

# THE VOID BETWEEN

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SURFSIDE 3D

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“Is that pounding in my head . . . or at the door?” Umbric mumbled into a wine-drenched pillow.

“The door,” Rommath grunted, though the muffled sound indicated he was applying a pillow to his own face.

“Someone should get that,” Umbric said.

“Someone should,” Rommath agreed. “I shall cheer for your success.”

“Please do not. The noise might kill me.” With a groan to answer Rommath’s quiet snicker, Umbric tumbled off the couch. In his seven years as a student in Dalaran—barely the blink of an eye to a high elf—he was certain he’d never actually been this hungover before. The friends he’d made among his fellow students of the arcane, Rommath chief among them, were normally a boon to his soul and a balm to his spirit . . . Though in this case they were the author of his pounding headache, the culmination of an end-of-term party that had spanned four pubs and then devolved into a game of Archmage’s Cup, using a deck of cards that had apparently been all archmages. Squinting against the light, Umbric staggered across the tiny room the Kirin Tor considered suitable accommodations for students.

Umbric didn't know what he'd expected to find upon dragging open the door. A flood or fire or plague of magicked, carnivorous cheesecakes, at the least. (*No, that was last week . . .*) Instead, a decaying book was thrust at his face, brandished with the same intensity that most people reserved for displaying a prized fish, driving him back a step.

"Romm—oh, it's you, Umbric. Took you long enough."

Umbric squinted at the pallid, narrow face behind the tome, the normally sullen expression replaced with a grin that couldn't seem to settle on being smug or manic. "Dar'Khan . . . What . . . ?"

Dar'Khan Drathir elbowed his way in, shutting the door behind him with a wave of his hand. "World-shattering brilliance is not to be kept waiting on the doorstep."

"What?" Umbric repeated.

Dar'Khan frowned at him, then leaned forward and took a speculative sniff before giving him a look eloquent in its communication of disgust. "I believe that wine is meant to be taken *internally*, Umbric." He glanced over at the sodden lump of blankets that Rommath had cocooned himself in and sighed. "Neither of you are any use in this state." He pointed at Umbric, then over at the small table that Rommath ostensibly used for dining. "Sit." With shocking efficiency, Dar'Khan proceeded to rout Rommath out of bed and brewed a pot of strong herbal tea that he insisted would cure any ailment.

Perhaps his claims about the tea weren't entirely bluster. Less than half an hour later, Umbric felt dangerously close to alive, and Rommath was leafing through Dar'Khan's tome. "Well, Dar'Khan, you have done it," Rommath said dryly. "You have found a book by the only person with handwriting worse than yours."

Dar'Khan rolled his eyes. "It is in *code*, you imbecile."

Umbric batted Rommath's hands away from the book and pulled it closer so he could squint at the spidery writing. "And you *have* deciphered it?"

"Mostly."

"Mostly," Rommath echoed.

There was something to the mysterious characters that pulled at Umbric's mind. Perhaps it was the remains of the hangover, but he felt like the squiggles moved when

There was something to the mysterious characters that pulled at Umbric's mind. Perhaps it was the remains of the hangover, but he felt like the squiggles moved when he didn't have his eyes on them, rearranging themselves bit by bit until he could pick out words, then sentences.

he didn't have his eyes on them, rearranging themselves bit by bit until he could pick out words, then sentences. "Fascinating." *This book wants to be understood.* "I see what you mean, Dar'Khan."

Rommath snatched the book back and glared at the open page. "You're both mocking me."

"Could it be?" Dar'Khan teased. "Have I found a tome that resists your charms?"

Umbric could tell, however, that his best friend's temper was close to tipping from normal brusqueness into actual pique. He didn't feel like soothing two bruised egos today. "It would be helpful to tell us what you are actually planning to do with it, Dar'Khan."

"I hardly know," Dar'Khan said, pleased rather than concerned. "But then, that is the point of an experiment."

*Typical*, Umbric thought. This was the habit of Dar'Khan's that had formed their friendship, from the first time he had shown up at Umbric's doorstep with a mysterious dust-coated crystal he'd ferreted out of a forgotten corner in a sundries shop. The resulting explosion, after no small amount of experimentation, had blown out all of Umbric's windows and transmuted every stick of wood in the apartment into semi-sentient butterscotch. The dwarven arias they sang had left the usually reserved Rommath in such a fit of laughter that he'd entirely abandoned dignity and fallen over, unable to breathe around his giggles at each fresh warble of notes. Every appearance of a manic Dar'Khan could be summed up as "*It seemed like a good idea at the time*," and Umbric wouldn't have traded even a second of it for all the arcane wealth of Dalaran.

"Another experiment?" Rommath snorted with such force that tea slopped out of his mug. "You *cannot* be serious." This was a familiar refrain to Umbric's ear; Rommath was a rule-abiding model student with little taste for the extemporaneous. But Umbric saw, too, the glitter of interest in Rommath's eyes. As prudish as Rommath could be at times, he wouldn't have found such success in Dalaran without a sharp intellect and the curiosity to go with it.

Thus, it was time for Umbric to fulfill his usual role as the bridge between two brilliant mages whose personalities were nearly opposite—which nicely served his own now-piqued curiosity. *I would know what the book wishes to tell me. And Dar'Khan has never*

*found a prize the three of us couldn't handle together.* "Oh, come on, Rommath. Dar'Khan hasn't managed to kill us yet."

"Despite his best efforts."

Umbric detected victory in the shift of his tone from irritated to put-upon. He didn't quite grin at Dar'Khan. "Well, how do we start?"

Together, they shoved Rommath's furniture against the walls, rolled up the carpet to reveal a scarred wooden floor that could have done with a thorough sanding, and used a stub of chalk to outline a warding circle. Dar'Khan went over the circle after, adding a symbol here and there to focus and direct arcane currents.

"Rommath, you ward the north," Dar'Khan said, waving toward an appropriate bit of the circle. "Umbric, you go"—he consulted the book—"south." Umbric took his place, careful not to smudge the chalk. This felt quite ordinary; he and Rommath would support Dar'Khan while he did all the exciting work of weaving the spell together. It was the sort of thing they'd learned as apprentices, and the role Umbric occupied often these days, as Rommath, Dar'Khan, and quite a few of the other students identified their specialties and excelled. Umbric could hardly resent their focus as he dabbled at the edges, searching for and not finding anything to fully capture his interest. Even the lecturers had begun to remark that he was in danger of becoming a dilettante, yet none could quite object when he chose to spend part of his term reading in their area. Whether it was evocations or illusions, conjuring or divining, he found *everything* captivating and dove deep until something compelled his attention toward another subject.

Dar'Khan kept the book in one hand, gesturing with the other to gather threads of arcane energy into the shape he willed. The words he recited, glancing down at the pages, were entirely unfamiliar . . . yet Umbric understood them all the same.

The feeling of routine shattered as Dar'Khan's spell formed a torus that twisted into an infinite shape and collapsed inward, becoming a pinpoint deeper than darkness. The form of it captivated Umbric, the flux of energies unlike anything he'd seen before.

"Is that . . ." Rommath's words came slowly, horror building in each syllable. "You wouldn't—"

Dar'Khan smirked. "I knew it! I present to you: the Void."

