Draco ex Machina

by KatieSkarlette

Summary

By the end of Cataclysm the black dragonflight was utterly defeated and nearly extinct. But what if there was a way to change history and give the black flight something resembling a happy ending? Neltharion’s youngest daughter, Obsidia, can’t give up on the hope that maybe, just maybe, her family can be whole again…

Notes

In literary terms, “Deus ex machina” (DAY-oos ex MAH-kee-nuh) means pulling an unlikely plot twist or coincidence out of your butt to force things to turn out the way you want them to, regardless of the story’s internal logic. (It means literally “God from the machine,” a reference to how actors playing gods in ancient Greek theater would be lowered or raised onto the stage with mechanical scaffolding.)

It’s generally considered to be a lazy, uncreative shortcut. But sometimes canon paints you into a corner, and you have the overwhelming urge to write a fanfic that “fixes” things. The only way out is a dash of deus ex machina—or in this case, draco ex machina: dragon from the machine…

There’s another, more humorous layer of meaning in the title that will only become apparent toward the last third of the story, but I’ll leave that for you to discover. ;)

It was late 2011. Cataclysm was over. Deathwing had been utterly destroyed. Nefarian and Onyxia had been raised to undeath and then slain again. The death toll among the black

Only a few remained. Serinar was M.I.A. Seldarria was quietly hanging out in Stonetalon, with no lore surrounding her or quest to kill her. Sabellian and his brood remained in Outland. Wrathion was a mere whelp, and wanted nothing to do with his predecessors.

The black dragonflight I had known and loved since I first started playing WoW in 2005 was gone.

Or was it?

There’s always fanfic, after all.

I sat down to write a wish-fulfillment AU in which the black dragonflight was not wiped out in disgrace…at least, not permanently. Was it all plausible? Maybe not. (Thus the title.) But if it gave some of my favorite characters a happy ending, and I enjoyed writing it, that’s all that mattered. Hopefully now that I’m finally ready to post it, others will enjoy reading it, as well.

There are four main things to know before you read it, however;

1. This was written before Dawn of the Aspects was released. I had my own ideas about how the Titans first uplifted protodragons and blessed the Aspects that are quite different from the way it was depicted in Knaak’s novella.

2. The main character, Obsidia, is both my original character and a canon character. It’s complicated. (Long story short, Blizzard and I independently of each other created a character named Obsidia who is one of Deathwing’s daughters. I incorporated as much of their version of the character into mine as I could. Their Obsidia, who is killed in the Twilight Highlands, can be considered the main timeline’s Obsidia. Mine, as seen in this fic, is an AU version.)

3. It’s important to keep in mind when Deathwing was in control of his own actions and when the Old Gods were pulling the strings. As I see it (YMMV), during the War of the Ancients he was under the direct control of the Old Gods. He broke free at the time of the Sundering, and for the following ten thousand years he was the master of his own actions. (The whispers remained and his sanity was tenuous, but he was not mind-controlled by N’zoth anymore.) When he was seriously wounded at the Battle of Grim Batol in Day of the Dragon, the Old Gods took control of him again, and everything that happened from that point until his destruction at the Maelstrom was their bidding. Thus his children can continue to love and support him in the post-Sundering, pre-Cataclysm years without in any way condoning what he did to their mother and his other consorts, Malygos and Sindragosa, and all the others harmed by his actions.

4. Wrathion will be in this story, but not until the last few chapters. His creation, the red dragonflight’s involvement, and his first year at Ravenholdt happen in this AU exactly as they happen in my fic “The Beginning.” He will barge into this fic at the moment his story diverges from the main timeline. The parts with him and Fahrad will make more sense if you’ve read my other fics, but it's not absolutely necessary.
PROLOGUE

A dragon lay sunning herself on the rocky plateau outside the entrance to her lair. Her purple-black scales stood out in stark contrast to the rust-colored landscape, but matched at least some of the hues swirling slowly in the sky above. The Twisting Nether was constantly changing, a chaotic storm of magic and energy.

A flock of dark shapes flew toward her, and she lifted her horned head with a smile.

"Auntie Obsidia!" chorused young voices as whelps in a variety of sizes swooped down to greet her.

"Hello, little ones," she said warmly, holding still as they swarmed around her face, chattering and licking and laughing. She noted that most belonged to her eldest brother, but a few were from her other siblings' clutches. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

One of Onyxia's daughters landed in front of her. "Uncle Nefarian says you're a hero."

Obsidia chuckled. "Can I get that in writing?"

A whelp who looked strikingly similar to her brother piped up. "Papa says we used to live on a different world where evil monsters made us crazy."

Obsidia's smile took on a melancholy cast. "That's true."

"And he said you and Uncle Sabellian are responsible for bringing us here where it's safe."

"He says without you none of us would have been hatched!" said one of Nefarian's sons.

"Well..." She shifted her weight uncomfortably, looking down at her front paws. "I suppose that's true. What made him suddenly decide to start singing my praises?"

"Papa doesn't sing," another of Nefarian's sons said with a giggle.

"He and Auntie Onyxia are getting ready for--" began one of Nefarian's daughters.

"We're not supposed to tell!" Onyxia's daughter scolded, pouncing on her cousin.
"It's been two whole years since everyone came here!" said Nefarian's son.

"Ssh!"

"And there's going to be a party!" his sister squealed.

"It's supposed to be a surprise!" Onyxia's daughter groaned.

Obsidinia smiled. "It's all right. I won't tell."

"I heard Papa say that he and Uncle Sarth and Uncle Fahrad were going all the way to Nagrand to bring back clefthoof to eat. I've never had clefthoof. Is it good?" Nefarian's son asked.

"Yes, very," Obsidinia said.

"Mama made us promise not to tell her or Grandpa and Grandma!" Onyxia's daughter fretted.

"Well, we didn't tell Grandma and Grandpa," one of her cousins said with a shrug.

"Yet," said another.

"Don't worry," Obsidinia said, patting her tiny niece on the head. "I won't breathe a word."

"Tell us about what happened!" demanded one of the smallest whelps.

"Yeah! Tell us about the other world and the evil voices!"

Obsidinia hesitated, but her nieces and nephews gathered around and stared at her with universally curious, pleading expressions. She sighed. "It's a long story."

"Papa's so busy he won't notice we're gone."

"Please?"

"All right, all right. Let's see..." Obsidinia sat up straighter and took a deep breath. "Until just a couple years ago, the black dragonflight lived on a world called Azeroth."

"I've heard of that!" chimed in one of the whelps.

"Ssh! Let her tell the story!"

Obsidinia waited until they had settled down again before continuing. "Our earliest ancestors were called protodragons. They weren't very smart, and they weren't divided into the different colored flights that we have now."

One of Nefarian's sons raised his paw in the air. "If we're black dragons, how come Auntie Onyxia is purple?"

"She's purple and black," one of her equally-purple daughters said defensively. "And your papa's kind of orange."

Obsidinia interrupted to nip the digression in the bud. "Our base foundation is still black. Anyway,
the Titans came and made us smarter, and gave us special powers so that we could protect the world."

"Uncle Sabellian says the Titans were dumb and incompetent." The whelp looked proud of himself for pronouncing such a large word.

She smirked. "Yes, don't get him started. They weren't dumb, but they didn't think ahead like they should have. They defeated the Old Gods--the ones who did the evil whispering--and imprisoned them in the center of the planet. The problem was that the black dragonflight's domain was the deep places of the world, right by the Old Gods."

"That was dumb," one of the whelps said.

Obsidia gave a tolerant smile. "Probably. Anyway, we were so close that they slowly drove us crazy with their whispers. They started with your grandfather, and once our Aspect was corrupted it spread to the rest of us. He became like a completely different dragon with the Old Gods controlling him. He changed his name from Netharion to Deathwing, and he was the Earth Warder no longer. They called him the Destroyer."

"Didn't Grandma Sintharia change her name, too?"

"Yes. She was Sinestra while she was corrupted. And you know what?" Obsidia leaned forward confidentially, and the whelps waited in rapt anticipation. "He'll hate me for telling you this, but Nefarian also had a different name before he was corrupted. He's so used to 'Nefarian' now that he doesn't want to change back, but when he was a whelp like you he was called Romathion."

The whelps gasped and giggled, already figuring out how they could tease him.

Obsidia winked and resumed her normal sitting posture. "Anyway, I wasn't much older than you when everything came to a head. Your grandfather was completely taken over by the Old Gods. They made him do terrible things, like kill other dragons with a powerful talisman called the Dragon Soul. They had brainwashed him into making the talisman, but they did too good a job of making him obsessed with it. When they demanded that he give it over to them, he refused. They fought over it, and finally his will was too strong. He broke free of their mind control, but the damage was done. The other dragonflights hated us. Most of the blue flight had been killed. Your grandmother had been badly hurt, and was so angry and afraid that she didn't speak to your grandfather for ten thousand years."

"Wow," chorused the whelps.

Obsidia moved on quickly, glossing over the details of Sintharia's plight due to their age. "And even though the Old Gods weren't controlling him directly anymore, they were still whispering to him and every other black dragon. Some of us snapped right away and were evil from that point on. Some of us managed to keep our sanity, more or less, but it was a struggle every single day. If you let your guard down for a second, they might take over and make you do bad things."

The whelps shivered.

"Your grandfather devoted the rest of his time to protecting our flight, controlling and destroying the mortals who would interfere with us. Some of the people on Azeroth even killed us to make armor out of our scales!"
"Eeeeeeewww!" the whelps said in unison.

"I know," she said, grimacing. "But no matter how much he tried to protect us from mortals, there was no way to stop the whispers. We suffered constantly, turning on each other and sometimes doing terrible things that made mortals want to hurt us even more than they already did. So when a portal opened up to another world, your grandfather and Uncle Sabellian thought maybe we would be better off there. It was dangerous, but if there was a chance that after ten centuries we could be our own masters again, it was a risk worth taking..."
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

As the youngest of Deathwing’s surviving children, Obsidia is admittedly a bit spoiled. Nefarian, Onyxia and Sabellian all have important tasks to do for the black dragonflight, while Obsidia spends her time collecting gems and lounging in hot springs. Yet she cannot escape her family’s dark legacy forever…

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains spoilers for the novels "Beyond the Dark Portal" and "Day of the Dragon."

Content warnings: Discussion of reproduction (carrying eggs, feeling pressured/obligated to do so, etc.) Mentions of rape with regard to Sintharia, and the emotional scars left on Nyxondra, who heard it happen. Mentions of child death (i.e. destroying berserk whelplings to protect their clutchmates.)

Four figures, apparently human, sat around a campfire in a ravine at the edge of the Black Morass. It was well past sunset and the firelight cast ominous shadows on the red rock walls of the canyon. Was it a trick of the light that made some of those shadows show dragon wings?

Two of the figures were dark-skinned males, one was a pale woman, and the fourth, obviously the leader of the group, was a man with light skin and strong, hawkish features. They all had jet-black hair, and despite the range of skin colors they were clearly related to one another. The two younger males, in particular, looked very much like brothers.

"I bet you five gold she’ll be late," said one.

"I wouldn’t take that bet," snorted the other. "We all know how she is."

"She’ll be here," said the female with a slightly defensive tone.

The patriarch of the gathering rubbed his temple as if fighting a headache. Noticing this, the younger of the two brothers reached into a bag of woven orange fabric and pulled out a twisted knot of liferoot. “Here, Father. Chew this. It helps dull pain.”

He declined the root with a thin-lipped smile. “Thank you, Sabellian, but nothing
helps this.” He noted the look of pity on the female’s face. “I’m fine. Really. This is nothing new.”

A looming shadow suddenly blocked out the stars and the flap of huge wings stirred the ashes of the campfire, but none of the figures seated there gave the slightest sign of alarm.

"She’s actually on time for once?” the older brother gasped in exaggerated amazement.

A dragon landed beside them, dwarfing them all in size. Her scales were a dark, purplish-black with lighter violet accents along her spine and wings, and a pale purple underbelly. A thick gold chain around her neck was studded with every gemstone imaginable.

"Oh, shut up, Nef," she snapped. "I’m not always late.” Before their eyes, her form blurred and shifted until a young human woman in an elaborate purple gown stood in the dragon’s place. Her pale skin and long, black hair matched the lady already present. “Besides, I was in Stranglethorn when I felt the summons, so it wasn’t a long flight.” Her annoyance fading, she turned to the man who presided over the gathering. “Hello, Father!”

Deathwing held out his arms and she eagerly launched herself into his embrace. “And how is my little Obsidia?” he asked, holding her at arm’s length to inspect her.

"I’m well, Father. I found the hugest ruby the other day! It was soooo pretty, and I had to rearrange the corner of my lair where I keep my red gems just to display it! You really should come see it!” She beamed with excitement, earning a fond smile from her father, rolled eyes from her older brothers, and a tolerant head shake from her sister.

"I’m afraid I won’t be able to visit any time soon, Obsidia. Sabellian and I are leading an expedition through the Dark Portal."

"The what? That big swirly green thingy?” Obsidia gestured vaguely in the direction of the Portal.

Nefarian audibly stifled a laugh at her description.

"Yes," Deathwing said.

"Why? Those orc creatures who came through it don’t taste very good. The ogres aren’t bad, though…"

"This isn’t about food," Nefarian chided.
"Indeed," Deathwing said. "There’s an entire world on the other side of that Portal. The possibilities are endless, but my primary concern is finding a safe place to establish a hatchery. I’ve gathered eggs from several of the remaining broodmothers: Nalice, Seldarria…and Onyxia of course," he added, nodding gratefully at the woman sitting across the campfire from him.

"My honor," she said, nodding back.

"Sorry I can’t…contribute," Obsidia said, awkwardly nudging a rock with her foot.

"It’s all right, my dear," her father said graciously.

Obsidia gave a grateful smile. Even as the youngest of Deathwing’s surviving children, she was well past the age where she could have started a brood of her own, and she felt guilty for not reproducing when the black dragonflight’s numbers were dwindling.

