

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Velen: Prophet's Lesson

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The Seat of the Naaru's soaring energies inspired inner peace from the most bloodthirsty of warrior pilgrims, awe from even the most jaded of Azeroth's inhabitants. The figure floating before the Seat had long taken comfort from this column of Light. Velen looked out from his meditation chamber, seeking insight... in all the connections, great and small, where he might perceive the lines of the future. For the past several months, those lines had increasingly felt fragmented.

As the Prophet of the draenei meditated—his legs crossed beneath him, his hands resting on his ancient knees—the crystals that reflected his energies glowed and pulsed and swirled around him, not in patterns but in chaos. And the visions, the endless possibilities of tomorrows, assaulted him.

A weary, bedraggled gnome pulled a strange contraption through the dusts of Outland, leaving twin ruts that snaked endlessly in the dunes behind her. Ethereals, their energies wrapped in cloth, simply watched her struggle, neither helping nor impeding the gnome's hard-fought progress.

Vindicator Maraad battled an unseen foe with his gargantuan crystalline hammer and then fell to his knees, a lance of blackest darkness thrust through his chest, oily, diseased smoke trailing the weapon's edge.

The sky-filling, armored form of Deathwing flew across a burned world and landed on a charred, broken tree so vast it could only be Nordrassil, while supplicants draped in dark-purple robes lined up and threw themselves into a volcanic crack in the earth.

Med'an—the Guardian of Tirisfal—wept, the tears out of place on his orc-tinged features, his eyes so vulnerable and hurt that the sight of them would have broken the heart of any other.

But not Velen.

The Prophet had long ago learned detachment from his visions lest they drive him mad. The third eye of prophecy had been with him so long that having premonitions was like breathing. The ata'mal crystal shards had transformed him into a sentinel of alternate universes without end, sometimes down to their very eclipses in darkness, or ice, or fire. Velen didn't sorrow for these futures or mourn their extinctions or shout in exaltation at their triumphs. He merely read them, watched their woven tapestries, looking for the roads that led to ultimate triumph, where life and the Light battled back the dark and saved everything from annihilation. What mattered the minor events prized by most mortals—even his own draenei—measured against the awesome responsibility of ensuring the survival of creation?

Velen searched among the debris of the rapidly moving images, trying to seize onto something, find a marker for the path. But it eluded him.

###

Anduin Wrynn knelt in the soft earth, his hands resting on a lasher, one of the few remaining mutations resulting from the *Exodar's* crash on Azeroth. Two draenei flanked the creature, restraining it for the prince, their gentle might keeping it from wriggling free and fleeing the channeled Light in the young boy's hands. The draenei had once made it their mission to mend the damage their destructive appearance in the world had wrought, but when the majority of the work had been completed, they'd found their powers were needed elsewhere—first in the war against the Burning Legion, then in the march on the Lich King's icy domain, and now... in the aftermath of the Cataclysm.

Some of the twisted monstrosities had been overlooked in the confusion, tragically wandering in madness and pain, diverted from their original purpose by a terrible accident. The first time Anduin had glimpsed one, he'd felt not disgust but sorrow. *I have to help. I*

have to try. At the first break in his lessons with Velen, the prince had raced off into the wilds of Azuremyst Isle, his draenei escorts rushing in his wake. Now they served as crude bonds while he beseeched the Light to heal the mutant, to calm its madness. Anduin didn't understand what was wrong with the thing. He didn't need to.

The *Light* knew. Its power moved through the young prince, using him as its channel to set aright the creature writhing under his hands. The act of healing always made Anduin feel like the key in a lock, the tool applied to its proper use, and he'd proven his talents to himself in his time with the draenei. His confidence had waxed under the tutelage of the ancient race, particularly under the instruction of the Ageless One, the Prophet. *Whether or not you see it, Father, I was right. Magni was right. This is my calling.*

The thought saddened him. He loved his father, but the gulf between Varian and Anduin, both in temperament and experience, was too great. *Why can't you see, Father? I'm not like you. And what's wrong with that? Isn't there something to be learned from our differences? From me?*

For his part, Anduin regretted their falling-out. His father insisted on treating him like a child, when the Prophet, Magni, and others clearly saw him differently, acknowledged his budding worth. Anduin and his father had argued during the Alliance summit at Darnassus, and Varian had laid hands on him, hurting his arm with a vice-like grip. The proudest moment of Anduin's life had followed when, in the aftermath of that argument, the Prophet had spoken to him in his soft preternatural tones, inviting him to study at the *Exodar* as his ward.

Why couldn't you see I had to go, Father? Why didn't you see the honor in this invitation?