"*The Void*," Rommath hissed. "A forbidden—"



“Don’t be such a boring stick, Rommath. It’s perfectly—” Dar’Khan was interrupted by a hand of inky black energy oozing from the tiny portal. Dar’Khan yelled something Umbric didn’t quite catch as the hand was joined by another to stretch the portal wider, revealing glowing eyes.

“Close it!” Rommath bellowed at Dar’Khan.

All the triumph had drained from Dar’Khan’s face, replaced by a clenched jaw and a pallor even more pronounced than usual. “Right.” His ready agreement with Rommath stood testament to a fear that evolved quickly to terror as he tried one gesture, then another, then a third before shouting, “It’s not obeying me!”

More of the creature squeezed through, bringing with it a wave of yawning emptiness. Rommath built a swirl of bright fire over his hands and flung it at the monster, which only seemed to snag its attention.

Umbric’s skill at offensive magic had never matched Rommath’s, nor Dar’Khan’s. “I’ll handle it!” he said to Dar’Khan.

“But—” Dar’Khan ducked a bolt of shadow.

“Now! Help Rommath!”

Shadow sizzled through the air as the being fully emerged on their plane in a wave of searing cold. Dar’Khan stumbled over the beginning of a familiar ice spell before he steadied himself.

Umbric turned his attention to the magic that had created the gate, now a self-sustaining gyre that drew ambient energy into itself from the planes it bridged. He’d never seen a construction quite like it and had no time to study its intricacies. Sparks of bright fire and shards of ice danced across the edge of his perception as his friends battled the creature, but his mind was occupied with the gate’s shape and how it might best be taken apart. Two problems faced him now, with little time to solve either: the escaped Void creature and what to do with all the energy the gate had begun to build into a howling nimbus. *If I could but link the two together, fuel the banishment with that excess of energy...* Working half on instinct, Umbric began to weave a second spell into the one holding the gate open. He found the tight knot that closed the sheer ontological distance between this Void-imbued location and Azeroth, a delicate thing, easy to unravel. He reached for it with his will and—

How strange, for something called *Void* to seethe and roil with energy and potential. It was not cold nothingness; it was the compacted heart of a star, impossibly dense with . . . everything.

*Such knowledge, waiting to be known. Why choose one path? The Void will give me what Dalaran cannot, what I want the most: the chance to take all roads and never have to wonder what might have been.* It was so tempting, to fully explore all the unbound possibility he sensed in that roiling darkness beyond. *Rommath and Dar'Khan would never abide being so overshadowed. They would keep me small and limited, but if I kill them first . . .*

A chill shuddered down Umbric's spine at the tickle of that thought, so seamlessly flowing from the one before it. The concept of murdering anyone, let alone friends so dear to him, was abhorrent. Yet he could almost taste the channel of dark power it teased, the probabilities dancing at fingertips still sticky with blood.

*No.*

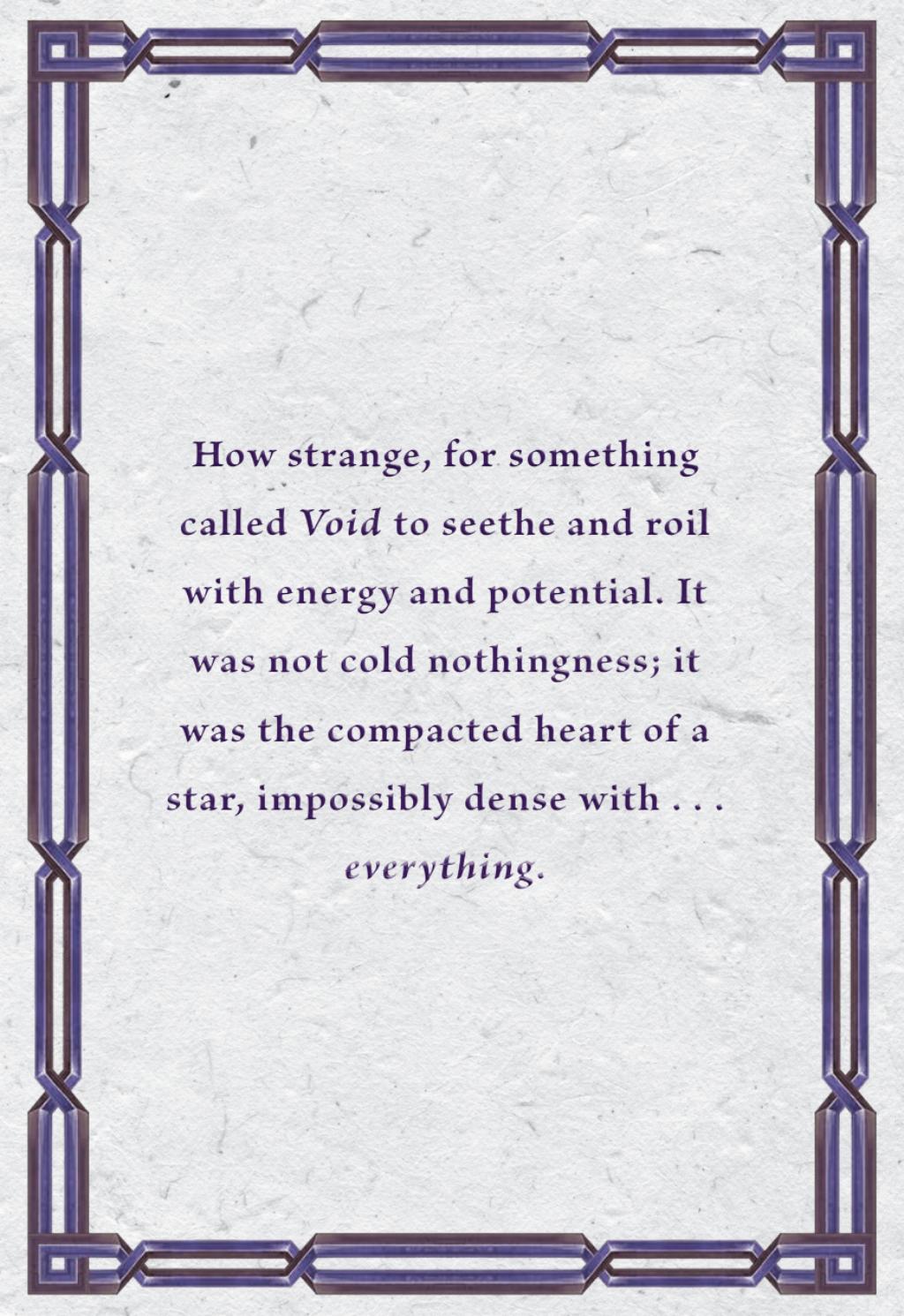
He severed the bridge that linked Void and apartment. The spell he'd created on the fly seemed to work perfectly, the bright flash of energy as the gate began to collapse becoming a net that snared the monster. The creature, unprepared for this sort of assault while it held Dar'Khan and Rommath at bay, let loose a reverberating shriek as it was pulled back through the now pinhole-size gate, stretched and warped like taffy. An instant later, the portal collapsed, and Umbric realized he'd miscalculated how little energy trapping the monster would actually expend as the backlash flung him face-first into the floor. He tasted blood and lightning, and his ears popped several times before he could properly hear again.

