent with my love.

It was Bilaal who interrupted my reverie. Perhaps his word was intended only for Salhadaar to hear, but something told me otherwise.

"Blasphemy."

Krysson's grip tightened in mine as a shocked gasp echoed around the hall.

Salhadaar raised his own bandaged hands. "Decorum, please." He looked to me. "I have much to think on." He addressed the Ravel now. "Go. I will call you here again for my final decision."

With that, the Ravel parted.

It was to be for the final time, but I did not know that then.



Word did not come from Salhadaar the next day, nor the day after, nor for several beyond. But I did not wait for his decree—a mere formality, I was certain—for I knew my task was urgent, the work ahead difficult, and that time was not our ally. I therefore started at once to gather what Reshii Ribbons had not yet been used in the arcane reactors. No sooner had I started than the voice came again.

Yes, Locus-Walker. Gather them now, before it is too late.

Not for the first time, I wondered about this voice. Was it real? Or was it merely a facet of my own mind that spoke to me? Because as I collected the Reshii Ribbons, the whisper merely told me what I already knew.

The Reshii Ribbons are the key to the future. The time of the K'areshi's ascendence is at hand

I could not act alone, and it was to Nari I went for help. Her network of agents was a web that spread across all K'aresh, and gathering the Reshii Ribbons would take many hands.

But it was upon the third day following that Nari returned with troubling news. Her agents had failed in their task, the Reshii Ribbons already gone from their sacred holdings, gathered in number by none other than Salhadaar himself—but she was quick to still my excitement. She doubted the high priest was taking fast action in preparation for what was to come. For on her journeys Nari had heard and seen much. There was rumor and intrigue, news whispered that Salhadaar called himself high priest no longer, that he intended to make a public address on the morrow.

Salhadaar was making plans. And those plans, Nari said, did not feature the Ravel in their undertaking.

I summoned Ky'veza, and Krysson also, for I feared what was to come next and wanted her close. How long our conference lasted, I do not know. But before long a bell sounded across the city—it came from the market square, and we four went with all haste to find the plaza alive with more bandage-wrapped citizens than I had seen together for some time. The news Nari heard had spread, it seemed, and not for the

first time I cursed my dedication to my oath, which often cloistered me from the news of the world

The bell rang a second time, and there was movement on the balcony of the market guildhall. Salhadaar appeared, Bilaal at his side. But there was another with them I had not seen for a long, long time.

"Soul-Scribe," muttered Ky'veza into my ear. "Out from hiding at last." This was true. Since the erection of the barriers, the nomadic peoples of the Testing had become more integrated with residents of the city-states, but even Krysson had not seen the Soul-Scribe for many a month.

Salhadaar spread his arms and the crowd hushed.

"The future of K'aresh hangs in the balance," he said. "I will not lie to you, my people. We have fought long to protect you. We have worked hard to give you the future you deserve. The All-Devouring is a torment without end, and the means of our protection is a suffering we can endure only for so long."

The moment had come, and now, despite the voice in my mind, despite the warnings of Nari, I felt my confidence returning. Salhadaar was doing precisely as we had suggested. The people needed to know what was to come, because after years of struggle and change, this was to be the greatest challenge of them all.

"There is change coming," Salhadaar continued. "Change for all of us. For these last years, you have worked hard and followed the path of your oaths. The Council of Oracles has asked much of you, and the strength of the K'areshi has endured, even as our bodies wither and our numbers dwindle.

"We are soon to face the greatest test of all, and for that reason, we must unite, cast aside our differences, forget our arguments. We have fortitude, we have resolve, and I commit to you now the new oath I have undertaken. For I am no longer your high priest . . .

"I am your high king."

I felt my companions grow tense beside me, even as I struggled to comprehend Salhadaar's meaning, if not his words. To declare himself high king was not a strategy I had expected or understood.

"We have fortitude, we have resolve, and I commit to you now the new oath I have undertaken. For I am no longer your high priest . . .

"I am your high king."

"And as your high king," Salhadaar said, "there are truths I must tell you." At this, he cast his gaze skyward, at the pink dome above that protected us from the boiling darkness of the Void beyond. "The barriers both protect us *and* condemn us. We are trapped beneath them as the Wasting destroys us." He stepped forward on the balcony to look down upon his people. "But the Wasting was no accident, my people. There were those among us who schemed and plotted, who designed this fate, who sought the doom of the K'areshi even as we fought for our very survival."

Krysson's grip was tight in mine. I thought of my work, I thought of the preparations we had made, every breath taken to safeguard the future of our people, if not our world itself.

I could scarcely believe what Salhadaar was now saying.

And there, on the balcony above, the newly declared high king was pointing a bandaged hand.

Pointing it at me.

"There stands the Locus-Walker," he said. "Void-Sorcerer. Arch-traitor! And there, his comrades, the leaders of a conspiracy that would gift this world to the void lord. They and their friends have met in secret, plotted against us under the guise of saving K'aresh. It is they who have undone us, my people. It is they who have deceived us. The Wasting was by their design. They have betrayed us all with their blasphemy!"