Anduin wrenched his attention back to the present, away from distracting self-pity and toward the need of the lasher. He made a vow to himself in the next heartbeat that he'd

never lose his awe of this experience. Healing was too often seen as a commonplace thing, a miracle made mundane, but Anduin knew the Light, healing's source, didn't see it that way. Every life, *every* life, a miracle.

Before the prince now was a beautiful, broad-petaled plant-creature, purple and green, upright and strong. The draenei released their hold on it. One of them bowed in recognition of what the boy had done.

Anduin heard a disturbance behind him and started, awakening fully from the healing trance to realize he was sitting on his royal behind in the mud. *Very dignified*, Anduin thought. *Father'd be thrilled*.

The prince sprang to his feet. Facing him was a heavily armored, tall draenei—a Shield, one of Velen's personal guards. "The Prophet has asked to see you, Prince Anduin," was all he said.

###

The refugees had arrived in lost humility at first, in ones and twos, by leaky boat and makeshift raft, risking the unknown to flee the horribly known. Rumor had spread that the draenei withstood the breaking of the world, that refuge could be found on Azuremyst Isle. And rumor was better than the reality most of these exiles faced. In the beginning, the draenei had aided as they could, giving the refugees a place outside the *Exodar*, healing them, and sharing food and water. But then the outcasts had begun sending out word to find their friends and families, and the call echoed throughout Kalimdor: *The Prophet holds Azuremyst safe. The Prophet foresaw the Cataclysm and will make everything right*. The ones and twos became tens and twenties... and then hundreds. Now, the refugee camp boasted a thousand exiles, and the draenei found that the need had outgrown their will and capacity to provide.

The whispers in the camp eventually took a darker tone. *The Prophet won't see us. The draenei keep him hidden in the vaults of their ship. They look like hooved demons, do they not?*

Anduin had spent time among the refugees, healing as he could, encouraging faith in the eternal Light, counseling and leading in quiet ways that often left adults astounded in his presence... and a little disturbed when he wasn't around. The prince had asked many times why these wayward souls failed to seek the protection of his father, of the strength of Stormwind. They would answer with sideways eyes, naming his father a great and true king but saying he lacked the Prophet's ability to see the future. *No offense intended*, their tone said, *but your father's just a man. The Prophet is more than that.* After a while, by piecing together many discussions as if he were solving a puzzle, Anduin realized the refugees' actions were not simply predicated on reverence for a prophet they'd never met. These people were from the edges of society. For them, the rightful order of government was something to be feared rather than sought as a protector. Eventually, the prince stopped asking questions.

And so, he was a familiar face as he was escorted through the camp to his audience with Velen. Familiar and yet not one of them. He felt the distance, a gap born of his royal blood, his strength in the Light, and the trauma of his childhood. Sometimes, he was a little wistful that he wasn't more... normal. But he was beginning to sense, as he rushed toward the challenges and strange energies of puberty, that the differences were necessary. He had a unique role to fill, that of leading and protecting his people, and it was neither a privilege nor a font of personal power. It was a duty.

The refugees were all human. Undoubtedly, the dwarves were too proud to forsake their homelands; the night elves were undaunted even by Deathwing's rage; and the gnomes were... well, *gnomes*. What fear could they have of molten fire and earthquakes when an explosion was always just a malfunction away?

The refugees were afraid, hungry, and sick. Fevers raged among them with regularity, and the young prince would use his talents when epidemics swept the camp. Given his efforts, he found it impossible not to be stung by the comments he heard as he passed a group of refugees sitting in a circle, doing nothing useful beyond idle conversation. "Alien's pet," one said. "The Prophet sees the boy but refuses us?" was the reply. The rest of the exchange was lost as he walked past. Anduin spent a lot of time observing people, quietly watching the movements of their souls in their faces. And in many of the exiles' eyes, he saw the same accusation he'd heard aloud just moments before. The talk of the camp was against him, and it was difficult to suppress his resentment. *I've done nothing but help*, the prince thought.

But then, an unwelcome doubt came. *Why doesn't Velen see them?*

###

The memories of frosted air and the dead north gradually lost their grip on the gryphon rider as he flew through the warm climes of Kalimdor. The gryphon's burden was both heavier and quieter than what the beast was accustomed to. Usually, the earthbound were either awed by the new perspective of flight or frightened by the soaring and maneuvers that were commonplace among those who flew. Even if the typical traveler said little aloud, small noises and tension in the legs spoke volumes to the sensitive, observant gryphon. In contrast, serenity and stillness... these were the nature of his current rider.