"Umbric!" He felt rather than heard the *thump* of Rommath going down on one knee next to him.

"Nothing broken," Umbric mumbled against the floor. "I . . . don't think." With a slow care that belied his outward brusqueness, Rommath levered him to his feet, at which point Umbric became aware of the blood flowing freely from his aching nose. "Well, almost nothing broken."

Rommath rounded furiously on Dar'Khan. "You could have killed us all, you *fool*."

Dar'Khan grinned unabashedly. "Do you know what this discovery means? A Void-Gate—"



How strange, for something  
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star, impossibly dense with . . .  
*everything.*

"It will mean your exile!" Rommath snarled. "Of all the idiotic—"

"*You* are the idiot if you cannot see—"

This was only going to get worse, Umbric realized. Dar'Khan was overexcited by both the discovery and a narrow escape from death, and Rommath . . . It was so easy to read the utter terror beneath his blustering. Maybe they could have a reasoned discussion about what had just happened . . . someday. Now, it was edging perilously close to a fight. "Rommath, your handkerchief, please," Umbric interrupted.

"What—oh." Rommath looked toward him, his expression closing off into a cold sternness as he dug the white linen square out of the sleeve of his robe.

Umbric took advantage of the pause his freely bleeding nose had bought. "Dar'Khan, run to the alchemist and fetch me a health potion, please. She likes you best of the three of us."

Dar'Khan swallowed whatever he'd been about to say. "Right." Grumbling, he departed, the moldering tome that had incited the whole unfortunate incident tucked under one arm.

Keeping the handkerchief against his throbbing nose, Umbric turned his attention to the remains of Rommath's furniture and animated the pieces to begin putting themselves back together.

"Sit. It's my furniture," Rommath said.

"I will, once there is a chair in one piece. Besides, I had a part in making this mess."

Rommath huffed, then pulled a broom out of the closet and enchanted it to begin sweeping the chalk from the floor. "If I had known *that* was Dar'Khan's delightful surprise . . ."

"You would have missed out on the fun," Umbric said.

"*Fun?*"

One of the chairs looked stable enough to bear weight; Umbric dragged it over to the small room's generous window, which obligingly opened itself at a gesture. He sat gingerly, leaning out over the daytime bustle of Dalaran, the babble of voices distant but still too great to be entirely dampened by magic. Had it really been so little time since Dar'Khan had dragged them both from their sleep? Umbric looked over a large group of

chattering apprentices having lessons out on a wide expanse of lawn, at a trio of gangly teenagers testing freezing spells, at a grand procession of some visiting dignitary or other winding through the streets. What had once seemed so impossibly bustling and noisy looked simple now, ordered and legible.

Rommath drew up a still-wobbly chair next to him, though he was far too dignified to lean out the window. He gave Umbric an expectant look, one eyebrow raised.

Umbric returned his gaze. "Even you must admit, it was a . . . learning experience." The words felt unforgivably tepid as they left his lips, but he was nowhere close to sorting out anything in his own head just yet.

Rommath snorted. "It seems I alone am listening when the priests speak of the Void. Hunger without end that twists the weak and foolish into madmen and murderers. This was not the confirmation I required."

"Was that all you saw?"

"Should I have seen more than that monster trying to kill me?"

For a moment, Umbric considered telling him about what he'd felt as he touched the Void, not insatiable darkness but *potential*. Though he considered, too, the strange thought that had inserted itself into his mind. Would Rommath consider that a point for discussion or a reason to haul Umbric in front of the aforementioned priests? "No, of course not." At the suspicious narrowing of Rommath's eyes, Umbric hastened to add, "I merely hoped there might be something more."

Rommath waved the topic away like it was an annoying fly. "I ought to tell the Council of Six what Dar'Khan did."

Umbric didn't want to lose one or both of his friends over this. "I will have a talk with him."

"Not good enough."

"You will have him exiled from Dalaran," Umbric pointed out.

"He would have gotten himself exiled."

"If the council takes that much exception to an experimental Void-Gate, I don't think they will look too kindly on our part in it either."

"They would be fairer than that," Rommath said, though he sounded doubtful.

“Let us not put it to the test.”

Rommath seemed to sigh out the last of his anger, leaving only remnants of his fear behind. “Do you think he will actually listen to you?”

Telling him yes would be a lie neither of them could believe. “I will do my best. Or at least convince him to leave you out of it.”

Rommath’s eyes narrowed. “Just me?”

“*Us.*” Umbric shook his head. “I have other things I would rather study. Things less detrimental to my good looks.”

“The unwed ladies and gentlemen of Silvermoon will mourn this day,” Rommath said dryly. “Umbric.”

“Yes?”

“Promise me you will not suffer Dar’Khan’s nonsense again.” Rommath took in what remained of the broken furniture with a sweep of his hand.

Umbric considered once more the fathomless depths of possibility he’d sensed. There was so much *more*, an infinity that invited him to broaden his reach rather than narrow his focus. *They would keep me small and limited.* Then he recalled the feeling of blood cooling, thick on his fingers. Not for the first time, he wished desperately that he had some measure of Dar’Khan’s burning desire to learn and damn any consequences—or Rommath’s unwavering conviction that not only drove him to excel but afforded him such certainty.

He lacked this drive within himself, still confused and reeling and struggling to think around the sharp throb of his nose. The potential consequences—expulsion, exile, or worse—were far clearer than those already fading impressions of the infinite.

What good could such uncharted possibilities bring, at any rate? Silvermoon needed pillars of strength like Rommath and sharp minds like Dar’Khan’s to guide the course of her future, not an offering of uncertainty borne on a sea of questions that might never be answered. *Remember why you are here.* The thrill of learning, yes, but the ideal of service first and foremost. One day soon, he would serve his home as a magister, side by side with his dearest friends; that was the treasured and tangible vision of the future they’d all built together over many a night deep in their cups, and he wished no other.

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He met Rommath's gaze, his best friend's usual sternness still shocked through with concern, and said the words that should have come far more easily and quickly: "I promise."



Umbrik cursed as he caught his foot on a broken paving stone; his body—weakened by lack of food, sleep, but most of all the energy of the Sunwell—had not the strength and coordination he might have once employed to save himself. He went sprawling, his knees and hands stinging from the impact, but he had eyes only for the cracked leather valise that had partially cushioned his fall. It seemed undamaged as he scrambled to pick it back up. A scan of the street revealed it to be deserted, half choked with debris. The only sounds were a distant, desultory weeping and the unsteady clatter of unfastened shutters being thrown about by the wind.

Umbrik fought the hysterical urge to laugh. Silvermoon was a battered shell of a city, still smeared with filth from the Scourge's invasion. And her people, withering without the steady magic of the Sunwell, lingered, ghosts in waiting. Of course, there was no one to see him hurry away like a thief.

Still, he could not help the furtive glances he threw over his shoulder as he staggered toward his apartment, dizzy with the clawing pangs of withdrawal. He didn't stop until he had slammed his door shut behind him and locked it. Exhausted, he dropped his package on one of the end tables and sagged onto the settee near it. While he waited for his heartbeat to slow, he stared at the valise, eyes aching. "I am going to burn you once I catch my breath," he informed it. He imagined it uttering a sharp, mocking laugh in answer.