She had told her father she was not opposed to having a family someday, if the circumstances were ever right. What she never got around to explaining was that those circumstances were a world without the Old Gods pulling the strings.

Deathwing continued. “Regardless, it is vital to protect the eggs we have, and that is becoming increasingly difficult to do here on Azeroth.”

Sabellian finally spoke up, his tone subdued. “There is also the possibility that eggs hatched on another world will be free from the whispers.”

A moment of silence passed over them along with an inexplicable chill. All black dragons felt the pull of the Old Gods’ will. Some were able to fight it better than others, retaining their free will despite the nagging whispers and chaotic urges. Others fell into darkness completely. Once surrendering to the madness, only the black Aspect himself had ever been strong enough to break free again, and that was a daily struggle.

"Well, that seems like a good idea," Obsidia said at last. "Worth a try, anyway."

"Yes," Deathwing said. "We will be assisting the orcs with their plans, at least for now, in exchange for their help transporting the eggs through the Portal. So please refrain from eating any of them or their ogre allies."

"Right," Obsidia said sheepishly.

"I don’t know how long Sabellian and I will be gone, but Nefarian and Onyxia will be in charge of the flight while I am away. They already have their instructions."

His two eldest children nodded.

"What can I do to help?" Obsidia asked.
"Stay safe," Deathwing said, putting a hand on her shoulder.

She gave a small sigh of disappointment.

"Someday, Obsidia, you will have the strength and wisdom to take part in my plans. But you have to live long enough to see that day, and these are dangerous times. For now, you can best serve the flight by staying out of trouble."

"Yes, Father," she said sullenly.

"Besides," Sabellian said with a twinkle in his eye, "if you behave I’ll see what kinds of shiny rocks I can bring you back from Draenor."

"Ooh!" Obsidia brightened immediately. "I’d like that!"

Sabellian grinned and put an arm around her shoulders. “I always like to spoil my baby sister,” he teased.

"You stay safe, too," she said, hugging him.

"I will," he promised.

Obsidia’s lair was on the coast east of Loch Modan, nestled at the foot of the highlands. As she made the journey northward from the Black Morass, she realized she would be passing right by her other sister’s home.

Nyxondra was a bit older than Obsidia, but younger than Onyxia and their brothers. While still a whelp she had witnessed what happened to their mother, Sintharia, when the newly-molten Deathwing forced himself on her. The Old Gods had a firm grip on his mind at the time, ensuring that he neither noticed nor cared about the damage he was causing to his mates. Only Sintharia, his prime consort, had survived mating with him, and she was left permanently disfigured by ever-burning scars. Maddened by pain and her own dose of the Old Gods’ influence, she had fled into the wilderness and was rarely seen, even by her children.

Obsidia herself had been barely three years old at the time, and slept through the horror in another cavern along with the rest of her clutchmates. Nyxondra alone had been awake to hear Sintharia’s screams of pain and betrayal.

Traumatized, Nyxondra had exiled herself from the rest of the family. She refused to speak to her father, and avoided her siblings whenever possible. Obsidia was the only one she would agree to see, and even then she insisted on meeting away from her own lair.

Obsidia respected her wish for distance, but since she would be so close by… She landed on a
mountain peak in the Burning Steppes and sank her claws into the arid soil. Closing her eyes, she reached out through the earth in search of her sister.

_Nyxondra, are you there? It’s me, Obsidia._

It took a moment before the reply came. As always, Nyxondra was guarded. _Obsidia. Are you alone?_

_Yes, yes_, she said impatiently. _I’m in the Steppes, heading north toward home. I thought maybe I could drop by and say hello._

Nyxondra was silent, considering. _If you must._

_The usual place, around sunset?_

_Very well._ With that, Nyxondra broke off the communication.

Obsidia sighed. Well, at least she agreed to meet. All too often Obsidia’s invitations were rejected with excuses about being too busy, or ill, or for no given reason at all.

She leapt into the air again and headed north by north-east.

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A full-grown black dragon in flight was a fearsome sight that few mortals could claim to have seen. It was less of a novelty to Obsidia, but she still got to her feet with a grin when she spotted the dark figure among the clouds.

If Obsidia and Onyxia favored their mother in looks, Nyxondra took after Neltharion. Her eyes were a vivid carmine that called to mind fresh lava, and her scales were a rich brown-black. It was fortunate that dragons rarely looked into mirrors in their true forms, for it would no doubt have vexed Nyxondra to see the resemblance to her father.

The huge shape swooped down, wings splayed to slow her descent, and came to rest on the hillside in front of Obsidia. It was a nondescript spot along the coast, rarely traversed by mortals.

"Sister!" the younger dragon cried joyfully, hurrying over to bump her head against her sibling’s. "I’m so glad you could come!"

Nyxondra returned the head bump with less enthusiasm before assuming a more dignified manner. "Hello, Obsidia. You look well."

"So do you! Are you gravid?"

Nyxondra settled down on the ground, mostly hiding her swollen belly from view. "I am," she said matter-of-factly.

"Congratulations!"

"Thank you," she said with a reserved but genuine smile. "I can only hope that this clutch will fare
better than the last."

"Oh?"

"Two survived. The other three were…not able to control themselves."

Obsidia winced and bowed her head. Some among the black dragonflight were hard-hearted enough to let berserk hatchlings fight until only the strongest survived. It was certainly what the whispers wanted. Nyxondra and a minority of like-minded broodmothers chose to destroy such crazed whelps to protect the rest of the brood, and to deny the Old Gods the extra servants.

The thought of either scenario was enough to give Obsidia nightmares, and was the main reason she had chosen not to find a mate and start a brood of her own.

"How are the rest of my nieces and nephews?" Obsidia asked when her sister did not elaborate.

"Well. Mostly."

Obsidia pressed on despite her sister’s reluctance. "Good! And Hemathion?" She had only met her brother-in-law once, and it had been a brief visit. He seemed friendly enough, if a bit quiet. Then again, no doubt Nyxondra had instructed him to keep contact to a minimum.

Nyxondra narrowed her eyes and gave her sister an appraising look. "You really don’t know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"As you are aware, there are several members of our flight living in the area who share my wish to have nothing to do with Deathwing." Nyxondra never referred to him as "father" anymore, and spoke his name with clear revulsion.

Obsidia nodded.

"We had successfully escaped his notice…until now. He swept through a few days ago and ordered every able-bodied drake and wyrm to follow him. He has some crazy scheme about going to another world."

"Yes, he’s hoping the whispers won’t reach through the Dark Portal."

Nyxondra curled her lip in disgust, and Obsidia instantly regretted admitting she had been in contact with him recently.

"As if the damage isn’t already done," Nyxondra grumbled under her breath. "Anyway, he wouldn’t take no for an answer."

Obsidia’s eyes widened. "What did he say to you?"

Nyxondra stood and began pacing, muscles coiled with barely-restrained fury. "He didn’t know I was there. Hemathion…” She swallowed before continuing. "Hemathion distracted him by pretending to volunteer for the mission, while I hid deep in our lair with our youngest children."

"So Hemathion went with him?"
"Yes. To protect us." Fear broke through Nyxondra’s anger, and she sat down again with a shudder. "The noble fool…"

Obsidua stepped closer and nuzzled her head against her sister’s neck. "I’m sure he’ll be fine. Sabellian is going, too. They’ll scout around, find a new place for a hatchery, and come back."

Nyxondra shook her head. "Something will go wrong. It always does. There’s a reason Deathwing was desperate enough for reinforcements to come here. He leaves nothing but destruction in his wake, and he’s taking the whole flight down with him."

"That’s not true," Obsidia said. "He’s doing his best to preserve what’s left of our dragonflight. That’s why he’s looking for a new, safe place to hatch eggs."

Nyxondra edged away from her with a scowl. "He’s a monster."

Obsidia’s back fin rose in agitation. "How would you know? You haven’t spoken to him in ten thousand years!"

"I have heard more than enough from him," she snarled.

"He’s not like he was then. After the Sundering, the Old Gods lost their direct control over him, and—"

Nyxondra stood and snorted smoke. "—and we have had to live with the whispers every single day for ten centuries! We have had to watch our children suffer from an unending nightmare. We’ve had to fight for control of our own minds and bodies. We’ve had to abandon the charge of the Titans. I don’t care what Deathwing does or says now. There is no way to reverse what he wrought upon the world! Upon the black dragonflight! Upon our family!" Her voice cracked from the intensity of her emotion, and she turned away from her sister. "Please. Just go. You may be able to forgive him, but I never will."

Obsidia hung her head. "I’m sorry," she said quietly. "I didn’t mean to dredge all this up. I just wanted to see you. You’re both part of my family, and I care about you."

Nyxondra exhaled slowly. "I know. I still care about you, too, little sister. As for the others…"

"Onyxia and the rest would be glad to see you."

"The feeling would not be mutual. You at least try to understand how I feel. The others…I don’t know if they don’t believe me about what I heard that night, or…"

"They believe you. They know what happened. But Father wasn’t in control of himself then. The Old Gods—"

"—are a convenient excuse!"

Obsidia blew smoke through her bared teeth. "It’s not an excuse! It’s the truth! You hear the whispers; you know how it can happen! They wear you down until you snap and do things you’d never do otherwise!"
"Oh, I know all too well how it happens. I’ve seen it happen to my babies time and time again," Nyxondra snarled.

"But you still love them," Obsidia said.

"Yes," Nyxondra said curtly. "I love them. Which is why my heart breaks a little more every time I have to snuff out a life that’s barely begun. But it isn’t their fault. They weren’t the ones who started all this. It began with him. He was supposed to be the strongest of us all. He was our Aspect. Our champion. Our father. And he failed us, Obsidia. When we needed him the most, he failed us in the worst way possible. There is no going back.”

"He’s still our father."

"Not anymore. Not to me." Nyxondra stretched her wings and squinted up at the rapidly-darkening sky. "I have my own family to worry about. And I need to get back to them before the hour grows any later."

Obsidia nodded solemnly. "I understand. I… I hope Hemathion comes home safely."

"Me too," Nyxondra said, trying and failing to sound confident.

"And I hope the clutch you’re carrying all hatches healthy, and…you know."

"Thank you. Farewell, sister." Nyxondra began to flap her wings, ready to take off.

"Bye." Obsidia sat and watched her fly away. Her chest felt too heavy to do the same at the moment.

It was many weeks later before Obsidia felt the mental summons again. As always, she dropped what she was doing (in this case, rearranging her green gems for the thousandth time) and flew off to join her father.

This time she felt called to Deathwing’s main lair, far beneath Grim Batol. That was either a very good sign or a very bad one; he was either resting after a job well done, or recovering from a defeat.

It turned out to be the latter. As soon as Obsidia entered the vast cavern, she noticed that the feeling in the air was subdued. Nefarian and Onyxia were sitting near a lava pool, talking in low tones. Deathwing laid on his side a short distance away while goblin servants scrambled all over his vast body, repairing damaged armor plates. In a few spots the armor had been completely torn away, revealing the raw, glowing magma beneath.

"What happened?" Obsidia gasped, immediately going to her siblings. "Is Father okay? Where’s Sabellian?"
"Father will be all right soon, once his repaired armor has the, er, situation contained," Nefarian said, glancing at his sire. "And Sabellian is still on Draenor."

"What? Why? What happened?" Obsidia chattered, looking back and forth from Deathwing to her siblings, too alarmed to focus on anyone.

"Alliance forces attacked the new hatchery," Nefarian said quietly. "Between the humans and elves, and some kind of giant creatures native to Draenor called the gronn, it was a blood bath."

"What kind of monster could do that to Father?" Obsidia wondered, her eyes wide.

"The worst of it was actually the result of an attack by a single human mage," Onyxia said with grudging awe. "The insolent mortal concentrated his spell on the armor plates themselves."

Nefarian continued, “Many of the eggs were destroyed, and the full-grown members of the flight suffered casualties as well.”

She wondered about Nyxondra’s mate, Hemathion, but did not dare ask.

"Sabellian has some superficial injuries but nothing bad enough to keep him out of action. Father left him in charge of the situation on Draenor while he came back here for repairs."

"My goodness," Obsidia breathed, swaying her tail back and forth with worry. "I hope he’ll be all right out there."

"He’ll be fine. He’s our brother, after all.” Nefarian’s glib tone was unconvincing, even to himself.

Obsidia softly padded over to where Deathwing lay, bowing her head to nuzzle his cheek. “Hi, Father,” she said. “I’m sorry you got hurt.”

The eye closest to her opened, a bright flare of red-orange light in the dim cavern. “Obsidia. Don’t worry, I’ll be back on my feet soon. Just a little…armor malfunction.”

"It looks painful," she said, surveying the glowing wounds in his hide.

"Of course it is. But I’m no stranger to pain. I’ll be fine." He sounded weary, and Obsidia frowned in concern.

"Rest, Father. Nefarian and Onyxia and I are right over here if you need us."

A strained smile spread across Deathwing’s face, exposing a hint of razor-sharp teeth. “Thank you, daughter.”
That night Obsidia, Nefarian and Onyxia slept curled up in a pile as if they were still whelps. No one suggested it, but Obsidia instinctively snuggled up to her big sister as they lay down to sleep in a side chamber, and when she awoke some time later their brother was wrapped protectively around them both.

Obsidia closed her eyes again, reveling in the comforting warmth of her siblings’ bodies. She loved them and her father, even with their flaws—no matter what Nyxondra said.

The Dark Portal was closed. The news stunned Obsidia and her siblings. Sabellian was stranded on the other side along with the remnants of the flight’s forces. Some petty mortal conflict led to the Portal’s destruction, and it was beyond the skill of any black dragon to open another.

It was an awkward time, for they were reasonably certain that Sabellian was still alive, but they had no idea when or if they would ever see him again. They couldn’t exactly grieve, yet they had to accept that their brother might be lost forever.

None of the others seemed aware that Nyxondra’s mate was among the forces left behind, and to protect her sister’s privacy Obsidia held her tongue. Dead or alive, he was just as lost as Sabellian. Nyxondra had refused to answer any more of Obsidia’s attempts at communication, so she respectfully took the hint and left her alone.