Someone who had seen scores of worlds and warred against the Burning Legion in an endless conflict would find nothing noteworthy in flight across Azeroth. Vindicator Maraad had preoccupations that overshadowed the beauty of the view. The north was secure; the darkness of the Lich King, vanquished; and now it was time to turn his energy elsewhere.

He'd heard of the return of the Destroyer, of the devastation Azeroth faced, but he was draenei; what did a threat to a single world mean to him? The Legion stalked the Twisting Nether, was still presumably destroying any life the demonic army encountered.

As he flew over Azuremyst by moonlight, he was shocked to see myriad tiny lights mirroring, poorly, the stars above. For just a moment, in a strange fancy of thought, Maraad saw the lights as their own little worlds before he corrected himself and glanced upward. The heavens were his concern. Always.

Was this an army camped near the *Exodar*? Why hadn't he been told?

The gryphon flew through a metal portal in the *Exodar*'s hull and was taken in hand by the hippogryph master Stephanos. Stephanos bowed slightly.

"Congratulations on the victory in the north, Vindicator. It is good to see you home."

"Home? There is no home for us, brother. Not truly. We are the wanderers of the universe, the exiles of lost Argus. We should never forget that. What are the campfires I witnessed on the way here? Has an army dared our isle?"

"No, Vindicator. They are refugees fleeing the horrors of the Cataclysm. They hope the Prophet will deliver them."

Maraad frowned, an expression that sat strangely on his features. "As do we all, brother."

The vindicator didn't wait for a response. He moved quickly and with purpose straight toward the Seat and then, without pausing, in the direction of Velen's chambers. His hooves echoed on the crystalline floor with each step, and as he passed the two Shields standing

guard before the entranceway, Maraad looked for anything suggesting a lack of vigilance. *Never again*, he thought. *Draenor was enough*.

It wasn't until he reached the doorway to the Prophet's receiving room that one of the Shields broke his statuelike pose. The guard stepped forward, blocking the way. This was not unexpected.

"I am Vindicator Maraad, formerly of the Alliance command in Northrend," Maraad ritually uttered. "I seek audience with the Prophet."

"The Prophet is seeing no one, Vindicator Maraad. I am sorry I must deny you after your long journey."

Now *this* was unexpected.

"It is still early in the eve. You are saying the Prophet *refuses* to see me? I have come all the way from Northrend, and you have not even asked him."

The Shield was clearly uncomfortable. "Again, my apologies, Vindicator. He is seeing no one at the moment."

"Should I return in the morning?"

"I advise against it, Vindicator. The Prophet has granted audience to no one but the human prince for many weeks. I will take note of your visit and summon you when his mandate changes."

Maraad regarded the Shield for several moments, the vindicator's thoughts inscrutable, before returning the way he'd come.

###

Anduin stood before his mentor in contemplative silence. It was impossible to truly understand the age and wisdom of Velen, so in the manner of the young, the prince simply accepted him as a given force of nature—like the sun or moons. The Prophet's back was turned to him, and Velen levitated in a meditative pose the boy had seen many times in the previous weeks.

"Why didn't you warn the world about the Cataclysm?" Anduin blurted out.

The turned back didn't shift position. There was neither a twitch nor a slouch to betray the thoughts of Velen, but something hung in the quiet following the question, something *heavy*.

"I watch for the path, for the Light to illumine our way past the Legion and its destructive mission. I alone can see the path. I alone can reveal it to the forces of the Light."

Anduin reflected on what he'd just heard. "It seems a terrible burden."

The Prophet spun slowly in the air to face the prince. "That is why I travel the paths of tomorrow. The Legion and the Old Gods burn holes in the fabric of the future, and if I can see them, can prepare the mortal races, we may yet avert disaster."

"What if you fail?"

Velen's ageless serenity cracked for a moment, replaced for a fleeting instant with pain and sorrow in overwhelming measure, made all the more frightening by the calm before and after.

"Let me show you something," the ancient draenei whispered. He unfolded himself and drifted closer to the ground. Still floating a few inches above the metal flooring of the *Exodar*, the Prophet closed the distance and placed his hand on the prince's brow.

"I am sorry. But it is necessary," the Prophet said.

The Exodar fell away, and there were only vast stretches of darkness punctuated by lights and mystic energies. Then, a sudden rush, and Anduin stood on strange ground under an unfamiliar sky. There were four prominent moons competing for his attention, an amber atmosphere, and rock formations made from the blue-tinted ground twisting in a thousand different ways. Anduin couldn't see any water, but the colored rock gave the impression of warring waves suddenly frozen at the whim of some godlike artist. There were creatures scattered over the terrain and swirling through the sky, so varied and other that they defied description. Colors and different means of locomotion and patterns formed from dance or play or war... little of it made any sense, and Anduin was simply left struggling to grasp the wonderful abstract chaos of it all.