*Withdrawal has finally thrown me into madness.* A fever dream had carried him back to better days in Dalaran, when he and Rommath had spent long afternoons studying in a succession of coffee shops and Dar'Khan would come find them with some new, idiotic experiment he wished to conduct. But it had brought other memories rising into his disordered thoughts when he woke, ones that had sent him halfway across the city to what had once been a cheese shop but was now a ruin . . . and within, a hidden study Dar'Khan had shown him years ago.

Umbrik put his face in his hands. *What did I think I would find there, other than pain, guilt, and horror?* Dar'Khan had always considered Dalaran's rules minor but annoying, though his behavior in those days was a far cry from tearing down the wards of Quel'Thalas in service of the Lich King. It ached, like pressing a finger against a bone-deep bruise, to consider Dar'Khan's part in setting the Scourge loose in Silvermoon, in opening the Sunwell to incurable corruption as it was used to sentence his own people to corrupt madness or slow, wasting death.

Dar'Khan's hidden study had been a mass of wreckage, though it was impossible to tell if that had been at the hands of the Scourge, Dar'Khan himself, or the furious magisters who had sought to destroy every blackened trace of him. Umbrik should have left then, when he found himself ankle-deep in drifts of shredded, charred paper. There was still enough of Dar'Khan's script on those remnants for a few words at a time to be legible, and what he read made his skin crawl.

But then he'd found the valise, the only intact thing left in the room. Or perhaps he'd been *meant* to find the valise. Perhaps this was a trap that had been laid for him.

*If only Rommath were here*, he thought, and of all things, that made him laugh. Rommath was gone in Outland, dead for all Umbrik knew. If Rommath were here, they would have been working together to solve the blood elves' great and deadly problem, and Umbrik never would have ended up in that cursed cellar or brought the no-doubt-equally-cursed valise into his rooms.

"Rommath would tell me to burn you too," he rasped. "And he would be right." Umbrik pulled himself to his feet, holding on to the back of the couch while a wave of vertigo passed over him. He carried the valise to his fireplace, intent on throwing it in. But then he noticed its flap was loose—the lock must have broken when he fell. *Doesn't matter. Burn it.*

If only he had Rommath's strength of conviction; he would have already cast the thing into the flames. Instead, he found himself wondering what was inside. It was the same sort of curiosity that had driven him to take his schooling in Dalaran, had set him on the path of the magister. And now, stripped down to his bones by the loss of so many friends and the withdrawal of the Sunwell, the marrow that remained wanted only to know.

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*Are knowledge and power tools that we wield or masters that wield us? Was Dar'Khan the victim of forbidden powers, corrupted to monstrosity by a foolish decision to take one step down that dark path? Or did he choose each day to become a monster, to care for his own ambitions above all else?*

The former was a much more comforting thought, making that great evil an inevitability like an earthquake. It was painful to set aside, to open himself to more guilt. *Perhaps if I hadn't chosen Rommath over Dar'Khan . . . if I'd found a way to keep us all together as friends . . .*

*No. Perhaps I could have helped him find a better path. But neither did I choose his course for him.* Umbric leaned his forehead against the mantel, which felt cool against his skin despite the fire that crackled merrily beneath it, and pushed back the flap of the valise. He would at least know what he burned before he cast it into the flames.

The corner of a tome poked out from the depths of the valise. Umbric's heart fluttered unsteadily in his chest as he pulled out the book. For all that he had seen the cover once, pushed practically against his nose many years before when he'd been desperately hungover, the sight was seared into his mind's eye. Of all the relics Dar'Khan would have kept from his schooling days, Umbric had never expected this. The memory of what he had felt upon touching the Void, that infinite possibility and power, crashed over him like a wave of cold water and his breath caught.

Was not the lack of such omnipresent power what was killing them all by inches now?

*Promise me you will not suffer Dar'Khan's nonsense again.* And he had sworn to Rommath, back then. Umbric's fingers tightened against the tome's cover, the leather flaking against the ragged crescents of his nails.

*Yet who does such a promise serve, as we all waste away?*

Umbric hurried to his desk and dumped the contents of the valise: stray coins, half a deck of dog-eared playing cards, broken quills, the ancient crumbs of what might have once been a biscuit. The only item of interest was the tome itself, and he tore into it. It was strange, that Dar'Khan had kept the book, when his interests had obviously been fixed upon necromancy. Umbric might have convinced himself that the volume had only been kept as a memento of better days, but for the sparse and cryptic notations in Dar'Khan's familiar crabbed handwriting he kept catching

himself upon in the margins: a half-finished equation concluded to nothing, a few passages about a place called Telogrus underlined with dark intensity. *Perhaps there are more notes, if he continued to dabble in this topic. But they're not here, and if they were in his study, they're no longer intact.* It was not a useful line of thought, and Umbric dismissed it for now. Better to see where the book might take him before setting off on a potentially fruitless search. Umbric turned back to the beginning of the tome and began to read in earnest, the words eagerly arranging themselves before his eyes into a nearly musical flow of information that led inexorably to the principle of constructing a Void-Gate.

Gates were meant to provide passage from one place to another. If the Void was to be the salvation of the blood elves, what needed to flow was energy, not monsters. He needed a *conduit*, not a gate.

Umbric fetched his chalk and began to draw a new arcane circle on the floor, modifying glyphs and adding equations as he worked. He slept now and then, perhaps, his cheek resting on the book, and woke with his lips tasting of ink and chalk. After days—weeks?—he traced a diagram, retraced it, and found no gaps in his theory. He clawed strands of magic from distant leylines and spoke his spell without truly hearing his own words, operating on desperate instinct.

This time there was no torus, nothing visible to the naked eye. It was something entirely *felt* rather than seen, like he had touched his fingertips to the fathomless, dark ocean an infinite space away. With a roar that resonated in his bones, it rushed through him, filling his blood and marrow and rising up through his lungs and heart to crash into his brain in the span of a breath.

For a moment, Umbric saw *everything*. Not the mere breadth of Azeroth, or even the Great Dark Beyond in which she sat, but something that lurked within the gaps of reality—a kaleidoscope of creation beside a vast unending nothingness that rebounded and contradicted.

Something dark and deliberate moved between him and the *everything*, like the moons eclipsing the sun. Part of him was grateful for the ebb of that overwhelming flow, and then he was frightened at the knowledge that something could throttle the rushing surge of a force so primal and unending as the Void. Possibilities still flowed over him,



but he could understand them fully now: visions of futures that could be his if only he were bold enough, clever enough, sly enough. He could rule over Silvermoon as a god-magister, beloved by those he had saved with the gift of the Void. The people sought solace in him as they once had the Sunwell, singing praise upon their knees as he nursed them on a controlled drip of the Void's energy.

*It's what I want, isn't it? To save us all.* But this future felt like slipping on shoes that weren't his. He wanted to free his people from their desperate hunger, not enslave them with it. *This is more Dar'Khan's dream than mine. And thank the Sunwell he chose Death as an easier route to power. Had he known . . . who would choose Death when they could possess even one crumb of the infinite?*

Another possibility eased past the occlusion of the shadow: Umbric at the ear of Kael'thas Sunstrider, a respected chief adviser, a power behind the throne as the prince presided over a cool, dark well of Void energy. This was more to his liking, but . . . where was Rommath?