Nefarian was busy at Blackrock Mountain, making sure that any remaining Horde forces were converted into the service of the black dragonflight—or, failing that, slain or driven away.

Onyxia returned to her favorite lair, a cavern in far-off Dustwallow Marsh, to concentrate on hatching reinforcements. Her prime consort, Sartharion, took a leave of absence from his post at the Obsidian Dragonshrine in Northrend to be with her. Together they produced scores of eggs, hopefully enough to offset the losses during the last war.

Deathwing soon recovered from the injuries he sustained in Outland, and as always he had more schemes ready to put into motion. He was secretive about the details, but informed his children of his whereabouts: the northern human kingdom of Lordaeron.

Several years passed. Bored and missing her family, Obsidia finally decided to pay her father a visit. It was a journey of many days from her lair north-east of Loch Modan to Lordaeron’s capital city, but she was in no hurry. She took her time, relishing the different kinds of prey available so far beyond her usual hunting
grounds.

At last the shimmering surface of Lordamere Lake became visible on the horizon, and she landed on the shore. Deathwing had warned his offspring not to blow his cover, as he would be posing as a human to further his goals. Keeping this in mind, she shifted into her favored mortal form: a slim, pale human woman of about nineteen or twenty. Not wanting to attract undue attention, she presented herself in a plain gray dress that could have been found in the home of any peasant.

Obsidia probed the area with her senses, trying to hone in on her father’s location. She set off down a dusty cobblestone road, doing her best to walk naturally despite the awkward body. Only two legs and no tail or wings? How did humans manage like this?

She walked for over a quarter hour before she felt her homing instinct strengthen, indicating the black Aspect’s proximity. She picked up the pace, passing a handful of modest cottages as she drew nearer to the great walls of Capital City. There were no locals around, just a drowsy dog who only bothered with a half-hearted growl as she walked by before going back to sleep on the front step of a home. She turned onto a pathway leading off the main road, and soon found her way blocked by a tall, stone wall and an iron gate. This was it. She felt it.

She peered through the barred gate into the garden, past the flowering shrubs and sculpted hedges, at a modest but immaculately-kept chateau. It was a warm, sunny day but smoke rose from the chimneys as if every fireplace was in use: the only oddity about the scene. Everything else indicated the home of a minor nobleman.

Obsidia put a hand on the iron gate and felt a jolt of magic. It didn’t surprise her to find the property guarded by warding spells, but the gate swung open without resistance. The spellwork recognized her as a member of the black dragonflight and therefore allowed her entry.

She crossed the small yard and climbed four stone steps to knock on the front door.

Several anxious minutes ticked by in which she wondered if perhaps no one was home, but at last a servant opened the door. She was a young woman in a dull brown dress, and it was glaringly obvious to Obsidia that she was being mind controlled by some unseen caster. “Greetings,” she said.

"Tell Lord Prestor that Obsidia is here to see him," she said with haughty authority.

"Yes, my lady," said the blank-eyed servant, stepping aside to let her enter the house. Although not extravagantly large, the chateau was furnished with all the finest trappings, from sturdy oak furniture to an exquisite tapestry of a forest scene. As the billowing chimneys had hinted, it was sweltering inside. A human would have been miserable, but it was quite comfortable for a dragon.
A short time later, a familiar voice came from the doorway to her left. “Obsidia! What a surprise!”

She whirled around and found herself facing her father in mortal form: a strikingly handsome male human with a strong chin and black hair cropped short. He wore a fine doublet of dark blue velvet with black pants and tall leather boots.

"Father!" she said happily, flinging her arms around him.

"What brings you here?" he asked with a slight undertone of concern.

"Nothing, really," she said with a sheepish smile. "I just missed you. And I was bored."

He gave a tolerant chuckle. “Well, I can’t have you staying here for long, since ‘Lord Prestor’ isn’t supposed to have any living relatives. But I have nothing important to do until the Kirin Tor delegates arrive tomorrow, so I suppose I can squeeze in a short visit with my little girl. Come this way.” He put a hand on her back to lead her down the hallway. Had she believed him to be a normal human she would have feared that he had a fever, for even in mortal form the primordial heat radiated through.

"Thank you, Father," she beamed. "How is your plan going? Whatever it is."

He flashed a perfect smile, lowering a devious eyebrow. “Everything is proceeding according to plan. I’d rather not get into the details at the moment, but you’re looking at the next King of Alterac.”

Obsidia frowned in confusion. “Alterac? What do you want with a human kingdom?”

"Let’s just say you can get a lot done by pulling the strings behind the scenes, and be quite…entertained while doing it." Deathwing tapped his fingertips together in delight.

They entered an interior room that made up for what it lacked in windows by having floor-to-ceiling bookcases on two walls. This was obviously his study, as a massive desk covered in papers sat on the far end of the room below a framed, antique map of Azeroth. She smiled at the geode sitting on one of the bookshelves, its open face shining with the precious stones within.

Obsidia pondered his vague explanation. “But don’t we already hold Alterac? Searinox’s lair is there, along with his mates and their brood. No other dragons dare trespass there.”

There was a plush divan along the wall to their right, across from an active fireplace, and he invited her to sit there beside him. “This isn’t about the other
dragonflights, my dear. This is about mortal kingdoms, and the inconvenience, annoyance and danger they have become."

"Mortals are just weak, crunchy little nuisances," Obsidia scoffed.

"Individually, yes. But in large numbers they can still be a threat. I tried an overt alliance with the orcs, and it ended in disaster. This time I’m trying a more subtle approach."

The oblique reference to Sabellian made them both pause sadly. Finally, Obsidia asked, “So you’re going to make sure the human kingdoms don’t bother us?”

"They and their elven allies to the north-east will be too busy sniping amongst themselves to worry about our kind," Deathwing said with a smug smile. "And if they do notice us, ‘King Daval Prestor I of Alterac’ will redirect their attention."

"It still seems like an awful lot of work when we could just bury them all in lava instead," she said with a small pout.

He laughed. “Oh, Obsidia, you have much yet to learn. Trust me, it’s much more amusing to play games with mortals than it is to merely slaughter them. Of course I could reduce Capital City to a smoldering heap of ash if I wanted to. But where is the challenge in that?”

"I don’t know; it’s a big city."

He patted her on the shoulder. “Someday you’ll understand, my dear.”

"Have you talked to Nefarian or Onyxia lately?" she asked.

"Last I heard, Nefarian was still dealing with some stubborn Dark Iron dwarves, and Onyxia and Sartharion were busy making whelps."

Obsidia blushed slightly.

Noting her reaction, he teased her, “Which reminds me, you’re more than old enough to start breeding, you know. Any time you want me to start looking for a suitable mate for you, I will gladly do so. I can’t have my baby girl laying eggs for just any old dragon.”

"Father!" she protested, unable to look in his twinkling black eyes. "You’re embarrassing me."

He chuckled. “Don’t worry, Obsidia. I won’t rush you, and the final choice will be yours. But there may come a time when you’ll want to settle down and start a brood of your own. And Titans know the flight needs all the population growth it can get.”
Obsidia crossed her arms on her chest stubbornly. “Why don’t you make Nefarian take another consort or two? I mean, nothing against Seara, but she doesn’t lay nearly as many eggs as Onyxia does.”

Deathwing sighed. “That would be ideal, but he seems content with her.”

"I wish I had more sisters so it wouldn’t all be up to me, Onyxia, and—" She cut herself off, but it was too late, so she quietly finished, "Nyxondra."

He studied the gold rings on his fingers, avoiding eye contact. ”Nyxondra has chosen her path,” he said evenly. ”She has disowned us, and not without reason. Let her be.”

"I know. I do. I was just wishing Mother was still around." His expression darkened, a glimmer of his true nature showing through his human guise. “That can’t be helped,” he snapped.

It was unfortunately common knowledge that all but one of Deathwing’s consorts had perished soon after the Dragon Soul corrupted his body into an inferno of barely-contained molten fire. It was a sensitive subject, to say the least, and Obsidia immediately regretted her comment.

"Sorry, Father, I didn’t mean—"

"Your mother is irrelevant to this discussion!" he snarled.

"I didn’t say—"

"Enough!"

Obsidia’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “Sorry.”

He nodded and exhaled slowly as he composed himself. “Obsidia, I… I would like nothing more than to have your mother and my other consorts back with me.” He spoke quietly, fixing his gaze on the flames hungrily consuming logs of firewood. “I don’t even really remember…what happened. I regret it, but what’s done is done. I cannot blame Sintharia or Nyxondra for staying away.” He paused, then continued. ”I may have my mind back from the Old Gods but my body is the same. I will sire no more children, yet the black dragonflight must go on.” He turned to look at his youngest daughter. “Do you understand?”

Humbled, she merely nodded.

He brushed a strand of black hair off her cheek. “We will endure, Obsidia. I promise.”

"Even if I don’t take a mate any time soon?"
"Even if you never do."

She smiled gratefully and slipped into her father’s warm embrace. “Thanks.”

He stood, still holding her hands. “Oh, by the way, stay away from Grim Batol on your way back home.”

"Why?"

"I have more than one plan in motion at the moment," he said with a wink. "And thanks to one of them, things could get a little messy around there in the coming days."

"All right…Your Majesty, King Prestor." She gave a theatrical curtsey.

He puffed up his chest regally and humored her with a grand bow. “Splendid, Princess Obsidia.”

They began walking toward the entryway. “I thought you said Lord Prestor didn’t have any relatives.”

"Ah, well, the Lordaeron court believes whatever I wish them to believe." He grinned deviously. "If I planted the idea in his mind, King Terenas would wear his trousers on his head."

She giggled. “And you were worried that I would blow your cover!”

He opened the front door, letting the relatively cold outside air wash over them. “Take care, my dear.”

"You too, Father," she said softly, giving him one last hug before leaving down the garden path. She turned at the gate to wave once more, and the dashing figure of Lord Prestor waved back from the doorway.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

After the Battle of Grim Batol, a severely injured Deathwing disappears, leaving his children to worry and wonder what happened to him. They are initially relieved when he makes contact again, but something’s just not right…

Chapter Notes

Content warnings:
Mentions of death, life-threatening injuries, suicidal feelings (sort of…more like desire for euthanasia), reproduction, infertility, genetic engineering, and mind control. A brief allusion to Sintharia’s rape. Gnolls being burned and eaten, because dragons.

"Obsidia!"

She was having a lovely dream of flying through a cavern made completely of shiny glass that reflected rainbows of light in all directions.

"Obsidia! Wake up!"

Nefarian wasn’t in her dream, was he? She didn’t remember seeing him, but now his voice was close by and—

“**Obsidia!** Wake up, or I’ll breathe shadowflame in your face!”

"What? Huh?" She bolted awake, looking around in fear and confusion. Her older brother stood before her, looking annoyed.

"Finally! I thought you’d never wake up!" he said with a scowl.

Obsidia blinked sleep from her eyes, trying to make sense of the situation. She was in her lair above Loch Modan. Judging by the meager light coming in the mouth of the cave, it was barely past sunrise. “Nef, what are you doing here?” she asked groggily. “And at this time of the morning! Yeesh!”

"I flew all night to get here," he snapped. Then, tone softening from anger to worry, he said, "Obsidia, I have some bad news. I wanted to break it in person."

He immediately had her full attention. “What’s wrong?”

"Do you know about Father’s latest project in Grim Batol?"
"Only that there was one. He wouldn’t give me any details when I talked to him a couple of weeks ago."

"He manipulated the orcs into moving Alexstrasza and her eggs. When she was out in the open, he was going to steal as many of her eggs as he could. Then I would help him alter them to augment our flight. You’re aware of my experiments."

She nodded.

"Somehow the other Aspects learned of the situation and came to Alexstrasza’s aid."

"The other… All three of them? Even Malygos?" Obsidia gasped. The Aspects had largely kept to themselves since Deathwing’s betrayal, and Malygos had completely isolated himself in his paralyzing grief.

"Yes. He, the Dreamer and the Timeless One all arrived to free the Life Binder. Together, they attacked Father."

"Khaz’goroth have mercy," Obsidia mumbled. "Did…did they kill him?"

"No," Nefarian said quickly. "At least, we don’t think so. He’s…disappeared."

"Disappeared? How? Surely he would have come to one of us for aid, or summoned us!" Obsidia looked desperately to her big brother for answers, but Nefarian looked just as perplexed as she was.

"Exactly. Yet neither Onyxia nor I can sense his location. We would have noticed if the link that binds us had been severed by his death, but this… It’s as if he’s somehow too far away to pinpoint. The only thing I can think of is that perhaps he fled to Deepholm."

Obsidia pondered this. Only the Aspect of Earth had the power to enter the elemental plane of earth, and even though Neltharion had neglected his duties for ten centuries, it was certainly possible that the erstwhile Earth Warder had gone there. “But what if he needs help? We can’t follow him there, and if he’s injured that badly…”

Nefarian gently bumped his head against hers in a comforting gesture. “There’s nothing we can do. Hopefully he’ll recover on his own. He’s done it before.”

"But if all the other Aspects attacked him at once—"

"I know. We just have to hope for the best. In the meantime, Onyxia and I will carry on as he instructed us."

"What about me?"
"Come back to Blackrock with me if you wish. Otherwise, just wait and see."

Obsidia did her best to look brave. “I’ll stay here. My lair is closer to Grim Batol than anyone else’s. If Father returns from…wherever…he may come here.”

Nefarian nodded. “Very well. We’ll be in touch.” With one last snout-to-cheek nuzzle, he launched himself into the air and flew away.

Obsidia watched him disappear into the clouds, trying not to let her imagination run wild with worst-case scenarios. Her father would be fine, of course. He had to be.

Pain.

Agony.

No, more than that. There were no words to describe the searing, burning, aching, mind-shredding torture he felt. Every nerve ending in his battered body screamed. Every breath he managed to take made it feel as if his chest would burst. Incredible heat overwhelmed him, and he twitched as if his body was trying to draw away from the source of the heat, but could not because the inferno was within him.