And the Light! He could feel it surrounding him, as strong as anywhere in Azeroth, pulsing and shining through the alien creatures.

The sky darkened. First to an angry red that invaded the amber skies like a premonition of doom. After a few moments, the color began to shift to an ever-more-nauseating shade of green. Flaring comets screamed from the diseased heavens and struck the earth, sending all the poor creatures scattering in panic. The comets stood up from their craters, towering and terrible, and began to rain down death with ruthless efficiency. A rip opened in the air near the prince, and a flood of horror spilled out: winged demons and alluring succubi wielding greenish-yellow fire and powerful magic, destroying everything in their path. After the dark

army had finished its deployment, a gigantic form walked through the rift, and it looked too much like the draenei for the prince not to notice.

This last being leveled the rock sculptures around him, clearing a space where he could kneel in the dust made from his destruction and draw symbols of dread power with his clawed finger. When he finished, there was a moment of perfect quiet as the slaughter halted and the entire world waited in horrified stillness.

And then, an explosion.

The unleashed energies ripped the world's surface apart, and Anduin found himself crying out and throwing his arms up in terror, but the magics moved right through him without harm. The Legion marched back into the portal, returning to the dark nexus of the demons' dwelling, and in their wake was left... nothing. Nothing alive, at any rate. Even the wondrous rock formations—Anduin would never know if they were natural or carved by the alien life he'd witnessed—were no more. There was only ash and broken matter. Even the sky was clouded, no longer allowing a clear view of the four moons.

Then, mercifully, the vision ended.

Anduin stood before the Prophet once again, and although he fought the impulse and was angry with himself, he wept.

"There is no shame in mourning so much lost," Velen said gently.

"What world was it? When did this happen?" the prince asked through his tears.

"I do not know its name. Its inhabitants did not speak in ways we understand, and none of the mortal races from this world ever walked there. I call it Fanlin'Deskor: Amber Skies

over Wondrous Rock. Given that I doubt the Legion records its victims—or even deigns to recall them—we are likely the only ones in the universe who know it existed at all."

"How sad," Anduin said.

"Yes. Light willing, when the last victory is won, I will sit in a tower built on one of the lost worlds, and I will record them all as my penance."

"Penance? For what? What have you done but help, Velen?"

"I failed long ago to turn my brothers from their course. And creation has paid the price." Velen waved that line of discussion away, returning to the purpose of showing Anduin the vision. "But my intent was to illustrate for you the consequences of defeat. As terrible as the Cataclysm has proven, as formidable an enemy as Deathwing may be, *our* war is a far greater struggle. It is not just a single world we defend, but them all."

Anduin always knew his lessons were at an end when the Prophet resumed his meditative posture and stared out at the energies of the Seat. As the prince opened the chamber's door and began to slide out, one final pronouncement from the Prophet followed him from the room.

"And, young one, it *is* a terrible burden."

###

The matter-of-fact tone of those last words haunted Anduin through the rest of the day and well into the night. He tossed and turned, fighting the sleep that he usually found easy to come by. When he finally succumbed, his dreams were sharply seen, vividly witnessed.

Demonic fires and broken worlds hurtled through a black sky devoid of suns or moons. All the lights of the universe were dark, as if a sanctuary's candles had been blown out by the cold kiss of the wind. And yet—more than the absence of light—it was the silence that disturbed Anduin. A living universe should not—could not—be so quiet.

The first thought that entered his mind as he observed the end of days was that he would never see his father again... or have the chance to reconcile the chasm that now stood between them. And then, extending that idea with the empathy ingrained in his nature, Anduin considered that no son anywhere in the universe would ever be able to tell a father that he was loved, or say the healing words "I'm sorry." Beyond the silence and the snuffed-out stars, it was the death of possibility, of hope, that was the deepest horror.

And then, a sound. At first it was merely a vibration in the night, yet even that slight disturbance of the air was pure and strong and clean. A glow began, then several; the vibration became many, all in different tones, and the sights and sounds coalesced into an ascending tide of rainbow and melody. Beings of Light surrounded Anduin, rescuing him from the dark and singing to him of hope in a chorus that restored the universe.

In the midst of it all, the face of one of the refugees appeared, a man the prince had seen many times but whose name he did not know. The beings around Anduin said (sang), "Each life, a universe."

He awoke, sweating, his hair matted from the intensity of the dream (*Vision, it was a vision...*), and yet he was comforted by what he'd seen. He fell asleep again, to mercifully unremarkable dreams.