*Dead, of course. He'd never stand to see me overshadow him or bear the presence of a power he could not control.* No, that didn't seem at all like the Rommath he knew, cranky and unbending at times but always acting from a core of loyalty and duty.

No. This voice he thought was his own was in fact the shadow presence, Umbric realized. In one way, it had saved his sanity by standing between him and the raw everything they had foolishly named "Void." But what possibility he touched now filtered through it. This was its offer, the Void tamed and measured out, and *yes he could of course use it to save the blood elves, but he could do so much more*—

No.

The next thought that filtered into his mind spoke with Dar'Khan's voice, each word lilting with mocking logic. *You were eager enough to see me, your dear friend, sacrificed for the good of Silvermoon. What's one more death, compared to the survival of all blood elves? And you know Rommath would agree with me, grinding his teeth to powder even as he did.* Umbric could not tell if that thought came from the shadow presence, from within his own mind, or from some shade of Dar'Khan. It did not matter; Umbric had never been interested in moral philosophy and would have been hard pressed to argue the logic even on a good day; his dislike of conflict had kept him away from Dalaran's ubiquitous

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infinite?*

and spirited debates. Yet justification was not necessary if he did not accept the point as worth arguing in the first place.

*No. I refuse such bloody expedience. If possibility is a truly infinite force, then there must be a world in which I can save my people without sacrificing everything I love.* Umbric sucked in a breath, his throat raw from screaming, awareness of his body and all its pains coming back. “I will find it for myself,” he croaked. His hands felt numb and distant, still tangled in the fraying threads of the arcane. He moved them with a clumsiness he hadn’t known since the day he had become an apprentice . . . and cut the spell off.

The shadowy presence vanished, but so, too, did the torrent of potential. Utterly bereft, Umbric fell to his knees and wept.

A moment, an hour, a lifetime passed, but then . . . a damp cloth settled on his brow, its cool softness at odds with the sharp command that followed. “Wake, Umbric. I have no time for your dramatics.”

He’d know the voice of his dearest friend—and the affection and humor hidden in that harsh tone—even if he were a hundred years dead. With a heroic effort, Umbric dragged his eyes open to see Rommath leaning over him. He wondered if this might be a dying hallucination; Rommath looked far healthier than any of the sin’dorei had in months, though his eyes flared an unnatural green. “Am I dead?”

Rommath snorted. “If my reprobation is to be your reward after death, that speaks ill of the life you’ve led.”

Umbric remembered, struck with sudden hectic energy, what he’d been doing. He tried to sit up—*How did I come to be on the settee?*—but Rommath pushed him firmly back down with a hand against his chest. “I found it, Rommath. The solution!”

Rommath glanced at the rest of the room, eyes widening as he took in the state of it. “What did you *do*?”

“The energy—knowledge. It’s infinite. It would save us. A conduit, you see? Not like Dar’Khan’s gate.”

Rommath looked toward the arcane circle, the smudged chalk equations, then the tome still lying open on the floor, his expression going stiff and cold as he recognized it. He turned his attention back to Umbric, his tone rising to an angry growl. “You gave me your word.”

“We are *dying*.”

“I trusted you!” Rommath shouted. “I slept more easily because I knew you were here, watching over Quel’Thalas. And yet I find you—” His expression twisted with anger and disgust as he swept a hand to take in the mess of paper and chalk that had overtaken Umbric’s sitting room. “How many laws did you break to obtain this—this *filth*? To *read* it? This—” He snatched up the book and brandished it. “Annotated by a man who betrayed me, you, everyone and welcomed the dead in to slaughter us all? Who enabled the defilement of the Sunwell and sentenced our people to starvation and madness?”

The successive shocks of fear, anger, and horror as Rommath’s words struck him like blows helped Umbric pull his thoughts into some kind of order. “I—I will not turn on our people as Dar’Khan did,” Umbric pled. “You know me, Rommath. Better than anyone. I have no interest in acclaim or power.” *No matter how the Void has tried to tempt me.* “I only want to save us from extinction.”

Rommath took a deep breath and seemed to master his anger. “The madness of the Sunwell’s loss has touched us all greatly.” He glanced at the book still clutched in his hand and cast it into the fireplace. Umbric flinched at the sound of it hitting the logs, the crackle as it caught fire, but he knew, somehow, that he had learned all that book had to tell him. Rommath continued, “It will not come to that. Kael’thas has sent me home because he found a solution, and I am to teach the first part of it. There is a method . . . to let us siphon the energy we need.”

“From where?”

“For now, artifacts, objects no longer in use, that manner of thing.”

“That is no permanent solution,” Umbric pointed out.

“I never said it was. But while we regain our strength, Kael’thas is acquiring a greater source of power that we will be able to use. Thus, there is no need for you to take such drastic action. Our prince will bring us our salvation. Trust in him.”

Rommath’s invocation of Kael’thas’s name should have been more comfort. Umbric had known the man only peripherally when they’d all been students in Dalaran, but he was King Anasterian’s son. He could not help but think of how they had all counted on the Sunwell as an immovable pillar upon which to balance their lives without a second thought, and how unprepared they had all been for its destruction.

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And he thought, too, *I once trusted Dar'Khan*. “I no longer think it wise to trust one's fate to a single savior, be it the Sunwell or Kael'thas.”

Rommath's lips formed a thin, displeased line. “Had you journeyed with us, you would understand.” He reached out and briefly rested the back of his hand against Umbric's cheek. “You are feverish. Set aside this madness, Umbric. While I can still excuse it.”

*Odd, how clear my thoughts feel.* Clear enough to see the favor Rommath offered, unasked for: If he let the matter drop, Rommath would chalk it up to withdrawal and sickness, and all would be forgotten. Continue to push the issue and Rommath, who believed in the law above all things, who did not compromise, whose heart still bled in the aftermath of Dar'Khan's betrayal, would set the Spellbreakers on him. Umbric squeezed his eyes closed against the ache in his head. He was too tired to try to argue a wall like Rommath into bending right now, his knowledge too shallow, his understanding of the Void too nascent. *I will learn. And when I have mastered this study, Rommath will listen to me.*

This time, Rommath did not stop him from sitting up. He took the cloth from his brow. “All right,” Umbric said. “I will hear what solution you have brought.”



*It is my birthday soon. Perhaps I'm walking into a surprise party,* Umbric thought with grim humor as he rapped his knuckles against the door of the council chamber. He would take any spark of levity to keep at bay the sure knowledge that something was very, very wrong. He had only just been turned away from the Sunwell's chamber by the guards there, a strange occurrence in itself. With the Sunwell now healed and stable, there was no reason for a magister of their people to be denied entrance, let alone one of Umbric's standing. He'd been puzzling who best to speak to about this mistake—*Lor'themar, perhaps?*—when a messenger had halted in front of him and handed over a summons to the full council of magisters. A full council about which no one had bothered to inform Umbric.

The doors opened and he took in the scene before him: nearly every magister currently residing in Silvermoon City, each looking more censorious than the last;

Maella, her hands bound before her, looking strange and small without her Spellbreaker armor; Rommath, standing with his arms crossed, his expression cold and his gaze fixed on Umbric.