Death. Please, please, please, let death come. Anything to end his agony.

How long had Deathwing laid there among the dark stone, sprawled in a pool of the magma that oozed endlessly from his wounds? There was no sense of time when every heartbeat brought such dizzying pain, and there was no sun in Deepholm.

Images swirled through his fevered mind, snippets of memories both ancient and recent. Malygos teased him playfully. King Terenas Menethil prattled mindless praise at him. Sintharia nuzzled against him as they watched piles of their eggs begin to hatch. Jagged spires of rock rose into a red sky as he battled gronn. He was alone in his deepest lair, trying and failing to shut out the whispers that plagued him day and night. Khaz’goroth held him in the palm of his hand, instructing him how best to carry out his duties. Young Romathion returned from his first solo hunt with a kodo bull, beaming with pride. The Dark Portal towered over even him, swirling with unfathomable energies. He and Alexstrasza sat together in a grassy mountain meadow, talking for hours as red and black whelps played together nearby. The whisperers wanted the Dragon Soul, but he would never, ever relinquish it! Sintharia was screaming in pain, writhing from the terrible burns he had caused. He was helpless to comfort her. She shrank back from his touch, and he couldn’t blame her. If the pain she felt was even a fraction
The pain. It had been with him for every moment of the last ten centuries, but never like this. His jaw was shattered. Gaping wounds criss-crossed his back and sides. It was a wonder his tattered wings were able to carry him here from Grim Batol. Some of his horns were broken, large patches of scales were torn off, and a rift in his chest made him both fear and hope that his entire body would split in two.

Why did death not come? It was in his name, he had brought it to countless others through the millennia, but plead as he might it would not grant him relief.

*You thought to escape us? You are ours.*

Deathwing’s eyes snapped open. The voices had not been that loud since the Sundering. Once he denied them the Dragon Soul, the Old Gods’ hold on him had been broken. He still heard them in the deep places of the world, but his will was his own.

*Or so you thought. Did you really believe that Khaz’goroth’s pet lizard could beat gods in a battle of wills?*

Deathwing thrashed his head from side to side in an attempt to dislodge the voices from his mind, but doing so caused such an intense rush of pain that he nearly lost consciousness.

*It is pointless to struggle, little worm. You have always been ours. You are all alone. No one can help you. No one would help you. They’ve all abandoned you...rejected you...betrayed you...*

He tried to protest but only a gurgling moan escaped his mangled jaw.

*There is no escape. You think death would save you? Death is nothing to us.*

He dug his claws into the rock, panic urging him to flee but logic telling him he could not escape the voices even if he was able to fly.

*You are no use to us like this. We must rebuild you. You will serve us yet.*

Deathwing suddenly became aware of mortals approaching and his heart leapt in hope that perhaps they would slay him. As his pain-blurred eyes focused on the small forms, however, that hope was dashed. Twilight’s Hammer banners rose above the ranks of purple-robed cultists, and they were led by some kind of nightmarish crustacean that was clearly a creation of the Old Gods.

The hideous creature stopped in front of him, clicking its massive claws. It stood on squat, two-toed feet, towering over the cultists. An array of insectoid limbs
sprouted from its back, almost giving the appearance of wings. Its golden eyes were framed by frilled fins and the lower half of its face tapered down into a trident of pointed tentacles. It spoke in the gibberish of the Old Gods, but what Deathwing’s ears could not decipher was somehow clear in his brain. “Greetings, Destroyer.”

Deathwing tried to summon the strength to send a mouthful of flame at the unwanted visitors, but he was too weak.

"We will see to it that you can serve the Masters once more," said the Faceless One. You will serve, said the whispers.

"No," he wheezed. "No!" All he had worked for, his flight, his family…if they took control again it would all be lost!

The gathered cultists channeled a spell at him while an orb of purple energy took shape in their leader’s claws.

Deathwing felt his will faltering. Images of writhing tentacles, swarms of eyeballs, and gibbering mouths full of twisted teeth overwhelmed his mind. The black dragonflight was nothing. He was nothing.

No! Nefarian, Onyxia, Sabellian, Nyxondra, Obsidia! Sintharia! They were his beloved family, his children, his prime consort! They were—

Useless. Inconsequential. Failures. Only the Masters’ will mattered.

No!

The energy emanating from the Faceless One’s orb grew in intensity, and Deathwing squirmed in revulsion.

No! Stop! Please!

Stop? Yes… Stop the mortal races from interfering. Stop the Titan’s plans from continuing. Stop the Masters’ imprisonment. Stop resisting their will. Destroy the world, unleash the Hour of Twilight!

Swirling black tentacles closed in on his consciousness, and he knew no more.

For months the black dragonflight waited, wondered, and worried. None had any contact with their Aspect. Nefarian and Onyxia forged ahead with their plans. Obsidia kept her vigil at her lair, but eventually was forced to hunt further and further away. It didn’t seem to matter. There was no sign of Deathwing.
At last Obsidia’s travels took her far enough south to justify a visit to Blackwing Lair. She had to circle the mountain twice before she spotted the balcony chiseled into the sheer rock face. The volcanic peak above was spitting a fine rain of ash into the air, making visibility poor.

The mountain stronghold that Nefarian had claimed as his lair after the last mortal war was of dwarven design, with spacious stone halls that were comfortable for a dragon. Bones left over from a recent meal were strewn in one corner of the balcony amid crumbled masonry, but otherwise there was no sign of Nefarian.

"Hello?" Obsidia called. "Anybody home? Nefarian?"

She sniffed around, catching his familiar scent in the air but not able to pinpoint exactly what direction he was.

Shortly, a burly drakonid warrior hurried out of a nearby doorway. “Lady Obsidia,” he hissed with a low bow.

"I’m here to see my brother," she said.

"Of course, my lady. The Master is in his laboratories. Follow me."

Seeing that the doorway was a bit small to accommodate her natural form, Obsidia shifted down into a human body as she approached, and remained in that form as the drakonid led her down broad stone staircases, through corridors, and around an enormous well of lava that gave off a pleasant heat. Her escort stopped before a doorway and bowed with perfect obedience. “The Master is within, my lady.”

Obsidia nodded but offered no thanks. None was expected. Drakonid were bred to be servants. They existed only to carry out the will of the dragonflight.

Dozens of strange smells assaulted her nose as she turned the corner into the laboratory. Beakers of multicolored liquid steamed and bubbled on a long counter next to vats of gooey mixtures. Crates lined up along the wall and under the counter contained a wide variety of strange things: horns, claws, feathers, scales, beaks, hooves, teeth and other bits she could not identify.

A cage in one corner contained what appeared to be a crocolisk, albeit one with the horns of a stag, tail of a green dragon, nose spike of a kodo, serrated spines of a murloc, and several more eyes than normal. This was obviously a side project, for she knew Nefarian’s main goal was to create a new, advanced breed of dragon.

Standing amid the bizarre collection was a human male with a powerful build, jet-black beard and mustache, and dark brown skin. He wore plain black trousers underneath a long overcoat that had been white at some point in time but which was now stained and splattered with a rainbow of unknown substances. He turned at the sound of her footsteps, and she saw he was wearing an utterly ridiculous-
looking pair of green goggles over his eyes.

"Um, hi, Nef," she said, then broke into giggles at his appearance.

"Laugh all you like, but until you’ve had windserpent venom squirt in your eyes you can’t appreciate the value of these things," he said, lifting the goggles up to rest above his eyebrows. "To what do I owe the honor of your visit?"

"I was just hunting over in the Searing Gorge and thought I’d drop by. Any word from Father?"

"If there was, you’d know," he said with a sigh, turning back to his work.

Obsidia came up to peek at the tangle of tubes, wires and containers on the counter in front of him. “What the heck are you trying to do?”

“Trying’? Are you implying that I might fail?” He clutched his chest in a theatrical display of offense. “You wound me, dear sister.”

"Of course not," she said with equally exaggerated innocence.

He smirked. “I am trying to distill the venoms of several different species to create an even deadlier toxin for the next generation of Chromatics.” He called the new variety of dragon he was designing the Chromatic dragonflight, as they would possess the strengths of all the original colored flights. Rather than merely salvage the dwindling remnants of the black flight, Nefarian had great dreams of improving upon the Titans’ design. It struck Obsidia as hubris, but Deathwing had given his blessing to his eldest son’s scheme.

"Sounds nasty."

"That’s the idea," he said with a wicked grin.

"How’s Gyth?"

"Excellent! Give me a second and I’ll show you."

She waited for a minute while he finished mixing vile-smelling green and yellow liquids, then set the beaker on a grate over glowing coals. With that safely done, Nefarian took off the goggles and stained coat and tossed them on a stack of crates.

"I don’t know how you can work in that body," Obsidia said, shaking her head. "Human hands are so clumsy!"

"Only when you don’t practice using them. Besides, they don’t make safety goggles in dragon size."

She giggled. "Good point."
He led her out of the laboratory, down a long corridor that went deeper into the mountain, and into a large chamber. “Gyth, come here!” he called into the shadows beyond the torchlight.

A small dragon swooped toward them, landing in front of Nefarian. He was too old to be called a whelpling, almost mature enough to be considered a drake. He was at an awkward stage of growth where his neck seemed too long for his body, his limbs a bit too short. His scales were a strange magenta color unlike any dragon’s Obsidia had ever seen outside Blackrock Mountain, with a line of aqua scales running from his forehead to his lower back. The aqua color also appeared in patches along the top of his wings and feet, but the membrane of his wings was greenish-yellow.

The hodgepodge of hues was not the only unusual thing about him, however. It was clear from the dull look in his eyes that he did not possess the same intelligence as a normal dragon. He did not speak, just sat patiently in front of his master awaiting orders.

"He’s grown a lot since I last saw him," Obsidia said.

"Yes. I have tried to accelerate the growth process but the bronze components make it trickier than anticipated," Nefarian said. "He also has brainpower somewhere between a particularly smart dog and a particularly dumb orc. Still, he seems healthy enough and I’ve trained him with some basic commands. Watch." Nefarian turned to the small dragon. "Gyth, fly."

Gyth spread his wings and launched himself upward, narrowly avoiding smashing his head into the ceiling.

"Gyth, fire," Nefarian commanded, pointing to a pile of straw in the far corner of the chamber.

He shot a mouthful of fire, and the straw burst into flames.

"Gyth, freeze!"

A blast of ice put out the fire and turned the straw into a jagged pile of icicles.

"Gyth, poison!"

He puffed out a noxious green cloud that settled over the frozen straw, partially melting the ice with a corrosive sizzle.

"Gyth, come here."

The magenta dragon obediently returned to land in front of his master.

"Impressive!" Obsidia said.
"It’s a start," Nefarian said with a shrug. "Further than I’ve gotten with any of the other Chromatics. Oh, I almost forgot… Gyth, dance!"

Obsidinia boggled as the strangely-colored dragon swayed back and forth, swishing his tail while keeping time with one front limb. After a moment of finding his rhythm, Gyth burst into dance, flopping around with clumsy hops and turns, nearly stumbling into a brazier.

By the time it was over, Obsidinia was laughing so hard that tears ran down her face. “Only you, brother! Only you would train your creation to dance!”

Nefarian grinned widely, pleased with her reaction. “It was originally supposed to help his balance,” he said with a laugh.

"Right." Obsidinia composed herself, wiping off her cheeks with the back of her hand. "Well, he’s quite amazing considering that you basically engineered him from scratch. Still pretty ugly, though… No offense."

Gyth looked at her blankly.

"None taken, I assure you," Nefarian said on his behalf. "And I’m not aiming for beauty."

"Obviously," she said with a smirk, giving his human form a critical look as they walked back toward the laboratory.

"I’ll have you know that ‘Lord Victor Nefarius’ is considered attractive by human standards," he sniffed.

"I’ll take your word for it," she laughed. "All humans look the same to me."

"Well, I don’t hear Seara complaining, and hers is the only opinion I care about," Nefarian said.

Obsidinia looked around, not seeing any sign of her sister-in-law in the laboratory. "Where is she, anyway?"

"Resting. We’re expecting a clutch any day now."

"Oh. Congratulations."

His smile didn’t touch his eyes. "Thanks. Hopefully these will actually hatch."

"Still having problems with that?"

He shrugged back into his discolored lab coat. "We’re up to eight live hatchlings now."

"For the month?"
Nefarian had his back to her, stirring the beaker of venom. He muttered something that she couldn’t quite make out.

"What?" she prompted.

"That’s for the year," he snapped.

She winced. Compared to Onyxia’s brood, such a number was abysmal. "I’m sorry, Nef," she said quietly.

He said nothing, tinkering with a rack of vials.

"You could take a second consort. Then you’d know if the problem was with Seara or you."

"I am well aware of that option," he growled, still not turning to face her. "I took Seara as my mate because I loved her. And no one else."

"You wouldn’t have to love the second one, just…" She let her voice trail off, cheeks flushing in embarrassment at having raised such a topic with her brother. "You know, for science!"

He finally put down his work and turned back to her. It was hard to gauge his expression behind the absurd safety goggles he wore, but his voice was cold. "You have no idea what you’re talking about, and unless you want to taste-test this windserpent venom, I suggest you shut up."

She recoiled from the foul-smelling beaker. "Eew!"

Nefarian stalked across the room and began rummaging in a supply cupboard full of jars in neat rows.

Obsidia stood awkwardly for a moment, inspecting the hem of her sleeve. "Sorry, Nef. I didn’t mean to…um, pry."

He returned to the table carrying a jar labeled “Murloc Mucous.” He set it down, stirred the simmering mixture on the burner, and then said, “Apology accepted.”

"It can’t be easy," she said, putting a hand on his back.

"Nothing ever is," he said quietly. After a moment of silence, he mustered a half-smile again. "But at least it gives Seara and me an excuse to mate as often as possible."

Obsidia rolled her eyes. "Spare me the details."

"You brought it up."

"So I did," she said with a theatrical sigh. "Forget I said anything."
"I was planning to," he said cheekily, carefully stirring the bubbling liquid. "Anyway, this venom should be done in a few minutes. If you want to stick around for dinner, you’re welcome to."