###

Maraad stood in a large circular room with glowing runes carved into the curved walls. Three ancient (though unbowed) draenei dominated the center of the chamber, their graceful, beautiful armor polished to a bright sheen. Surrounding them were several paladins and vindicators, all deferring to the three in subtle ways, their obedience derived from a pyramid of authority that tolerated no ego at either its top or its base.

These three were the Triumvirate of the Hand—Boros, Kuros, and Aesom—and the others in the room were the draenei elite: the Hand of Argus. Maraad had learned since his arrival that the Triumvirate had returned to the *Exodar*, just as he had, in an effort to reconnect with their brethren on Azeroth, to determine the next course of their race in the wake of recent events.

It had been far too long since Maraad had appeared before the Triumvirate, had sat in council with the leadership of the draenei. He had forgotten how ordered and measured the discourse was among them, how comforting the conversation in its reasonable ebb and flow—without the verbal games and unpredictable reactions of the other races of the Alliance. The contrast was driven home full force when the lengthy discussion of the refugees and their plight was quietly interrupted by Vindicator Romnar. Romnar headed the efforts to repair the draenei's dimension-faring ship, the *Exodar*, and as the debate wound in a polite but indecisive circle around how to deal with the growing influx of foreigners to the isle, he said:

"All this may prove moot soon enough. The *Exodar* is nearly repaired."

An announcement that momentous, had it been stated aboard the *Skybreaker* among the Alliance leadership in Northrend, would've landed like a lightning bolt, and everyone would've started verbally jostling at once. Instead, the news was greeted with pleased smiles, and a single hand was laid on Romnar's shoulder. *Well done*, the mood in the room spoke.

"'Nearly' means when?" Maraad questioned.

"A week. We have already repaired all the key systems. Now we are just cleaning up and bolstering any areas of apparent weakness."

"We could awaken our ship within *the week*? What does the Prophet say to this?" Maraad asked.

Uncomfortable silence reigned.

"He does not know?" Maraad said, incredulous.

"He refuses to see any of us," Aesom responded. "A message was left with the Shields, but we have heard no return word."

"Am I the only one disturbed by this?" Maraad asked, silently wanting to take the words back even as he said them. *I have been too long away from the Exodar*, he thought. *Of course* they were all disturbed. Their quiet signaled not approval, but worry.

What does one do when it seems the Prophet has gone astray?

Before anyone could speak, a draenei whose name was unknown to Maraad interrupted.

"The refugees are at our gates. They demand to see the Prophet."

As do we all, Maraad thought in sour humor.

###

Why didn't you warn the world about the Cataclysm? The simple, logical question of a mortal child echoed accusingly throughout the silent chamber, distracting the Prophet from his contemplation of the Light. Velen had evaded rather than answered, obscured instead of illuminating. He was surprised at himself. *Am I still capable of deception? Even after all this time? Both within and without?*

Why would a *prophet* not warn of calamity?

He had seen it. The armored shadow of night looming over Azeroth, darkening the world with fire and pain. He'd also seen the end of Azeroth in a dozen apocalypses, glimpsed a thousand smaller victories and failings throughout the winding futures. And the Light—the lodestone, the compass, the sense that helped him navigate the uncertain seas of his visions—had not pointed directly to the Cataclysm, had left Deathwing's destructive return a possibility among many. What good was a prophet who saw no difference between the true vision and the false?

Velen did his best to push the child's question from his mind and return his thoughts to recovering his ability to pick the truth from his endless visions... before he was driven mad or it simply became too late. When the Shield who served as sentinel to his chambers begged an audience, yet again, for the Triumvirate, Velen didn't answer.

He'd seen the Exodar repaired and heading into the Nether, swallowed by darkness and never to return.

He'd seen the Exodar seemingly repaired and exploding upon its launch, killing most of the draenei and laying waste to Azuremyst.

He'd seen the Exodar landing in Outland, the draenei healing their former home in exile.

*He'd seen the draenei repair their dimensional vessel, only to leave it moored on Azeroth.
Sometimes that led to shadow, and sometimes not.*

Velen wouldn't trade in educated *guesses*. Without the Light to point the way, he felt frozen.
Let the Triumvirate decide, he thought.

When there were no further outward distractions, he returned to the inward, desperately seeking the path.

###

Maraad stood by and did his best to hide his disgust. Most of his dealings with humans to this point had been with the sometimes impetuous but always courageous Alliance heroes in Northrend. It was hard to believe these ragged creatures—many of them missing teeth, all missing courtesy and the intellect expected of a sentient—were of the same race as those humans he'd marched beside.

"We wants to see the Prophet," one of them gurgled from a malformed face in barely recognizable Common. "He'll sets it all aright."