And then I felt Krysson's hand pulling on mine. I turned in confusion and, yes, panic, caught in a sea of enemies as the people in the square rounded on us.

"Take them!" This was the Soul-Scribe, her voice loud and sharp, filled with anger and hate.

"Do not let them escape!"

No sooner had the Soul-Scribe cast her order across the crowd than the vast curve of the arcane barrier cracked from horizon to horizon with the sound of a hundred thunderclaps. At once, the crowd ducked, covering their bowed heads with raised arms. And then they looked to the sky. All watched in mute horror as the glassy pink flux that protected Tazavesh split again and again and again, as though it were made not of arcane energy but Tingarla glass.

All stared . . . save for the Soul-Scribe and Salhadaar. As the fear of the crowd turned to a terrible anger directed at my party, I cast a glance upon the balcony of the guildhall. There I saw it—the real traitors, the real conspirators. The pair whispered close, terror the furthest thing from their minds.

And while the barrier crackled and began to fade, the sky restored to the awful purple glow of the Void itself, so the crowd's attention returned to those denounced by their high king.

We were lucky that Nari was with us, Ky'veza too. Their skills in combat were impressive, and although we were surrounded, it was by untrained citizens. My two fierce friends quickly pushed the rioters aside, allowing the four of us to flee the square intact. Nari led the way, her intimate knowledge of the city and its secrets a boon as we sought sanctuary. My mind roared with noise, and it was all I could do to follow, my hand never leaving Krysson's.

But now the entire city was against us. Every alley and thoroughfare led us to citizens, all angry, some armed, the high king's decree having been heard across the land, the message echoed and amplified by the Council of Oracles.

As we ran, I soon realized that I was a liability, slowing down our escape. We stopped in a shadowed corner, and I outlined my plan. Krysson had to be kept safe, and Ky'veza promised to be her guardian. Despite the high king's betrayal, I knew I had work to do, that there still might be a chance, however slight, to use the Reshii Ribbons and save the K'areshi. In this task, Nari would protect and aid me.

And so we separated, our farewells hasty, with a promise to meet when it was safe.

And then I watched Ky'veza and Krysson as they vanished into an alley.

And then I too ran, as all around us, the city fell to riot and the sky darkened and the Void roiled, and what hope I once had vanished along with the barriers that protected us.



On a high plateau of Telogrus Rift, Alleria Windrunner stopped in her tracks.

"And?"

Locus-Walker turned from surveying the way ahead and drifted back toward his pupil.

"You have a question?"

"I have many," said Alleria. "Aren't you going to tell me what happened next?"

Locus-Walker paused. "There is little to tell," he said. "Nari and I succeeded in our task, eventually."

"Eventually?" Alleria sighed. "I must know more than that!"

"Must you?" Locus-Walker asked. "The Reshii Ribbons saved us. Our people were transmuted into beings of energy. Dimensius closed in and K'aresh was consumed. There was nothing the K'areshi could do to stop it, but we survived, in a way."

Alleria felt her jaw slacken in surprise: "And Krysson? What happened to her? And what happened after the high king denounced you? You speak now as though it all meant nothing to you."

"Much happened," said Locus-Walker, "to many people. Of Krysson, I never saw her again. Of Nari and Ky'veza... of Salhadaar and the Soul-Scribe..."

He trailed off. Alleria looked firmly at him, her hands clasping and unclasping the grip of her bow in frustration.

"That is a story for another time," he said finally. "The K'areshi survived. Some of them, anyway."

Alleria shook her head. "They survived and yet you have abandoned them, isolating yourself. What for? Penance? Shame? Fear? Surely they need you now as they needed you then."

"And there," said Locus-Walker, "your aim is so very wide of the mark, archer."

Alleria sighed in frustration. "Your history lesson was perhaps less useful than you think. Did you mean to balance my mind through sheer distraction?"

"It is your *tethers* that make you unbalanced, Alleria. Release these things that weigh you down, these people you care about. This is holding you back from becoming who you're meant to be."

"The people I care about? Like you did with Krysson? With Ky'veza?" $\,$

Locus-Walker came closer. "Perhaps you do understand. It was not the story of K'aresh that was the lesson—though it was the information you demanded

of me—it was the story of *Krysson*. Through her tale I had hoped to show you that some paths are meant to fork, that some destinies are not designed to be so entwined. That some futures exist, but they must exist apart. To find your truth, you must see this and you must decide, balancing the good of your people, the good of your kin, against the good of *yourself*."

Alleria stared at Locus-Walker, trying to untangle his message. There was wisdom there, she knew—

"There!"

Alleria spun. They were no longer alone on the plateau. They had found the Void revenant.

Or rather, the Void revenant had found them.

The creature towered over them, a living, spinning storm of Void energy, purple smokelike eddies of dark power rising from its armored shoulders, from which sprouted six ragged, bladelike wings. Hunched over, its face hidden by a heavy iron mask that revealed nothing but a gaping maw lined with jagged teeth. Glowing power rimmed its terrible form like a cursed hoarfrost that left spots dancing in Alleria's vision. She blinked them away and, readying herself for battle, felt her heart thud in her chest, in her ears . . .