"Er…no thanks. This place reeks so badly I’ve lost my appetite."

Nefarian chuckled. “Suit yourself. I don’t even notice it anymore.”

"Besides, I should get going before it gets any later. If you hear anything from Father…”

"I’ll let you know immediately, of course," he said with a sympathetic smile.

"Where could he be?" she fretted. "He must have been injured, but we’d know if he had died, right? We’d be able to sense it?"

Nefarian sighed and set down his work again. “I have to believe that we would, but no flight has ever lost their Aspect before so we have no way of knowing. We just have to be patient and hope for the best.”

"If he’s…gone, you’d need to take over as leader of the flight."

"I know," he said quietly. "We’re not to that point, yet. He left me and Onyxia in charge, and for now we’ll just keep doing as he wanted."

"When will you decide that it’s time to…to move on?"

"When I have no other choice." He crossed his arms on his chest and leaned back against the counter. "I’m in no hurry to take on that kind of responsibility. I would rather just concentrate on my work here."

"But the flight needs a leader."

"And I will be that leader if I must. I simply—"

Come, my children.

Nefarian and Onyxia both froze in place, mouths open in shock.

"Did you hear—" she began, but the mental summons came again before she could finish.

Come to me now.

The siblings locked eyes for a moment, easily confirming without words that both had felt the same command. All other concerns were forgotten as they took off running.

Mind reeling with unanswered questions, Obsidia flew as fast as she ever had and
still could barely keep up with Nefarian. Their homing instinct was calling them to an unfamiliar location somewhere in the mountains north of Stormwind. The area was inhospitable and isolated, with little vegetation and jagged cliffs. Mortals never ventured there, ships stayed far from the coast for fear of hidden rocks in the shallows, and even dragons rarely bothered with it due to the lack of prey.

Her wings were burning from exertion when she finally landed on a small ledge high above the choppy ocean. Nefarian had reached it before her, and now sat there catching his breath.

"What is this place?" Obsidia panted, squinting into the dark mouth of a cave in the side of the cliff.

"Your guess is as good as mine," he said.

"Nefarian! Obsidia!" Their names echoed out of the cave, and they hurried inside to find Onyxia waiting for them. "You felt it, too, I take it?" She looked well-rested, having had a much shorter journey from Stormwind than they had had from Blackrock.

"No, we just happened to stop here for a picnic," Nefarian quipped.

Obsidia giggled nervously and Onyxia rolled her eyes. Their brother led the way deeper into the cave, their draconic eyes quickly adjusting to the darkness.

"What do you suppose happened?" Obsidia whispered to her older sister.

"Hush, we’ll know soon enough," Onyxia said.

Drawn inexorably toward their sire, they descended through winding passageways deeper into the earth until they emerged in a broad cavern. A massive stone circle stood against the far wall, carved with runes that Obsidia could not read. The ring towered at least three times Nefarian’s height, and formless black and red energy swirled within.

Obsidia was suddenly afraid, and backed up a step. This stone archway, whatever it was, seemed…wrong. The creeping feeling of dread that emanated from it reminded her of something, but what?

There was a flare of red light from the center of the ring, and a draconic silhouette took shape amid the mists.

"My children…" came a familiar voice.

"Father!" Nefarian cried, stepping closer to the portal. "You’re alive!"

"Yes," hissed the shadowy figure. They were unable to make out many details, save his glowing red eyes. "I have been in Deepholm, recovering from the battle
with those fools at Grim Batol."

"Are you all right?" Obsidia asked.

"I am now," Deathwing said. "I am…renewed." His voice sounded raspier than she remembered it but perhaps the strange portal was distorting the sound somehow.

"That’s wonderful, Father," Onyxia said with audible relief. "We were so worried!"

"I cannot join you just yet. There is much still to be done. Carry on as you have been. I will call you again when the hour draws closer."

"Of course, Father," Nefarian said, bowing his head. "Don’t worry, we have things under control."

A glimpse of razor-sharp teeth flashed through the mist as Deathwing smiled. “Excellent.”

Without any further discussion, the swirling fog dissipated, leaving the giant stone circle still and lifeless.

A shiver ran down Obsidia’s spine, although she wasn’t sure why. Her worries could be put to rest, now. Her father was alive and well. So why did something feel so wrong?

Perhaps her siblings sensed it, too, because no one spoke as they made their way back to the surface. Obsidia took a deep breath of the salty air as they emerged on the cliffside ledge.

"Well," Onyxia said uncertainly. "I’m glad Father is all right."

"Yes," Nefarian said distantly, obviously deep in thought.

"Did that place feel weird to you two? Almost like… I don’t know, something just felt off about it.” Obsidia fumbled to articulate what she had felt, but no words seemed to fit.

"It takes powerful, ancient magic to communicate from the Elemental Planes," Onyxia said. "That’s probably all it was." She didn’t sound entirely convinced herself, but the others were eager for a simple explanation and chose to believe it for the moment.

Obsidia glanced back over her shoulder at the dark cave mouth and suppressed a shudder. “So, I guess we just keep doing what we’ve been doing.”

"Indeed," Nefarian said. "Which was my plan, anyway."
"How are things at Blackrock?" Onyxia asked. "I know I haven’t been to visit in quite awhile but the stonemason situation is at a rather delicate juncture right now."

"But going well?"

Onyxia grinned deviously. "Quite. They’re all playing right into my hands."

"Splendid. My experiments are progressing nicely, as well. I’m working on improving the poison breath for the next clutch of Chromatics."

"Yes, he is," Obsidia said, "and it reeks!"

Onyxia laughed. "I take it you both came from there?"

"Yeah, I dropped by while I was out hunting."

"Let’s go grab a bite to eat before we go our separate ways again," Nefarian suggested. "There should be gnoll encampments east of here ripe for the picking."

"Mmm, gnolls," Obsidia said.

Onyxia considered. "If we don’t dawdle I suppose I can. ‘Lady Prestor’ is supposed to be taking a relaxing ride in the countryside so I shouldn’t stay gone too much longer."

They flew off the ledge and circled around until they had the height to get over the mountains. "What do humans eat, anyway?" Obsidia asked.

"Lots of things, most of it garbage." Onyxia sniffed disdainfully. "Grains, fruits, vegetables, and bits of meat that are so tainted with spices and sauces that they’re barely recognizable. And even then it’s always something boring like cow, sheep or boar. Maybe deer if I’m lucky."

"Ugh, that’s no fun."

"Tell me about it."

"Do you ever get out to hunt for real food?"

"Once in awhile. Not as much as I’d like."

"You should stop by my place more often," Nefarian said. "I’ve always got a larder stocked with meat."

"I seem to remember the last time I ate meat from your stores, dear brother, I was too sick afterward to fly back to Stormwind. I had to make up some excuse about getting lost on the road to Lakeshire, making myself look like a complete idiot."

"That was an accident! I swear, the meat from leftover experiments is kept in a
completely different part of the mountain now!"

Obsidia flew circles around them and laughed. “Nice one, Nef.”

"Hey, it made me sick, too, don’t forget! Now shut up and let’s have some good, fresh meat!” He drew in his wings for a steep dive, zooming down out of the clouds to take a gnoll camp unaware.

His sisters dropped down on either side of him, unleashing torrents of fire on the collection of rude tents and lean-tos. Nefarian’s shadowflame scorched a trail through the center of the camp, and the panicked gnolls who tried to escape it ran headlong into the inferno left by Onyxia and Obsidia. The mad screeches of dying gnolls filled the air along with the sizzling and snapping of burning wood.

Soon there was nothing left alive in the encampment besides the three dragons. They rounded up a pile of smoking corpses and sat down by the largest group of burning tents to eat.

"Mmm, I haven’t had gnoll in ages!” Obsidia said through a mouth full of meat. "I think these are even better than the ones in the Wetlands, actually. I should hunt down here more often!"

"More human settlements to raid around here, I think," Onyxia said, demurely picking bits of armor from a large gnoll before devouring it whole. "So they’re better fed than the ones scavenging in the swamps."

"Mmphs unsh," Obsidia said, her mouth too stuffed to speak properly.

"I didn’t know you spoke murloc," Nefarian teased.

Obsidia swallowed before saying, “I said, makes sense!” She flicked a bit of scorched bone at her brother, hitting him on the nose.

"Hey!" Nefarian grabbed a smoldering chunk of wood and flung it at her.

Obsidia yelped and ducked, laughing as the log bounced off her shoulder.

"Honestly, can we at least pretend to be adults?" Onyxia asked tiredly.

Obsidia and Nefarian looked at each other, then at Onyxia.

"Oh, no. Don’t you dare!” she snarled as a hail of debris pattered against her scales.

"Being an adult is overrated," Obsidia said, pelting her with whatever small objects were within reach.

"We’re just sharing," Nefarian said cheerfully, chucking a dead gnoll at her.
Onyxia ducked to avoid Obsidia’s salvo, then caught the gnoll from Nefarian and slouched back to eat it, grumbling about their immaturity.

Draconic laughter echoed through the canyons of western Redridge.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Deathwing finally runs out patience with his youngest daughter, and Obsidia finds herself stranded in Elwynn, trapped in a human body…

Chapter Notes

This chapter covers events from just before WoW started, through the launch of The Burning Crusade. (Now that the characters and plot elements are in place for my “let’s fix what Cataclysm ruined” AU, the rest of the tale will flow continuously, without the “many years later” time jumps.)

Content warnings:
Major character death (Nefarian). Body dysphoria (forced shapeshifting). Discussion of child death (i.e. whelps, especially berserk or developmentally stunted ones). Themes of mental illness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The seasons turned eight times without any significant news from Deathwing. Onyxia’s machinations in Stormwind worked even better than she had planned, for soon Queen Tiffin was killed when stonemasons rioted in the streets. Later, King Varian was abducted and feared dead, and a certain dark-haired noblewoman conveniently found herself at the right hand of the young Crown Prince Anduin. Between her magic and good, old-fashioned political trickery, she had the human kingdoms exactly where she wanted them.

Nefarian had little success making a full-grown Chromatic dragon, but Gyth grew to be a strong drake and many Chromatic whelps and dragonspawn now inhabited Blackrock Mountain.

Obsidia, as usual, was left to her own devices. Also as usual, those devices involved collecting piles of shiny gems.

Every few months, Deathwing would summon his children to the same cavern to speak to them through the eerie portal. Obsidia never liked those conferences, and the reason for her unease was twofold. The chamber still filled her with a vague sense of wrongness in a way that somehow reminded her of the Old God’s whispers.

More than that, however, was the change in her father. Deathwing was curt and
short-tempered, more formal than he usually was when alone with his children, and never offered any information about what he was up to. He merely received their reports, rarely offering suggestions or new orders, and then withdrew.

After one such meeting, Obsidia flew with Onyxia part of the way to Stormwind. “I miss Father,” she said with sigh.

"I do, too, but he’ll return from Deepholm eventually, whenever his latest scheme is complete," Onyxia said.

"No, I mean I miss him…the way he used to be. He hasn’t been himself for a long time…since the battle at Grim Batol, really. He doesn’t laugh anymore. His temper is worse than ever. He never asks how we are, only how the plans are going."

"He might still be in a lot of pain," Onyxia suggested.

"Maybe, but I don’t know. Something’s not right," Obsidia said with a troubled frown.

"I’ve noticed the things you mention, but we don’t know what he’s been through, or what he’s doing now. There are likely a lot of factors we’re not aware of. He keeps saying he’ll return to Azeroth when the time is right. We just have to trust him."

They flew in silence for awhile. Soon the green treetops of Elwynn Forest appeared over a rocky hillside, stretching as far as the eye could see.

"I need to land soon," Onyxia said, slowing until she merely hovered in midair. "I can’t risk being seen by any patrols from Stormwind."

"I understand. I’m going to make a sweep through Redridge on my way home to see if there’s anything tasty around."

"Have fun," Onyxia said with a smirk.

"Good luck with that whole ‘Lady Prestor’ business." Obsidia nuzzled her nose against her sister’s cheek, a gesture which Onyxia returned.

"Thank you. See you at the next meeting." Onyxia swooped down below the trees, no doubt resuming her human disguise when she landed.

Trying to leave the sense of foreboding about her father behind, Obsidia soared away to the north and east.

Such meetings with Deathwing became less frequent, but just as vague and
unsettling, as the next few years passed. Obsidia grew to dread them, and wondered why he even bothered to summon her along with her older siblings. They had grand plans in motion; she simply went about her life much as she always had. She hunted, collected gems, obsessively polished and organized said gems, and avoided mortals whenever possible.

One chilly spring morning Obsidia was soaring over the highlands near her lair, wishing summer would hurry up and come. Game was proving scarce after a harsh winter, and the combination of hunger and cold wasn’t putting her in the best of moods.

With a frustrated sigh, she banked and swerved in the direction of a nearby mountain. High on the slopes were some deep hot springs, and the sight of steam rising in the chill air immediately made her smile. Yes, a good soak would feel heavenly right about now…

She dived down to land directly in the largest pool, making a tremendous splash. A soft moan of pleasure escaped her as she sank until only her head was above the steaming water. Ah, this was just what she needed!

Obsidia closed her eyes and relaxed, slowly treading water and relishing the comforting heat.

_Come, my children._

Her eyes snapped open.

"Ugh, really?" she said aloud. "I’m supposed to just drop everything and fly all the way down there just to listen to Nefarian and Onyxia tell you things I already know while you ignore me?"

Spoken normally instead of through the earth, there was no way her father could hear her, which is of course why she dared to say such things.

She sank further, dipping her head underwater as well.

Fine. She would answer the summons when she was darn good and ready, and not a moment before.

By the time Obsidia tore herself away from the hot springs it was a half hour later, and as she flew southwestward she stopped to devour some raptors in the Wetlands. She would be late, but not excessively so. She would fabricate a story about being delayed by weather, or being shot at by dwarves, or something. It wasn’t as if she’d miss anything important.