"*This* is your appointed spokesman?" Maraad couldn't help asking aloud. His thinly veiled insult went unheard, unremarked upon.

"The Prophet is seeing no one, friend. We also seek his wise counsel in these dark times. He will speak when he chooses to," an *Exodar* peacekeeper said.

"A lie. He sees the Stormwind prince!"

"Prince Anduin is studying the ways of the Light under the Prophet's tutelage. You should be honored—humbled, even—that the Ageless One teaches one of your kind. Who knows what great boon to your people may come of it?"

"Ar'gance! Who're ya to tell us we needs be humbled, eh? *Who're ya?* Hoofed demon, says I!"

There could be no worse insult than to remind the draenei of their kinship to the eredar of the Legion. The peacekeeper's eyes narrowed dangerously, and his hand moved to the glowing crystalline sword at his side. At the gesture, Maraad found himself reaching for the handle of his great hammer, and several other draenei drew themselves up and leaned toward the ragtag "delegation." Maraad saw the humans instinctively draw back. Even if what passed for their conscious minds was fool enough, the animal in them sensed better.

The peacekeeper visibly relaxed and withdrew his hand, recognizing the refugees' fright. "I know you are far from your homes. You are hungry and the future is uncertain. In such straits, you are wise to seek the counsel of our prophet. Believe me, friend, when I say I would like nothing better than for him to address your concerns. But understand this: *his ways are infinite*. He will come to you, or not, as he will, but he will not be compelled. I advise you to return to your homes in the encampment."

"What homes? These not'r homes," came the sullen reply. The contingent slinked off, muttering and with dark expressions. The humans had nearly come to blows with their hosts, and they all knew it.

"What right have *they* to speak of exile to *us*?" the peacekeeper said in quiet awe.

"What right, indeed?" Maraad answered.

###

Surrounded by the Hand of Argus and its leadership, Maraad was outspoken with his opinion.

"The Prophet will not share his wisdom with us. The decision is ours. Let us take the war to the Legion! Or, failing that, return to poor, tortured Outland and complete the work to set it aright. Our second home needs us, as do the Lost Ones still wandering the wastes."

Maraad was met with silence from the Triumvirate, but he could sense agreement in the minute movements of face and body, which betrayed the leaders' thoughts. There was a sense of uneasiness, though, and the vindicator knew its origin... because he shared it. *The Prophet should speak, should bless our resolve.*

"In one week's time we will test the phase pistons of the *Exodar*. And if the Prophet has not spoken by then, we will leave Azeroth behind!"

###

"How go your lessons, Anduin? Is your understanding progressing?"

For months, the prince had been gratified by the attention afforded him, thrilled at the chance to learn from the being closest to the Light in all of Azeroth. But now, with Velen's unhurried, quiet questions echoing in his head, resentment flared up.

"Don't you know what's happening out there?" Anduin asked.

"There is always *something* happening *out there*," returned the soft voice. It was gently said, but its undertones held an edge nonetheless. "My concern is with the path."

"What is the path? A distant war on some far-flung world? You're needed *here*. Needed *now*. Is that why you never warned of the Cataclysm? Was it just beneath your notice? Are we all insects to you? Or, worse, chess pieces?"

It'd been an age since someone dared rebuke the Prophet. He spun to face the prince, surprised, as he often was when it came to humans, by how quickly the child seemed to be becoming a man, by the adult in the words hurled at him. And as soon as Anduin came into view, the world *changed*.

Instead of the prince, an armored warrior stood before him, his plate helm and breastplate shining with the essence of the Light itself. The warrior wielded a sword forged from the same material as the armor, held it aloft as he perched on an outcropping... Whether it was on another world or Azeroth, Velen couldn't quite tell. And suddenly the dark sky above erupted with the combined chivalry of Azeroth's races. The blood elves, orcs, trolls, tauren, and even the accursed undead and scheming goblins rode flying mounts of every sort and description. They were armored and armed in magical weaponry glowing with so much power it hurt Velen's eyes to look at them. Beside the legions of the Horde, the ancient night elves charged with humans, dwarves, and gnomes, whose ancestors formed the original Alliance, and the shape-changing worgen were united with them. Velen's own draenei bolstered the army, their ranks adorned in otherworldly metals and bearing crystalline maces and swords.

The Alliance and Horde were not alone.

Dragons swooped and soared in formations that made the sky resemble a giant multicolored, reptilian wing. They blanketed the horizon with their physical size and numbers, and when they roared a challenge, it shook not just the earth Velen stood on, but the universe as well.