Umbric welcomed the surge of anger at seeing Maella being treated like a criminal—plainly the surprise they'd planned for him. "I received your summons."

"This *woman*," Magister Duskwither said, "was caught practicing dark magic and faces judgment."

*And has already been judged guilty, if she is not being given the courtesy of her name.* "What manner of dark magic?" Umbric asked, though he already knew the answer.

"A ritual of the Void," Rommath said.

Umbric saw the choice before him clearly: pretend he did not recognize Maella and let her face punishment alone . . . or do his best to shield her by giving his fellow magisters the prize they were truly after. Maella would understand if he chose the former. They all knew what risks they took, continuing to study what the magisters had interdicted—over his protests—after the rekindling of the Sunwell.

Fatigue replaced the fear in his heart. He was tired of lying, of hiding, of acting as if the necessary pursuit of knowledge was wrong. He was tired, too, of the hypocrisy of each magister who proclaimed the sanctity of the Sunwell, this second chance they had been served on the tormented heart of a naaru. Umbric folded his hands into his sleeves to hide their trembling. "Then I suppose I had best face your judgment as well, seeing as I am the one who taught her."

The gathered magisters erupted into shouting, though Umbric looked only at Rommath. His expression was grim but not surprised. It was Rommath's voice that cut through the babble, his words cold and precise. "And what purpose could such a ritual have, with the Sunwell restored?"

Umbric had prepared for this day, imagining arguments, clever turns of phrase, ironclad logic that would finally convince the magisters of what they seemed so determined to ignore. Meeting Rommath's eyes, all the careful words were ash in his mouth. "You know the facts as well as I do. The Sunwell has been corrupted twice, destroyed once, and required the heart of the naaru we once tortured at the behest of Kael'thas to be restored. Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result is madness."

“Then I suppose I had best face  
your judgment as well, seeing as  
I am the one who taught her.”

“Doing the same thing over and over again.” Rommath bit out each word. “Such as nurturing a viper in the heart of our city? Dar’Khan nearly destroyed us. *Kael’thas* nearly destroyed us.”

One of the other magisters—Umbric did not see who since he could not look away from Rommath, from the fury and despair that warred in his eyes—added, “We would be fools to let you become even a footnote on that list of would-be tyrants.”

“I have no interest in political influence or general acclaim, and you know that,” Umbric snapped. He read the acceptance of that statement in the slight tilt of Rommath’s chin. “I would ensure we cannot be cornered like desperate beasts again. We magisters know better than most that power is but a tool, and like any tool it can be turned to build or harm. Let us create many paths our people can walk, so that the loss of one will not be a disaster.”

It was the best argument that he had, and it should have worked. It *would* have worked on the Rommath he’d known when they were students. It *could* have worked on the Rommath who had returned bearing Prince Kael’thas’s message of false hope, if only Umbric had been able to coherently make it at the time. But from the icy stillness of Rommath’s expression, he knew that his words had found no traction. “Your research must already influence you, that you cannot see the Sunwell is the best path—the *only* path—we have forward. Instead, you would open it to corruption again.”

“My research does not touch the Sunwell, nor do I intend to place it in any danger. But I fear the longer we rely on only its stasis and stability, the more close-minded and zealous we will become.” Umbric knew those words were a mistake the moment they left his mouth. While a few of the magisters—and he did his best to note their faces—looked thoughtful, the outrage was palpable in the room.

None were more furious than Rommath. “The Sunwell has protected us for millennia,” he said, enunciating each word like a slap. “And our greatest suffering came from its loss.” He took a careful breath. “You will destroy your research, disband your followers, and swear before every magister that you will not speak of this again.” His lips formed a bitter line. “Perhaps then you will keep your word.”

Umbric could feel the love that had bound them together as friends for so long like an overstretched thread, ready to snap. He knew how much pain Rommath had

felt at the betrayal of Dar'Khan and then Kael'thas. Many thought his friend dour or unfeeling, but Umbric had seen every time his heart had been broken. He did not want to be the cause of more pain for someone who had cared for him so much, who cared for their people so much.

*And yet.*

"No," he said firmly. "I will promise no such thing."

Rommath took a step back as if struck.

Ignoring the shouts of the magisters, Umbric said for Rommath alone: "I am sorry, old friend. Truly. If I'd been strong enough to say that before now, things might have gone differently."

The rest was a foregone conclusion that Umbric paid only the barest attention to, shocked by his own decision. He was bound with arcane shackles, formally stripped of his magister title, and then urgently taken by guards to a prison cell suitable for mages while the matter was brought before the regent lord. Rommath refused to so much as look at him as he was led away.



In the stark quiet of his cell, Umbric wondered if this would be his end: dead, and with his students in hiding, a martyrdom that would achieve nothing. It was no doubt possible; the Void had thus far shown him that all things were. But that meant, too, there were possibilities that did not lead toward his death. Perhaps fewer than he would like, since it had taken him so long to find the conviction of his cause.

Umbric was saved from further self-reflection by Rommath, flanked by guards that he waved away. "We will speak privately. He cannot hurt me."

*Not more than I have already,* Umbric thought miserably. "Bringing news of my death?"

Rommath shook his head. "I talked Lor'themar out of it. Take it as a favor that you will be banished. You and your followers. I will not be able to shield anyone else after this. Nor would I want to."

*The last gift of a broken friendship, then.* "I will see it done."

Rommath stared at him, mouth working as if he was sorting words between his teeth. "You have . . . changed, Umbric. I used to be able to trust you."

That hurt. But so did every word, now. "And you have changed not a whit, after all we have seen and done and learned." With every triumph and disaster that had set their world trembling, Rommath had responded always by planting himself more firmly, a tower built and rebuilt to weather any assault. It was his greatest strength—and greatest weakness. Umbric did not need to sort through the infinite possibilities within the Void to know that eventually every tower met a storm it could not match.

"There is still time, if you are not too proud," Rommath said. There was a tilt to his lips, so slight that Umbric almost might have imagined it, that spoke of a deep well of sorrow. "Lor'themar has a far greater capacity for mercy than I."

"No," Umbric said, as gently as he could.

"Why?" Rommath demanded.

*Why indeed?* The answer came to him unbidden, a conclusion he had long known but never voiced. "I understand my path at last." *Though it takes me far from you, old friend, from our people, from all I have known. The universe is too great, and we are fools not to see how small we are in comparison. How much we need each other's strengths.*

"Ha. A path to the Void." Rommath sneered.

Umbric shook his head. "You have walked away from Quel'Thalas before yourself."

"For our home. Our people."

"Is it so difficult for you to understand that my reasons are the same?"

"I did not happily turn my back on everything that was right in pursuit of a corrupt power. Nor lie about it." Rommath's lip curled. "We are *not* the same."

"I have never been more miserable in my life, Rommath." Umbric laughed with no humor. "There are forces far stronger than magic or the Void—and far more fragile. Friendship, love, connection . . . that is what will save us from the next disaster, and the next, and the next, don't you see?" *How could he? It is only now, as I speak these words, that I begin to understand.* "I will wield every drop of power at my disposal to protect Silvermoon. To protect you."

"I did not ask for that."