Normally her siblings would wait until all three of them were present to enter the cave, but when she finally arrived they were nowhere to be found. She smelled
them, however, so no doubt they had gone ahead without her. Not that it made a difference.

Obsidia held her head high as she walked through the twisting passageways deeper into the mountain. She heard Onyxia speaking in the distance, which meant she had missed Nefarian’s report, as they usually went in order according to age. When it came to be her turn, Deathwing would confirm that she was present and alive, nothing more. There was little else to say, apparently.

At last she entered the main cavern, and the ancient stone portal on the far end was indeed glowing with dark red energy. As always, she could barely make out her father’s silhouette and the fiery glow of his eyes.

Onyxia finished her report, and Obsidia heard Deathwing say, “Excellent. Now, what of your younger sister? Where is she?” He sounded matter-of-fact.

"We don’t know, Father," Onyxia said, sounding genuinely concerned.

Obsidia sauntered forward and came to a stop next to her sister. ”Here I am. Sorry I’m late.”

Nefarian made a relieved noise and came over to nuzzle his snout against her cheek. ”Thank Khaz’goroth! We were starting to imagine the worst.”

"What in the world kept you?" Onyxia asked.

Obsidia frowned in confusion. She wasn’t that late, was she? ”The hot springs were especially lovely this morning,” she replied airily. ”And I didn’t see any reason to hurry, since as usual I have nothing to report.” At this point she didn’t even care if her father got angry. If he wanted to punish her, he’d have to leave Deepholm and actually do something, and she was skeptical that he ever would.

A bestial growl reverberated through the cavern, growing in volume until Deathwing’s voice burst out, “Obsidia!”

All three siblings flinched.

"Your repeated tardiness and disrespect are unacceptable!"

She bowed her head, not as low as she might have, and spoke calmly. ”Sorry, Father. The weather was stormy along the way and—”

"Enough excuses!" he interrupted. ”Your brother and sister are accomplishing great and fearsome deeds to make all of Azeroth tremble at my name! You have done nothing but hoard shiny baubles!”

"I’d do more if you’d let me!" she snapped. ”Besides, I’ve done stuff! Like, um… that one night elf I killed! And I fried a zeppelin last month! Oh, and orcs! I must
have slain like a dozen orcs that time in the Swamp of Sorrows!"

"Trifles! Child’s play! Obsidia, you are not a whelp anymore. It is past time for you to prove yourself worthy of your place in the flight."

"Tell me what to do, then! I want to be useful, but you never give me a mission besides ‘stay alive’!" Obsidia stomped one of her back paws in frustration.

"Very well…" Deathwing said with quiet menace, and a sudden chill ran down her spine. "Until you can prove yourself worthy of your place in the flight, you will live among the mortal races, observing, learning, and undermining their efforts to thwart our plans."

She wrinkled her nose. "Live as a mortal? Eew. You can’t expect me to do that."

"I can, and I do," Deathwing said evenly. "Your first lesson…" Fire suddenly flared all around his image, seeming to come from deep inside his body, and his eyes turned an even brighter crimson. "Do not presume to tell an Aspect what he can and cannot do!" he roared.

Taken aback by his abrupt outburst, she nearly flattened herself to the rocky floor, meekly bowing her head. "I… I didn’t… I mean, I…"

Deathwing’s voice dropped to a more normal volume, and the fire returned to a dim glow amid the nebulous energies of the portal. "You will retain a small fraction of your ability to wield fire and shadow. I will bind you a human body so that you may learn to appreciate what it means to be one of the mighty black dragonflight."

Obsidia’s heart leapt into her throat. What? she wanted to scream. Live as a weak human? You can’t be serious! All she could manage to get out was a stammering, “B-but— But— But F-father—”

"Your trials begin now," Deathwing growled.

Before Obsidia could react, a beam of purple and orange energy shot out of the portal and struck her squarely in the chest. She recoiled with a cry of fear and toppled onto her side, no longer able to move her own body.

"Little sister!" she heard Onyxia gasp.

"Father, what—" Nefarian began, but Deathwing interrupted him.

"Neither of you is to help her in any way. Onyxia, drop her off at Northshire Abbey on your way back to Stormwind."

Obsidia felt herself begin to shrink and shift against her will: wings and tail retracting, hair replacing her horns, face flattening, scales fading…
No! Stop! she wailed silently, unable to reverse the process or make a sound of protest. The darkness of the cavern deepened, and she knew nothing else.

Obsidia did not make a habit of sleeping outside, so when she awoke with the dawn’s light in her eyes and grass beneath her, she was confused. Where was she?

Her instinct was to shade her face with one of her wings, but why wasn’t it working?

Wait.

Her wings were missing.

She sat up with a jolt, suddenly remembering what had happened.

“No,” she whispered, looking down at her body. She appeared to be a human in her late teens or early twenties, slim and pale with jet-black hair. She wore a commoner’s dress of faded red linen.

It was a form she had chosen for herself long ago, but knowing she had been forced into it against her will made her shudder. She crunched up her face in concentration and tried to shapeshift back to her natural body.

Nothing happened.

“Father, how could you do this to me?” she whispered in horror, staring at her pink, clawless hands. She projected her thoughts into the earth in a panicked jumble. Father! Please! I’m sorry I displeased you. I’ll try harder, I promise! Just please turn me back! I can’t live like this! I’ll die! Give me my real body back and I promise I’ll lay waste to villages! I’ll incinerate crops! Anything! Just please, please, don’t do this to me!

She crouched on her hands and knees, digging her fingers into the dirt, keeping her eyes tightly shut, waiting for a reply.

The only voices she heard in her head were the omnipresent whispers of the Old Gods, urging her to use her fear and anger as fuel for a murderous rampage. As always she did her best to ignore them, but tears flooded her eyes as she realized that her father wasn’t going to answer.

She was stuck like this until she could…do what, exactly? ”Prove herself worthy” wasn’t exactly a clearly defined mission.

"Excuse me, Miss. Are you all right?"

Obsidia looked up through her tears at the blurry form of a human guard approaching. He was in full armor and wore the tabard of Stormwind. "I… I’m fine,” she said defensively, wiping her eyes on the back of her sleeve. ”I just…had a fight with my father.”
"Ah," the human said with an understanding nod. "Well, you’re neither the first nor the last to show up at the abbey after a falling-out with your family. We’ll help you find honest work and get back on your feet. Don’t worry."

*Forget my feet. I need to get back on my wings!* she thought, but managed a half-hearted smile of thanks.

The guard moved on, and she composed herself enough to investigate her surroundings. She had only seen the valley from the air, but this must be Northshire Abbey in Elwynn Forest. That meant Stormwind—and her sister—couldn’t be too far away.

"Excuse me," she said, catching the attention of a different guard. At least, she thought it was a different one. She wasn’t particularly skilled in telling humans apart, and with a helmet obscuring his face she really couldn’t be sure. "Which way to Stormwind?"

"It’s quite a walk from here," the guard said, and his voice confirmed he was indeed different from the first one she had talked to. "Might take you a day or two on foot."

"Great," she muttered.

"Just follow this road here until you reach Goldshire, then take the road north. You can’t miss it."

"Thank you."

"Are you sure you don’t want to stick around? The brotherhood provides inexpensive training for all young people looking to better themselves."

Obsidia glanced down self-consciously at her plain clothing, wishing she had access to her hoard of gems and precious metals. "No thanks. I have…family business to attend to."

"Suit yourself. Light protect you."

"Uh…you, too." She spun on her heel and marched off down the road. Surely her sister would do something help her.

Walking long distances was not something Obsidia was accustomed to, and with only two legs and no wings or tail to help her balance, she stumbled embarrassingly often. Luckily most of these missteps were out of sight of any other travelers, and those who did see her wobble assumed she was intoxicated and gave her a wide berth.

It was well after noon by the time she reached the village of Goldshire, and her
feet, legs and hips were aflame with pain. She stumbled into the inn and flopped down in a chair.

A barmaid came over within moments. "What can I get ya, hon?"

Obsidia opened her mouth to ask for a glass of wine, but realized she had no money to pay for a meal, board, or provisions. "Just water," she said with a dejected sigh.

The barmaid’s smile faded but she brought over a cup of water right away.

Obsidia drank it quickly and left before anyone could draw attention to her lack of funds. The streets of Goldshire were bustling with merchants, traders, guards, travelers, adventurers, peasants, and soldiers. No one gave her a second glance, utterly ignorant to the fact that they had a black dragon in their midst.

Obsidia had never felt more alone.

She decided there was no use lingering in town without a copper to her name, so she found the north road and continued on her way.

It was just past sunset when the towering gates of Stormwind came into view ahead of her. She nearly wept in relief upon finally reaching it, but before she could celebrate too much it occured to her that she had no idea where to find her sister.

She trudged past the enormous statues lining the entryway to the walled city, her aching feet protesting each step. At this time of the evening there weren’t many citizens in the streets, but she soon spotted a guard on patrol, carrying a bright lantern in one hand and a shield emblazoned with the lion of Stormwind in the other.

"Hey, you!" she called. "I’m looking for, um, Lady Prestor. Can you point me in the right direction?"

The guard looked identical to the two she had spoken with in Northshire, at least to her untrained eyes, but his voice was much deeper than theirs. "The Keep is to the east, past Old Town on the canal."

"Thanks." She continued on through the city, squinting up at the stars as she tried to determine where to go. The tall buildings and extra light made it hard to recognize any constellations, and soon she was lost.

"Let’s see…east is…that way? Maybe? No, wait, that’s south. Curses!" She turned a corner and found a canal, but she had no way to tell if it was the one the guard had mentioned. She slumped down to rest on the stone ledge encircling a small flower patch. "If I could just fly I could get my bearings easily," she muttered.
When she could bear to stand again, she peered into the distance, looking for the tall towers of the keep. This method had so far led her to a cathedral and a clock tower, but this time she spotted an even more fortified structure, with battlements and soaring spires.

"Aha! That must be it!"

She forced her fatigued body to move again, and soon found herself at the front entrance to a magnificent castle. The two guards flanking the door nodded politely at her as she tentatively stepped forward.

"I have a message for Lady Prestor," she said, trying to sound like she belonged there.

"Straight ahead," one of the guards said.

She thanked him and continued on. The keep was nearly deserted at this late hour except for the guards. As she neared the top of the long, sloping corridor that led to the throne room, she heard voices talking: one familiar, one not.

"Highlord, there have been dragons in the Burning Steppes since before they were burning," Onyxia said. "This is not a new development."

"Yes, Katrana, but they’re growing bolder. The magistrate of Lakeshire has reported more incursions, and—"

"Magistrate Solomon is an old man, and I fear his wits may not be as sharp as they once were. Trust me, Highlord. I’ve had people look into it. There is nothing out of the ordinary going on in Redridge."

"I’m still hearing reports that say otherwise."

"Just a few bandits and gnolls. Nothing the local militia cannot handle." Onyxia’s voice softened and took on a more informal tone. "Bolvar, listen. I don’t want harm to come to Lakeshire any more than you do. If there were any real danger I’d push for action to be taken immediately. But I’ve investigated on multiple occasions, and it’s nothing but the overactive imaginations of peasants with too much time on their hands. I swear, they see a buzzard fly over at night and suddenly they’re panicking over dragons and Light knows what else. But it’s nothing. Truly."

Obsidia, who had talked to Nefarian enough to know that Redridge definitely was among the areas the black dragonflight operated in, almost found herself believing her sister’s honeyed words. She sounded so confident, so soothing…

"All right, Katrana. It sounds like you’re on top of things, as usual."
"Why Highlord, was that a compliment?" she teased.

"Don’t get used to them," he said with a chuckle. "Good night, milady."

"Good night, Highlord."

The metallic footsteps of someone in armor receded into the distance and a door opened and closed.

Obsidias was about to step around the corner and reveal herself when her sister’s voice made her jump. "You can come out now, Obsidia."

She came meekly forward. "How did you know…?"

"You still smell the same," she whispered in draconic, although the throne room was deserted. Then, returning to Common and a normal volume, she said, "And how are you doing in your…new circumstances?"

"Miserable. My feet are killing me, I can’t tell north from south, I’m dressed like a peasant, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, and I’m penniless."

Onyxia’s pale human face remained impassive. "All to be expected."

"Can’t you do anything?"

"Father forbid us to help you."

"Father has gone over the edge," she growled. "You know it and I know it. He hasn’t been himself for a long time, but this… I’ll die like this!"

"You won’t die," Onyxia said patiently. "Your mind is the same. You’ll figure something out."

"How am I supposed to eat? Where will I sleep? I don’t know anything about… living like this," she said, gesturing at her human body.

Onyxia gave a patient smile and leaned on her blue-and-white staff. "Obsidia, I realize this is a bit awkward. But you’ve always wanted Father to trust you with an important mission."

"Yeah, important being the key word!"

"Sister, I love you, but Father does have a point. You’ve been spoiled and idle for far too long. Just because he hasn’t assigned you with any specific tasks doesn’t mean you can’t work for the greater good of the family. It’s high time you made your mark in the world and made him proud of you."

Obsidias crossed her arms on her chest and slouched. "Easy for you to say! You never had to go through any stupid trial like this!"
"Not like this, no, but I was tested, as were our brothers. We are all individuals with unique strengths and weaknesses. We know your weaknesses, sister. Now show us your strengths."

"But…I don’t know if I have any," she said quietly, studying the marble floor.

Onyxia dropped her voice to a whisper. "Well, I know one thing you’re very, very good at. You have excellent instincts for finding jewels and precious metals. Remember, what is merely something pretty to look at for you has a different value to mortals."

"Meaning…?"

"If you’re broke, go dig up something shiny and sell it."

"Oh."

Onyxia gave an almost maternal smile and put a hand on her back. "Come on, I’ll let you stay in my quarters for the night. After that, though, you’ll be on your own."

"Thanks, sis."

Obsidia was too exhausted to make conversation as “Lady Prestor” led her deeper into Stormwind Keep. She barely noticed when her sister stopped in front of an ornate wooden door, and nearly ran into her.