And yet, for all this, the greatest shock to Velen's senses came as he saw those that flew just beyond the army of dragons. The naaru had taken the field, so many that Velen didn't understand how creation could contain them. The power of these beings of Light filled Velen's heart with hope, swept away the lonely centuries, and left him in wonder that he could ever despair, that the dark, no matter how terrible, could ever truly reign.

And then a shadow fell.

It was vast and empty and swallowed all light that entered it. Velen knew it would be all consuming until, at last, it would turn and devour itself, endlessly gnawing on nothing in the Great Dark Beyond, removing all meaning from the universe, from the most heart-breaking sonata to the most arresting sunset. It was too terrible to see, to comprehend, and yet the army headed straight for it. And the light began to fade...

Standing before the Prophet was only a human man-child, eyes wide and passionate, saying something unintelligible to him.

The Prophet turned his back on Anduin, his mind clawing toward the Light, reaching for the thread of the vision he'd witnessed, trying to see the path amid the fractured possibilities. He was forcefully reminded of the weeks leading up to the Cataclysm. He didn't notice when the prince left his chambers.

###

The week passed in tension for the refugees. The draenei were occupied with their own concerns, preparing to test their beloved ship and worrying over the silence of the Prophet. The exiles noted the increased activity and could feel something in the air. Their ignorance of the whys only fed their darker thoughts and rumormongering. There were a few voices that reminded the others of the kindnesses done for them by the draenei, but it was ever

the nature of mortals to suspect and fear what was not understood, and the hooves and blue skin of their patrons ultimately counted far more than the supplies and healing they'd lent. Very few refugees asked themselves, even in the quiet dark as they lay safely within the protection of Azuremyst Isle, how the draenei might've been treated had they fled to other Alliance shores, seeking aid.

And so, when the enormous structure named *Exodar* began to hum and vibrate, when the very air turned electric around them, the refugees' instincts told them what their intelligence couldn't: the ship was working.

The draenei are leaving! enough of them thought for panic to infect the camp. *They take the Prophet with them!*

The unseen had become a savior to the refugees, the Prophet a talisman against the horrors of the Cataclysm. Like most mobs, this one had no single leader, and there was no moment that could be pointed to when fear and worry boiled over into action. And yet, almost the entire camp found itself surging recklessly toward the *Exodar*.

###

How did one answer the call of centuries, the challenge to see each day anew and not as a repetition of banality that could only end in sorrow? The heaviest burden for the being who had been only Velen and was now the Prophet—a force, a myth, an abstraction—was the loneliness of higher comprehension. He could not unsee the seen. And he knew this weariness, this lack of daily conviction, was his once brethren's greatest weapon against him.

Have you tired of the death you bring worlds? Velen wondered of his lost friend Kil'jaeden. *Do you ever doubt, in the blackness of your soul, the choices you have made?*

Yet these were old worries, ancient musings.

In one possible future, he'd seen a successive Lich King rise from the Frozen Throne, even more terrible than Arthas or Ner'zhul, and sweep across the land with thousands of skeletal warriors in his wake. When the Legion returned, it was to a world already dead, and the demons laughed and played with the unnaturally risen draenei—all to spite Velen for the chase he'd led across the universe.

He'd seen the maddened Earth-Warder, the Destroyer, burn the world and then begin to contemplate the deaths of his own children, the black dragonflight, to slake his psychopathic need to end things.

Please, he begged of the Light. Show me the path.

###

The mob had lost all intelligence because of its numbers, all reason in the crowd's passions. The draenei tried to parley, but to no avail, and when the alarm sounded and the paladins, vindicators, priests, and magi took the field against the rabble, the tragically predictable happened. The defenders were faced with an impossible choice: fight only to subdue and push back, risking death at the hands of a lesser foe; or slay allies they had no wish to kill. War was a thing to be engaged in completely or not at all, and the draenei were reminded of this when Vindicator Romnar fell beneath the surge as he made his way to the gates to investigate what disturbance his tests had caused. The vindicator was grievously wounded by the mob before the other draenei were able to pull him behind their lines to safety.

Seeing Romnar go down brought back memories to Maraad of battling the undead, and his crystalline hammer no longer merely parried but began to come down with crushing force

on the invaders. Once he had cut loose the bonds of mercy, the rest of the draenei followed, and the beginnings of a slaughter were writ in the blood of the refugees.

###

"Prophet! You must come! You must!" Anduin cried out to Velen's levitating back. The panic in the boy's voice cut through the visions, and Velen wrenched his attention to the present, spun to face his charge.

"What has happened?" Velen asked in his ageless tone.

"The refugees are mobbing the *Exodar*. *Your* people are attacking them! Attacking *innocents*."