No. The sound, it was not her fear, her reeling thoughts. It was a voice. A whisper, calling out across the infinite distance of the Twisting Nether. The voice pulled at her, altogether alien and vet at once instantly familiar.

Alleria turned away from the creature. She saw Locus-Walker behind her, hovering motionless, his gaze upon the revenant. As she watched, he held out a hand toward it, but the gesture was peaceful, almost . . . friendly.

Locus-Walker knew something about the revenant he hadn't told her. It was a creature, he had said, more powerful than the others they had encountered but the same in nature. Yet how he knew it was on Telogrus Rift, why it was so important to dispatch, he had never said.

The voice called again. In Alleria's mind it sounded like a woman's, although perhaps it was just an echo of her own.

But . . . could Locus-Walker hear it too? Was that how he knew the creature was here?

And then the voice was gone, and the sudden silence in Alleria's mind rang out like a bell. She glanced at Locus-Walker, saw his outstretched hand curl into a tight fist.

"Now." he said. "The time is now."

Alleria turned slowly, pulling her bowstring back, hard. She felt it dig painfully into her bottom lip, felt the way her hand stretched the skin of her face back, baring her teeth. She sighted along the length of the arrow, aiming for the creature's heart.

But she did not fire.

"Alleria, quickly now," said Locus-Walker. "Fire, before it knows."

Alleria lowered her bow. "I want to know who it is before I kill it."

She expected perhaps another lecture, another lesson wrapped in a riddle. Instead, Locus-Walker snarled and flew forward, pushing Alleria to the ground as he launched his attack. Alleria rolled in the dirt and saw the Void revenant spin and begin to lengthen, the power of the shadow growing inside it as it focused its attention at the oncoming attack. Within moments, it was twice the size it had been, dwarfing Locus-Walker before it.

Alleria stood. She sighed, then gritted her teeth, took her aim, and fired her arrow.

The battle was short but fierce, and then Alleria and Locus-Walker were alone on the plateau once more, the Void energies of the revenant evaporating like colored smoke back into the Twisting Nether. All that remained of the creature was its heart, the pulsing core of Void energy hovering in the air before them.

Alleria slung her bow over her back and reached for the heart, feeling the slight tug of the Void on her hand as she went to take it. She knew what she had to do. She had done it before. Locus-Walker had shown her.

"Stop."

Alleria dropped her hand. "I thought—"

"I told you before. This one belongs to me." Locus-Walker drifted forward as Alleria stepped back. She felt her heart thud in her chest again.

She had to know.

"This creature," she whispered. "This revenant of the Void . . . "

"Ask your question."

Alleria reached forward and took the heart in her hand. She squeezed, feeling it buzz uncomfortably, the electric tang of the Void as it seemed to surge, invisibly, around her. The voice called out again. Maybe it was her own voice. Maybe it was an echo of the Void.

Or maybe it was the echo of someone else entirely.

"Do you know who this creature was once?" she asked.

Locus-Walker's hand curled once more into a fist.

"That belongs to me," he said.

"I know it does," said Alleria. "It always did, didn't it?"

Locus-Walker did not speak.

"You are wrong, Locus-Walker," said Alleria. "My strength—my balance—comes precisely from those I love. They are not a weight that needs to be countered lest I be dragged down. My love for them is not a thing to be purged so I can be pure of mind and sure of focus. My strength comes from them." She stepped closer to Locus-Walker, holding the Void heart in her hand. "That was where your strength once came from too. You told me the story of two loves on a dying world, and I felt that love across the ages. You claim to teach me, but it is you who have forgotten the lesson. It is true that the future has many paths, and there is another open to me now. A path I fear you never saw back then."

Alleria opened her hand. The Void heart floated in the air, glowing with an impossible halo of violet, and drifted slowly toward Locus-Walker.

"Or perhaps you flinched away from it," said Alleria. "I do not know. It was not my story to tell."

With that, she spun on her heel. "I must return to Dalaran. Khadgar awaits my report." She looked over her shoulder. "Perhaps now you will think about the lesson *I* have given *you*."

She walked off across the barren plateau as the Void flashed above her, and Locus-Walker was alone with his thoughts, alone with his past. Before him, the Void heart floated.

A long moment passed before Locus-Walker reached out and took the Void heart. He paused only for the span of a breath, and then he consumed it, and it was gone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam Christopher is the New York Times bestselling author of Star Wars: Shadow of the Sith and Stranger Things: Darkness on the Edge of Town. He has also written official tie-in novels for the hit CBS television show Elementary and the award-winning Dishonored video game franchise Co-creator of the 21st century incarnation of Archie Comics superhero The Shield, Adam has written for Greg Rucka and Michael Lark's Lazarus series from Image Comics and Big Finish's Doctor Who universe. A contributor to the internationally bestselling Star Wars: From a Certain Point of View anniversary anthology series, Adam has also written for the all-ages Star Wars Adventures comic from IDW. Adam's original novels include Made to Kill and The Burning Dark, among many others, and his debut novel Empire State was both a SciFi Now and Financial Times Book of the Year.