The two guards on either side of the door bowed deeply, and one opened the door for her. Obsidia inhaled sharply in surprise as one of them hissed, “My lady” in draconic.

Onyxia clicked her tongue in disapproval and the guard winced apologetically. "One more lapse and it’s back to Dustwallow for you," she snarled.

"Won’t happen again, my lady," the guard said in perfect Common, bowing again.

"See that it doesn’t."

The sisters continued on, and after the door shut Obsidia gasped, “Are they…?"

"Dragonkin," Onyxia said with a curt nod.

"I couldn’t tell."

"That’s the idea." Candles were already burning in wall sconces, casting dim light over the formal sitting room. Onyxia crossed the room and motioned for her to follow. "I make sure I have my own guards around at all times. Father taught me enough mind-controlling magic to smooth over most suspicions, but it’s best when
I don’t have to hide my identity from my guards.”

"I imagine so."

They entered “Lady Prestor’s” bed chamber. A large four-poster bed edged with red velvet curtains took up the middle of the room. A gilded mirror and dressing table sat off to the left, and Obsidia caught a glimpse of the privy through a door to the right. Everything looked perfectly normal, like the quarters of any noblewoman.

Onyxia went to a tall cabinet in the corner and opened it. ”You can wear one of my nightgowns.”

"You’ve really got this ‘being human’ thing down, don’t you?" Obsidia said with a sigh as her sister deftly disrobed and put on a silken nightgown.

Onyxia pulled her long, black hair out of the back of the robe and flipped it over one shoulder. ”Practice, sister. You’ll get there.”

"I don’t want to get there,” she said with a hint of a whine. ”I just want to go back to normal again.”

"I know. Don’t think about it for tonight. Get some rest. Things will look brighter in the morning."

Obsidia fumbled with her red gown, unable to figure out how to get it off.

Onyxia gave a tolerant sigh and helped her. When they were both in nightgowns, she doused the candles and beckoned her little sister to join her in the bed, which was large enough to accommodate them both with plenty of room to spare.

Obsidia reluctantly slid under the covers and tried to mimic her sister’s position. ”I’ve never slept in one of these before.”

"What? A bed?" Onyxia chuckled.

"I know what it’s called," she snapped.

"Well, human bodies don’t do well sleeping on cave floors, so get used to it." 

"Oh, joy."

Onyxia had left her staff leaning against the bureau, and it suddenly lit up with a pulsing purple light.

“Now what?” she grumbled, throwing off the covers to investigate. She put the palm of her hand over the central sapphire in the staff’s head. ”Yes? What is it?” she asked in clear irritation.
A female voice drifted out of the jewel, sounding distant and distorted. "A thousand apologies for bothering you so late, Mother, but…"

"Let me guess. It’s Ashy again, isn’t it?"

"I’m sorry, Mother, I’ve tried to keep him in line, but he won’t listen! And the voices… The voices won’t stop telling me to…to…"

"I understand, Smolderwing. Send him through," Onyxia said wearily. Obsidiana recognized the name of one of her older nieces.

"Thank you, Mother. Everyone else is fine, but he…" The other sounded near tears.

"It’s all right," she soothed. "I’m sorry to ask so much of you."

"Here he comes."

Onyxia took her hand off the staff and stepped back. The purple glow intensified until Obsidiana had to look away.

"Yeep! Mama!" came a high-pitched, inhuman voice.

Obsidiana turned back just in time to see a tiny whelp materialize and the purple magic fade away.

"Hello, Ashy," Onyxia said with a sigh. "You were supposed to behave for your big sister."

"Yeep!" The whelpling flew around his mother’s head three times, then stuck out his tongue for a messy greeting slurp from her collar to her cheek.

"Um…one of your kids?" Obsidiana said.

"Yes," Onyxia said with a sad smile, returning to bed with the whelpling tucked in her arms. "Nelashrion, but we call him Ashy. He’s egg-touched. Normally I just…let nature take its course, but this one…"

Ashy made a happy trilling noise and snuggled under her chin.

"I see," Obsidiana said.

The greatest problem broodmothers of the black dragonflight faced were berserk hatchlings who attacked their clutchmates. Somewhat less common but no less heartbreaking were those whose minds were scrambled by the Old Gods early in their development in the egg. Such “egg-touched” dragons had little if any of the powers associated with their flight, only minimal speech, and no shapeshifting ability. It was as if they mentally reverted to their protodragon ancestors. They
were harmless but helpless, and many broodmothers cast them out to fend for themselves—which was a death sentence.

A lump rose in Obsidia’s throat as she watched her tiny nephew cling to her sister, a contented smile on his face. ”He’s cute,” she said finally.

Onyxia merely nodded, looking as if she might weep if she had to speak.

"I don’t know how you do it. I know I should be breeding, too, with the flight’s numbers as low as they are, but I just… I can’t imagine facing the things you have to face…doing the things you have to do."

Onyxia shook her head slowly and patted her son’s back. ”You simply do what must be done for the greater good of the entire brood,” she said softly. ”And try not to think about it too much. Concentrate on the healthy ones.” She looked down at the whelpling and blinked back tears. ”But sometimes… I just…can’t. Look at him. So innocent. So trusting. All he wants is to be held and loved.”

Obsidia made a sympathetic noise and leaned over to get a closer view of her nephew. ”He looks the same as any other whelp.”

A whirring noise came from the whelpling, akin to a kitten snoring. Ashy had fallen asleep despite their conversation.

Onyxia shrugged and could not stop a smile from taking over her face. The sisters settled down to sleep with a contented whelpling between them.

Morning came all too early for Obsidia’s liking. ”Lady Prestor” nudged her awake before the sun was fully up, and before she even had her eyes open there was an excited whelpling hopping up and down on her chest.

"Yeep! Yeep yeep yeep!"

"Ashy, be gentle," his mother chided, but it seemed to have no effect.

Obsidia sat up and rubbed her eyes. Ashy landed on her pillow, sprawling out on the warm spot left by her head.

"I’m afraid I have official business to attend to right away," Onyxia said. She was already dressed in her silver-trimmed robes of magenta and scarlet, and her long hair was perfectly combed. "And I can’t have you lingering around, inviting questions. One of my guards will see you safely out the servants’ entrance.” She hesitated, tightly gripping her staff. "And, Obsidia… How would you feel about taking Ashy with you?"
"Huh? Him?" She got out of bed and looked down at the oblivious whelpling lolling around on her pillow. "I don’t know anything about raising a whelp. I’ve got enough problems right now without dealing with that!"

Ashy hopped up and landed on her shoulder. "Yeep!" He licked her ear, and she recoiled in disgust.

Onyxia nodded solemnly. "I understand. I just thought, perhaps… I can’t keep him here in Stormwind, and my older children who watch the brood while I’m away, well… The whispers are rather insistent that they…cull the weak."

"Can’t you send him to Wyrmrest and let Sartharion take care of him?"

"He has even less patience for the egg-touched than our children do."

Obsidia eyed the whelpling with a frown. The blank look in his eyes made it clear that his intelligence was negligible, but he readily smiled at her and cocked his head with a curious “Yeep?”

"You’re saying if I don’t take him…"

"He won’t see summer’s end," Onyxia said quietly. "I’ve done everything I can for him, and if I was at my lair full-time it might be different, but as things are now…” She swallowed hard and looked away.

"Well, for Titans’ sake, when you put it that way…” Obsidia stared at the whelpling’s innocent face, feeling her resolve melt by the second.

"He doesn’t eat much, and he’d keep you company on your travels," Onyxia said hopefully.

"I can’t promise that nothing awful will happen to him out there."

"I know. He would still have a better chance with you."

Obsidia huffed and paced briefly. "I suppose if he wants to tag along, it wouldn’t be the worst thing,“ she said at last.

"Oh, thank you, sister!" Onyxia cried, throwing her arms around her. "Thank you so much!"

"This wasn’t some scheme Father put you up to, was it?"

"Certainly not. We…don’t talk about the egg-touched. It used to upset him, since he felt responsible, and now… I don’t want to bring it up because I’m afraid he doesn’t care anymore," she finished in a whisper.

"I know what you mean."
Onyxia plucked Ashy off Obsidia’s shoulder and sat down on the edge of the bed with him in her lap. ”Now, Nelashrion, you’re going to go with your Auntie Obsidia.” She looked deeply into his eyes, gently holding his head in place to ensure he was paying attention only to her. ”She’s going to take care of you, now. Do what she tells you to do. Understand? Stay with her, and don’t wander off.”

"Yeep!"

"Does that mean ‘yes’?" Obsidia asked.

"It’s all he ever says, except ‘mama’ and ‘papa.’"

"Oh."

Onyxia bowed her head to plant a kiss on the top of the whelpling’s snout. ”Be good, Ashy. I love you very much.”

"Yeep!" He licked her chin.

Onyxia stood again and carefully set her son on Obsidia’s shoulder. ”All right. You’d best be on your way. Be safe.”

The sisters exchanged one more embrace before going their separate ways: ”Lady Prestor” to the council chamber, and a young lady with a whelpling through the servants’ quarters.

"Dig up something shiny and sell it” turned out to be excellent advice. Obsidia set out into the wilderness with a mining pick and a backpack, and returned with everything shiny she could find. She unloaded her haul at the auction house in Stormwind: piles of copper and tin ore along with gleaming chunks of malachite and tigerseye. Having no sense of how much mortals would pay for such things, she allowed the auctioneer to set a fair price. She didn’t expect much. She found the cheapest room in town at an inn in Old Town and fell asleep, exhausted, in front of the fireplace with Ashy in her arms.

Her jaw nearly hit the floor the next morning when she returned to the auction house to collect her earnings. The auctioneer checked his records and informed her that all her shiny things had sold, and handed her a bag of gold coins. Her hands shook as she counted the money, suddenly finding herself to be no longer poor. She was not rich by any means, but she could afford some better clothes, perhaps even a mount to ease her awkward, aching human feet.

"How much for the whelp?" came a gruff voice near her hip. She turned around and looked down at a grizzled dwarf with a salt-and-pepper beard regarding her with stormy blue eyes.
"Excuse me?" she said uncertainly.

"How much for the black whelp ye got there?" asked the dwarf, gesturing at Nelashrion on her shoulder.

"Yeep?" the tiny dragon said, tilting his head sideways to get a better look at the short humanoid. Perhaps he had never seen a dwarf before.

Aghast, Obsidia backed up a step. "He’s not for sale!"

"I’ll give ye two thousand gold for it," the dwarf offered.

"No thank you," Obsidia said quickly, trying to push past him to exit the auction house.

"The black ones are gettin’ harder to come by these days, and me brother’s been looking for some scales for his armor-makin’ business. Tell you what, I’ll give ye two an’ a half thousand gold and a pair of the finest travelin’ boots he can make."

Obsidia clutched her nephew to her chest in horror. "Absolutely not!" she gasped, fleeing out the door into the crowded streets.

"Yeep?" Nelashrion questioned, squirming in her grasp.

"Don’t worry, Ashy, I won’t let anyone turn you into armor," she muttered. "Not for all the gold in Azeroth."

"Yeep."

"Yeah, you’re welcome."

Obsidia looked down fondly at the tiny whelp. She had never spent much time with one of the egg-touched before, but Ashy was oddly endearing and she was glad for the company…even if he did try to lick everything and everyone he encountered.

As it turned out, Obsidia did not have to sell any relatives or body parts to collect enough gold to live comfortably. Her instincts for finding ore never failed her, and soon her mining business earned enough profit that she was able to rent a small apartment in Ironforge. She thought it best to keep some distance between herself and her sister, not wanting to do anything to jeopardize “Lady Prestor’s” mission.

Ironforge was actually rather comfortable for her, considering it was tucked inside a mountain and well-heated by the molten rock coursing through the Great Forge. She wasn’t there all that often, as most of her time was spent out in the world, gathering ore and trying to find ways to prove her worthiness to her father. It was nice to have a place to call home, though—not her lair, by any means, but better than drifting from inn to inn.
Obsidia sat in her cozy second-floor rooms, browsing an atlas as she planned her next mining expedition, when there was a loud knock at her door. She gently lifted the sleeping Nelashrion off her lap and went to answer it.

The figure at her doorstep appeared human to the average bystander, but even a full year trapped in a human body had not dulled Obsidia’s nose and instincts enough to keep her from knowing this was a member of her own flight—albeit not one she recognized immediately in mortal guise.

"Lady Obsidia," the stranger said without prelude, "I bring urgent word from your sister in Stormwind." He bowed and handed her a small package, then descended the stairs and disappeared down the shadowy street.

Puzzled, Obsidia shut the door and sliced open the brown paper wrapped around the package. Inside were just two items: a polished stone about the size of a human fist, bearing a swirling rune, and a folded piece of parchment.

"Obsidia," she read. "This hearthstone will bring you to my quarters in Stormwind. Use it immediately. We must talk."

What in the world…? A million horrible possibilities flashed through her mind, but speculating would give her no answers.

She grabbed the knapsack in which Ashy usually traveled while in populated areas, slid the drowsy whelp inside, and lifted the stone in front of her. Such magic artifacts were both rare and expensive, and the fact that her sister had sent one instead of waiting for her to take the tram or a gryphon spoke volumes on the urgency of the situation.

Obsidia concentrated on the hearthstone, and before long a rush of vertigo washed over her, along with a pulling sensation all over her body. When she got her bearings again, she was standing in an opulent sitting room that she recognized as her sister’s quarters within Stormwind Keep.

"Obsidia!" came Onyxia’s voice as the raven-haired noblewoman rushed to embrace her. She was paler than usual and clearly distraught.

"Sis, what’s the matter?" Obsidia asked immediately.

Onyxia led her to sit on a divan nearby before speaking. Her voice shook, quite unlike her usual, confident demeanor. “Mercenaries raided Blackwing Lair yesterday. They scoured the rookery…hundreds of eggs destroyed… They killed everyone in their path, from Razorgore to Lashlayer. Think of that, some of our greatest champions slain by forty rag-tag sellswords!” Onyxia gave a bitter laugh, just a hint of madness in her eyes.