Velen felt it. The path. There were two forks, and he could see the child leading him down one. At the end of the other was shadow. Such a burden, that so much could turn on small choices. Was this, then, the meaning of his earlier vision? That the marker to lead Velen out from the wilderness, back to the Light's road, lay with the child?

"What does your war matter to those fighting outside?" the boy yelled. And then, recalling his dream, he said, "*Every* life is a universe!"

Have I lost myself so much? Velen wondered. *I must be taught by a mortal child?*

And then the answer came from the depths of his soul: *The Light's lessons are a boon no matter their origin.*

"I will come," Velen said.

###

The adversaries were locked in a desperate struggle that blotted out all other concerns. The refugees knew they had made a terrible error, and it was too late to undo it. They fought from a need to survive, to rectify their mistake. For the draenei, their understanding of what they were doing, the horror of slaying not just allies but also those weaker than themselves, lent the defenders a tragic, self-hating fury. It would take no small thing to halt the carnage.

Velen was no small thing.

The world erupted in Light, blinding the mob and defenders alike, a runic, geometric sunburst that illuminated rather than obscured the figure suspended in its midst. The Prophet's crystal blazed beside him, and his voice roared, forcing some of the combatants to their knees.

"Enough!"

The draenei stopped, most of them relieved, several of them dropping their weapons to the earth in horror. The refugees froze at the sight of the mythic Prophet in the flesh before them.

Velen descended until he hovered among them mere inches from the blood-soaked soil of Azuremyst.

"This is how we treat our brethren?" Velen asked his people in sorrow. Many of the draenei wept in shame when they heard his disappointment. Maraad was unmoved. "And you, who enjoy our aid, our hospitality, strike your friends without provocation?" How could any of the combatants stand before the accusation in those forever eyes?

The Prophet lowered himself to the muddied, trampled, bloodied ground, his hooves touching down.

There was a collective gasp from the other draenei as the muck stained the end of the Prophet's robes. Velen walked to one of the fallen, knelt in the filth, and reached out to hold the broken body. Light issued from one of his hands as he plunged it into the caved chest, sorrowing for a moment over the familiar mark of a crystalline hammer, and channeled the Light to clear the wound. The human opened his eyes, healed of the potentially mortal injury.

Anduin was right. What hope was there for the universe if Velen failed to guard every life as best he could? Would the draenei not win their war at the cost of everything that mattered?

Velen stood, his dirtied robes speaking volumes. He addressed his brethren, his children.

"We will go forth among the mortals of Azeroth, our pledged allies, and serve and aid their quest to heal the world from the Cataclysm."

It was Maraad who spoke up. Only he would dare.

"The *Exodar* at long last is repaired, Prophet. We should take the war to the Legion. Or perhaps return to Outland and heal our home in exile."

"Each to your own conscience," the Prophet replied. "But I tell you this: *our war is everywhere.* In every deed and breath. We must prepare the people of this world to stand together. We must be their example to rally against evil. In service we will awaken them all to form the ultimate alliance against the dark. Go among the people, save them from the Cataclysm's hurts, and make them strong for the future."

The other draenei were deeply affected by their Prophet's words, and they went to the wounded refugees. Anduin lent his own blossoming talents to the effort, and even as Velen healed and offered comfort, he couldn't help but watch the prince, impressed by the man he was already becoming.

###

The *Exodar* wasn't merely a machine to the draenei, but a living thing, a brother in a sense that the other races would never understand. And its pain had been righted, its essence healed. The Prophet rejoiced with his entire race at the triumph.

The refugees had met in council, assembled in ever-widening, concentric rings across the hills near Ammen Vale, and ultimately decided their place lay with their own kind. Caught in the fiery emotion of Velen's dramatic appearance, many of the humans sought the priesthood, and nearly all lent themselves to the might of Stormwind to repair Deathwing's destruction. To a man, when asked about their experience with the draenei, the refugees would claim for the rest of their lives that they'd had the right of things all along—that the Prophet *had* given them the answer to the Cataclysm.

Service.

Yet the people most affected by the tragic refugee assault were the Ageless One himself and the human who would someday be king. When Anduin next appeared before his mentor, he found the Prophet facing him, his cloven hooves on the ground.

"Thank you for awakening me to the path. You asked me why I did not warn of the Cataclysm. I failed to recognize the threat it represented because my focus was too inward and... in some ways, too outward. I had lost sight of the individuals in the present world—of

their need—and that was why the Light's beacon dimmed for me. If I am unconnected to the living beings of the now, how can I ever navigate all the connections of their futures?

"You will be a powerful priest someday, Prince Anduin. And a wise king."

Anduin wished only that his father could hear those words.

THE END