“I understand my path at last.”  
*Though it takes me far from you, old friend, from our people, from all I have known. The universe is too great, and we are fools not to see how small we are in comparison. How much we need each other’s strengths.*

“You have always done what you believed you must for our people, even when you despised it. Even when it hurt you. Take pride that I have finally learned something from you.”

Rommath bowed his head briefly in acceptance. When he looked up, he might as well have been considering the fate of a stranger for all the warmth he showed. “You will have one day. After that, you will be expelled by force.”

“Then you had best let me out.”

Rommath stood aside, and Umbric began the long walk away from his home. He did not look back, but he knew that Rommath stood there, watching.



“You looked less nervous the last time you were in battle,” Maella said, casually leaning against a boulder. It was a stance Umbric had seen her take often in Silvermoon City while they discussed some point of ritual or another, only now she wore the armor of a riftblade and had the purple-cast skin of the ren’dorei.

“Do you think that is what this will become?” Umbric asked, glancing away from the Void-Gate being built in front of him. His hand itched with the desire to take charge of the delicate work—building a passage from Telogrus Rift to Azeroth was no simple proposition—but he had promised to let his fellow ren’dorei have the practice. The broad expanse of sky over Telogrus Rift swirled with eddying currents of energy and possibility that shone brightly to his eyes; when they had all first come here—before the Void had changed him utterly inside and out—the sky had seemed dark, oppressive, and empty. *How the world seems to shift, when one has eyes to see.*

“Don’t you?” The tilt of Maella’s eyebrows over the lilac flare of her eyes indicated the depths of her skepticism.

“No. Or . . . I hope not. We have a much larger mutual concern than old grievances.”

“I’ll be sure to note ‘old grievances’ on your funeral wreath if you’re wrong.”

As a mercy to keep Maella from winding up his anxiety further, the gate swirled with dark energy and opened. “I trust you to keep everyone safe while we are gone.”

“Of course, just . . . try not to get yourself burned.”

Umbric pretended not to hear that final admonishment as he signaled to the waiting mages and Riftwalkers to follow him. He did not like that he was taking most of Telogrus Rift’s defenders with him, but if he was right, they would be needed elsewhere. Traveling by Void-Gate felt distinct from the many times he’d used their arcane equivalent. It brought the sensation of being propelled through a roiling ocean of possibilities to inexplicably wash ashore at the correct one.

That irresistible magic tide deposited him on a broken stone path overgrown with grass: Windrunner Village. It looked as it had for years, a broken shell, left as a legacy of the Horde and later the Scourge invasion, at least now freed of the undead and at peace.

“Movement to the left,” one of the Riftwalkers said quietly in Umbric’s ear. “A sentry, I think.”

“That was the plan. Now we wait.” *Rommath will call this another broken promise, and he will not be entirely wrong.* But Umbric could see no other course of action, quite literally. The Void was no soothsayer’s scrying orb; the potentiality was about the now, with branching futures splitting into even larger infinities. Yet when he had learned of Vereesa Windrunner’s vision, the Void reaching out to swallow Silvermoon, it matched with the ragged borders of his own observations. There was a snarl in the fabric of possibility, one that threatened to consume all Azeroth, and it was near.

They were not kept waiting long; Umbric soon after detected the shift in ambient energy that heralded a portal, followed by the growing thunder of many hawkstriders approaching. Behind him, one of the mages murmured about the honor of being such a threat that they warranted an immediate response. Umbric wished that he could laugh about it, but it was all he could do to stay outwardly calm as his stomach churned with nerves and tension.

As he had both hoped and feared, it was Rommath who led the column, back stiff and straight as a poker as he sat on his mount. *He looks tired,* Umbric thought, though a far more important observation would have been the sheer number of Spellbreakers and Blood Knights who followed at his back. *Has he made no new friends to bully him into taking care of himself?* Any fondness he felt at the sight of his old friend was summarily squashed by the expression on Rommath’s face. Anger, disapproval,



censure . . . all of those, he had expected. But what he caught in the man's expression was disgust.

*And I'd finally gotten used to how we look.* That, of all the stupid jokes he could have made to himself, broke the inner tension, even if it did nothing for the air between the groups that seethed with hostility.

Rommath halted his force, an order of magnitude larger than the number of ren'dorei Umbric had brought with him, and made one gesture with his hand. The air filled with the hiss of metal as weapons were drawn.

"I am no longer surprised when you break your word to me," Rommath said.

"We are not here to demand a return to Silvermoon." *Though I hope I someday might.* "Rather to address a threat she faces."

"You and your kind are the only threat I see."

"Have you been told of the vision given to Vereesa Windrunner?" Umbric asked, ignoring the obvious bait. There was a slight curl of Rommath's lip at the mention of the name, but no other sign of recognition. Umbric quickly explained all that he knew of it, and his own observations within the Void that comported with her words.

"You *creatures* of the Void bring me a warning that it will swallow Silvermoon?" Rommath asked, his disbelief plain.

"I am no more a *creature* of the Void than you are of the Sunwell," Umbric answered coolly. "We wield power. We are not wielded by it."

"And yet I see no other encroachment of the darkness here. Even if you do not knowingly lie, Xal'atath remains free. You could be unwitting pawns in her corruption." Rommath bared his teeth. "You have set foot on our soil again. Remain here and your lives are forfeit. *Leave.*" He cupped one hand, a mote of fire sparking there that flared and rapidly grew, as the Spellbreakers and Blood Knights began to slowly advance—not charging, not yet, but the intention to force the ren'dorei into flight was plain. Umbric held one hand out to keep his own people still and desperately sought some path forward in the unforgiving planes of Rommath's face. He saw his former friend's furrowed brow, read the words he could not hear: *"Don't make me do this."*

Umbric exhaled air and drew in the potential of the Void. There were so many possibilities, and most of them ended with him dead or Rommath dead or the both of

**“I am no longer surprised when  
you break your word to me,”**  
**Rommath said.**

them in stupid, mutual destruction. He could not even be angry with Rommath; he understood too well every step that had led them to this place.

With no answer easily apparent, Umbric seized on the single, slim possibility that cried out to his heart. He breathed the Void out and turned to the long-ingrained magics of the arcane, uttering one word of command to set his will against Rommath's spell. For a moment they struggled, Rommath trying to weave the fireball to its end with a surge of desperation as he sensed Umbric working to unravel it. Umbric had always excelled at counterspells, but Rommath had on more than one occasion foiled him with sheer will.

Their gazes locked as they fought silently.

And then Umbric felt Rommath yield.

The abrupt collapse of the spell emitted a soundless *boom* that caught his hair in a burst of wind. One of the ren'dorei mages uttered a sound between a sob and a hiccupping laugh.

Umbric took a step toward Rommath, holding his gaze. "I could never make you do anything, Rommath, any more than you could force me to do something that wasn't in my heart. I know you don't trust the Void, and with good reason. What I ask is that, this one time, you trust *me*."

"Ha," Rommath said. "*Doing the same thing over and over again . . .*"

Umbric grimaced but took another step forward. "Tell me what harm I have offered the Sunwell. Tell me what harm I have done to Silvermoon other than walking away when I was sentenced to do so." *I have broken so many promises to you, and perhaps I will never fully pay for the damage I did to both of us. But there is one charge I have never violated and never will.*

"Trusting you again may well be what damns Silvermoon."

It would be a difficult thing to ask of anyone, let alone someone who had been betrayed thrice over. "That may be. But I wouldn't be here if I had any doubt that my leaving would make that destruction a certainty."

Rommath did not answer, his jaw working. Umbric took a careful step, and another, until he was even with the first of the Blood Knights who had moved to protect Rommath, until their sword rested lightly against his neck. There he paused, raising one eyebrow at Rommath. *So many think you have no heart, old friend, but we both know better.*

*So many think you have no heart,  
old friend, but we both know  
better. You may have the greatest  
heart of all, to have been wounded  
so deeply and lived. Show me that  
strength once more.*

*You may have the greatest heart of all, to have been wounded so deeply and lived. Show me that strength once more.*

*Please.*

Perhaps Rommath felt his silent prayer. His shoulders sagged, almost imperceptibly, and he raised one hand. The Blood Knight before Umbric sheathed their sword and moved slowly back. This heralded another wave of sound, far less crisp and eager than the first, of weapons being sheathed.

“Do not give me cause to regret this,” Rommath said.

“Thank you,” Umbric said.

Rommath squared his shoulders. “If any of you are seen within the bounds of Silvermoon City, or near the Sunwell, you will be executed on sight.”

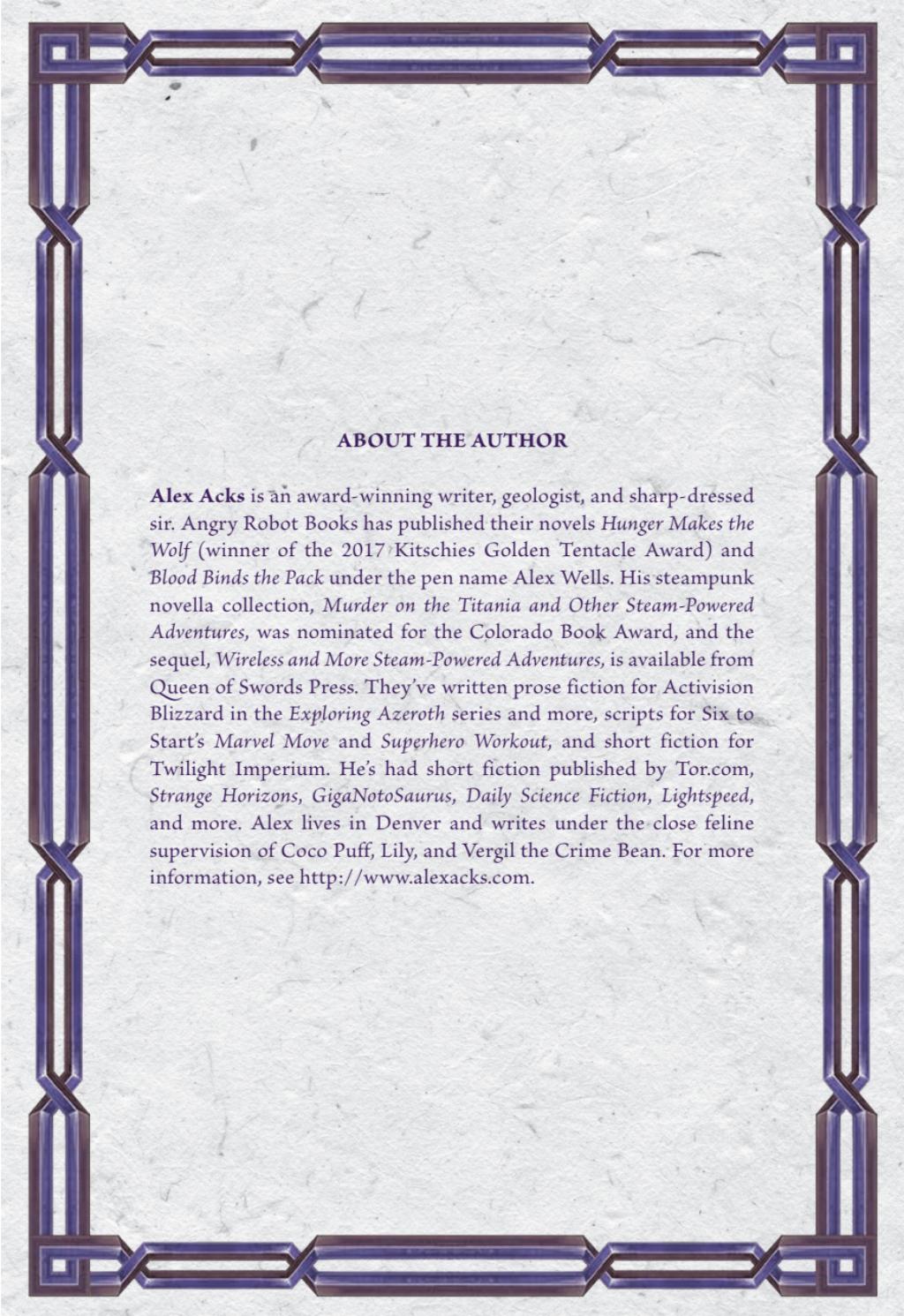
The sudden relief that flowed through Umbric compelled him one more step forward, though he did not reach for Rommath. “I—” *I miss you. I’m sorry.* “We have much to discuss.”

“Perhaps,” Rommath said. His lips tightened into a frown for a moment, and he reached into his sleeve to draw out . . . the white linen square of a handkerchief. Wordlessly, he handed it down to Umbric, who, utterly baffled, took it. Rommath huffed a small, deeply annoyed snort, a sound Umbric had quickly become familiar with during their friendship, and lightly tapped the side of his own neck with one finger before turning to leave. “Stick to the village.”

Umbric pressed the handkerchief against his neck and only then felt the thin, sharp pain of where the Blood Knight’s well-honed sword must have parted his skin. He pulled the handkerchief briefly away to confirm the bright line of blood against the linen. “Thank you,” he said to Rommath’s slowly retreating form. The man gave no sign of having heard, and perhaps he hadn’t, over the noise of so many hawkstriders on the move.

Umbric’s people rushed up to crowd around him, voices rising in a babble that was half suspicion and half near-hysterical relief. “Did he hurt you?” one Riftwalker asked. “What did he give you?”

Umbric ignored the first question; only the second mattered. “A possibility.” *And in every possibility lives hope.*



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Alex Acks** is an award-winning writer, geologist, and sharp-dressed sir. Angry Robot Books has published their novels *Hunger Makes the Wolf* (winner of the 2017 Kitschies Golden Tentacle Award) and *Blood Binds the Pack* under the pen name Alex Wells. His steampunk novella collection, *Murder on the Titania and Other Steam-Powered Adventures*, was nominated for the Colorado Book Award, and the sequel, *Wireless and More Steam-Powered Adventures*, is available from Queen of Swords Press. They've written prose fiction for Activision Blizzard in the *Exploring Azeroth* series and more, scripts for Six to Start's *Marvel Move* and *Superhero Workout*, and short fiction for Twilight Imperium. He's had short fiction published by Tor.com, *Strange Horizons*, *GigaNotoSaurus*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Lightspeed*, and more. Alex lives in Denver and writes under the close feline supervision of Coco Puff, Lily, and Vergil the Crime Bean. For more information, see <http://www.alexacks.com>.