Obsidia waited for the rest, sensing that the news got worse.
"They took down several of our nephews, as well: Flamegor, Firemaw and Ebonroc. And then," Onyxia continued, her voice breaking, "they continued on, and fought our brother. He…” Onyxia squeezed her sister’s hands tightly, gulping back a sob.

"No," Obsidia whispered.

Onyxia nodded, blinking back tears. “They killed him, Obsidia. He took down many of them along the way, but in the end…he fell.”

"No! There must be some mistake! How did you hear about this? Surely he can’t really be…?"

"I’m sorry, sister. The news came from one of Nefarian’s own guards, who barely escaped with his life."


"Alive. The mercenaries left after slaying our brother. The others were deeper inside the mountain when the attack came."

"Nefarian," Obsidia whispered, the reality finally sinking in. "He can’t be gone. He just can’t. Not Nef. We can’t lose both our brothers!” She fell forward into her sister’s arms with a hoarse sob, and they clung to each other as they wept.

Life went on, as it had after their mother disappeared. After Sabellian was lost to them. After their father secreted himself in Deepholm for Titans-only-knew-how-long.

Obsidia stayed in Stormwind for several days, not wanting to leave her sister’s side. When she finally tore herself away, she headed straight to Blackrock Mountain. Seara was nearly catatonic with grief, having lost her mate and three of her oldest children in one terrible day. Obsidia comforted her as best she could, working through some of her own sorrow as she helped her sister-in-law cope.

Seara swore to continue her beloved’s work, saying it was what he would have wanted. They had been making progress on a new, multi-headed variety of Chromatic dragon, and she would carry on as best she could alone.

Obsidia and Onyxia dreaded the next meeting with their father, unsure how he would take the news of his eldest son’s demise. They felt the summons more strongly than usual when it finally did come. Perhaps Deathwing was trying to reach his missing son.
The sisters approached the stone portal together, staying close to each other. Obsidiana trembled, the unease she always felt here multiplied by her dread of Deathwing’s reaction to the news.

A swirl of red mist formed inside the stone circle, the nebulous silhouette of the Black Aspect soon visible within. “Where is Nefarian?” he asked immediately, sounding annoyed.

"Father." Onyxia bowed her head. "Nefarian’s lair was invaded by mortals. He… he was slain."

Silence. Deathwing’s expression was unreadable through the mists.

At long last, his voice so quiet they had to strain to hear, he said, “Was his work on the Chromatic flight lost as well?”

"No, Father. His assistants, led by his widow, Seara, are continuing his work."

"Very well. Carry on as best you can." The mists within the circle abruptly faded away.

"Father?" Obsidiana called, although it was clear the portal had closed. "Is that all you have to say? Nefarian is dead!" she screamed.

"Obsidiana, please," Onyxia said wearily. "He’s gone. He can’t hear you."

"But but but—how can he just leave us like that? Didn’t he understand what you were saying? I can’t believe he would make us go through this alone!"

"We aren’t alone, dear little sister," Onyxia said softly, putting an arm around her shoulders. "We have each other."

"Well, yes, but… This isn’t like Father. Not at all. I don’t understand what’s happened to him. I don’t like it."

"I know," Onyxia soothed. "I don’t understand it, either. But he was right about one thing: we have to carry on. The dragonflight is depending on us."

Tail dragging, head bowed and eyes burning with angry tears, Obsidiana followed her sister out of the cavern.

Time passed with only vague instructions from Deathwing. The rest of the world was not nearly as static, however.

Thousands of years after they were sealed to end the War of the Shifting Sands, the gates of the ancient desert city of Ahn’Qiraj reopened. Mortal races waged war on the forces of the Old God C’thun with the aid of the Bronze dragonflight.
Obsidia stayed out of the conflict. She claimed it was beneath her, that she refused to work with the brood of Nozdormu (and the feeling was surely mutual), but that was only part of the reason. Fighting in Silithus would mean direct contact with minions of the Old Gods, and she feared further corruption. Since she was forced to live as a human she had spent much less time underground, and the whispers were easier to ignore. She had no intention of exposing herself to their influence if she could help it.

Eventually mortal armies managed to slaughter their way through Ahn’Qiraj and defeat C’thun, ending the war. The Old God was not dead, of course. Even if mortals could muster enough power to kill one of them, doing so would endanger the planet itself. Still, the horror of eyeballs and tentacles was beaten for now, forced to retreat for, perhaps, another millenium or two.

The next conflict to grip Azeroth was an attack by the Lich King. Floating necropoli loomed over many of the world’s great cities, unleashing scores of undead. Here was a conflict Obsidia would happily participate in. The Old Gods were not a factor, and the Scourge was just as big a threat to dragons as to the lesser races. Reports from Dragonblight told of Scourge necromancers raising long-dead dragons into frostwyrms, bound to the Lich King’s will.

Obsidia threw herself into the fray, helping to defend the Alliance’s cities and even venturing out to more remote areas to help quell undead attacks. She was used to her human body by now, and although her power was still diminished she had honed her skills to the point where she could slay plenty of undead with flame and shadow. Fighting the Scourge was a welcome distraction from thoughts of her fractured family, and it felt good to indulge in the kind of mindless destruction that the whispers were always asking of her.

Some of the Argent Dawn were astounded by her ability to keep up her attacks for far longer than a mortal should have been able to, but if they suspected she was more than a mere human they said nothing. Whatever she was, she was incinerating waves of their mutual enemies and that was all they cared about. After all, the Argent Dawn welcomed any and all races into their ranks, regardless of other allegiances. A dragon wasn’t that much of a stretch when orcs, humans, trolls, dwarves, tauren, gnomes and elves were already fighting side-by-side.

Eventually the dread citadel Naxxramas was forced to retreat from the Plaguelands, and Obsidia returned to Ironforge for a well-deserved rest.

Her respite did not last long. She was on her way to the auction house to check on her latest batch of thorium when she noticed a large crowd around a notice board. It was impossible to get close enough to read the placard, but she soon overheard enough conversations to understand the news.
The Dark Portal was open! The Burning Legion had managed to get the portal working again, reuniting their forces on Azeroth with those in Outland.

The demons were a secondary concern to Obsidia, however. If the portal was open again, Sabellian could come home! That was, of course, assuming he was still alive. She would not allow herself to think about the alternative. Losing one brother was more than enough heartbreak.

Her other errands forgotten, she ran back to her rented rooms and threw together her traveling things. It didn’t take much to get her kit in order, as she hadn’t been back from the Plaguelands for very long.

Nelashrion fluttered around in confusion as she rushed to pack. “Yeep?”

"Oh, Ashy, this is wonderful! I can’t wait! You’ve never met your Uncle Sabellian, but I’m sure you’ll like him. I have so much to tell him!” She paused, her smile fading as she realized it would be up to her to tell Sabellian about Nefarian’s death. "So much has happened…" she said softly, hugging her traveling cloak to her chest. "I have to find him."

Obsidia stopped in Stormwind on her way to the Blasted Lands, meeting with her sister. Like her, Onyxia’s first thought upon learning of the Portal’s reopening was of Sabellian.

"I wish I could go with you," she said, standing in an alcove within Stormwind Keep.

"Me too," Obsidia said. "I’ll bring him home as soon as I can. I wish Father would contact us, though." They had no way of establishing communication with Deathwing, and could only talk to him when he summoned them. Their meetings had been rare in the last year.

Keeping her voice low, Onyxia agreed. “I would like to let him know about the Portal reopening, but I don’t anticipate him doing anything about it.” There was an undercurrent of bitterness to her tone. “I’ve tried to do as he asks and keep…all this…ready for him,” she said with a gesture at their surroundings, keeping her words vague in case they were overheard, “but it’s nerve-wracking just biding my time without any indication when it will end, or where it will lead.”

"Everything’s still under control, though, right?" Obsidia asked carefully.

"For now." Onyxia leaned on her tall, blue-and-white staff with a sigh. "I do my best to redirect attention away from…certain areas," she whispered, knowing that Obsidia understood she was referring to regions where the black dragonflight was present. "And despite that, our brother still…” She swallowed, not needing to say any more.
"It wasn’t your fault, sis," Obsidia said quietly. "Those mercenaries were aligned with the Horde. You had no control, no knowledge of them."

"Father underestimated the Horde. I should have had a counterpart in Orgrimmar," she whispered. "They could have warned our brother."

"Maybe, maybe not. There’s no way to know."

Onyxia nodded slowly, gaze on the marble floor.

"Don’t be too hard on yourself. You’re only one dr…person," Obsidia said, correcting herself at the last moment.

Onyxia shrugged and gave her a half-hearted smile of thanks. “Well, I have a meeting with some Seventh Legion commanders to get to, and you have a long gryphon ride ahead of you.”

"Yeah, I do. Take care, sis. I’ll be in touch."

The sisters embraced, and Nelashrion launched himself from his mother’s shoulder to his aunt’s.

"Bye, Ashy," Onyxia cooed. "Be good."

"Yeep!" the whelp chirped happily.

"I’m glad you two get along so well," she said with a wink.

Obsidina smirked at him. “Yeah, well, he’s not good for much besides slobbering all over and eating my food, but I appreciate the company.” She patted him on the head, and he nuzzled against her with a happy noise.

Onyxia chuckled. “You know, Obsidia… I obviously can’t make the decision for Father, but… I think you’re doing very well. I’m sure he’ll be pleased with your progress.”

"I sure hope so." She paused to wave from the doorway before heading out of the keep toward the Stormwind gryphon roosts.

Thanks to the near-constant lightning, the closest gryphons could fly to the Dark Portal was the Alliance settlement known as Nethergarde Keep. Before heading south from there, Obsidia found a private spot behind the stables to reach out through the earth to her other sister.

Hey, Nyxondra, are you there? It’s me, Obsidia.

Silence.

I haven’t talked to you in, like, years, and I just wanted to, you know, see if you were okay. And all
that, she said awkwardly.

I am fine, came the terse reply. I have a mate again, and a lair full of whelps.

That’s great! I’m so hap—

But I’m not taking any chances that our so-called father will interfere this time. Thank you for your concern, and I am sorry it has to be this way, but please…don’t contact me again.

Wait! I wanted to tell you, I’m about to go through the Dark Portal. I’ll look for Sabellian, but if I find Hemathion—

If he lives, tell him I have moved on.

But—

Before she could say any more, Nyxondra severed the mental communication.

Obsidia sat in stunned silence for a moment. Surprise, anger, hurt and disbelief whirled in her brain before finally settling down into grim acceptance. Very well. If her sister wanted nothing to do with her, then she would get her wish.

The Dark Portal loomed high into the lightning-streaked sky, radiating strange energies that were unlike anything Obsidia had experienced elsewhere in her travels. Alliance and Horde troops uneasily camped at the foot of the portal’s platform, somehow managing not to attack each other. The threat of the Burning Legion was nearly palpable, forcing a temporary armistice between the two factions as both mobilized for a push into Outland.

Obsidia watched as a regiment of orcs, trolls, forsaken and tauren marched up the stairs and disappeared into the portal. She clenched her teeth and glared at them, wondering if any of them had been among the group who ransacked Blackwing Lair.

When the Horde group was through, an Argent Dawn commander motioned to the Alliance encampment. At his signal, a line of Stormwind infantry came forward. Obsidia followed them in a small group of other civilians and mercenaries who were ready to depart.

She could feel Nelashrion moving around in her backpack and she nudged him with one shoulderblade to remind him to be quiet. The last thing she needed was to be questioned about smuggling a whelp to Outland.

The Stormwind troops walked into the swirling green portal without flinching, but the group of adventurers with Obsidia hesitated. Finally, a night elf druid was brave enough to walk through, and the rest found the courage to follow.

The rush of energy and strange whooshing sensation disoriented Obsidia, and it
took her several seconds to find her footing. When the world stopped spinning and she looked up, she was taken aback by the alien landscape spreading out before her.

Rusty red stone and dirt stretched to the western horizon, but far more disconcerting was the way the edges of the land to the north and south crumbled away into nothingness. She knew this was the aftermath of the shattering of Draenor, but seeing it first-hand was quite different from hearing rumors. Enormous chunks of rock floated slowly in the open air, supported by either magic or some kind of gravitational abnormality.

A primal instinct triggered somewhere deep in her brain as she surveyed the geological disaster. She was a black dragon. Like a song to which she had long since forgotten the words, some tiny corner of her mind told her that she should know how to smooth out those jagged ledges, to quiet the shifting boulders, to fuse the crumbling edges…

But no. She had never learned such skills. The Earth Warder’s madness was already upon him when Obsidia reached the age where black dragons would normally be trained to use their Titan-given powers. Her dragonflight had been created to be stewards of the landscape, yet it had been ten centuries since any had even tried to fulfill their duties.

The other newcomers had continued down the massive stone staircase toward the Alliance base camp, leaving Obsidia alone. Suddenly recalled back to the present, she hurried to descend before a group of Horde soldiers bowled her over.

She wasn’t here to engage in philosophy or politics. Her mission was simple: find Sabellian.

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Chapter End Notes

As near as I can tell, there is no in-game reference to the gender of Smolderwing, although Wowpedia refers to the character as male. My headcanon is that Smolderwing is one of Onyxia’s daughters who helps watch the brood while she’s away in Stormwind, since in the quest you put a challenge banner at the entrance to her lair and Smolderwing is the one who comes out in response.

The lore isn’t blatant about which faction was responsible for Nefarian’s (first) demise, but the general consensus I’ve seen online is that the Horde gets credit. Saurfang mentions something about it to the Horde player in WotLK. There’s the balance issue where the Alliance (i.e. Varian and friends) unquestionably has credit for killing Onyxia, so for fairness’ sake it would make sense that Horde gets Nefarian.
Plus, with Rend Blackhand being allied with Nefarian, the Horde had a more personal, specific reason to raid Blackrock Spire.

The idea of some black dragon whelps being “egg-touched” is my own headcanon. Although they’re not the same as developmentally disabled humans, I am aware of the similarities and have tried to treat the topic with respect, inspired in part by my experiences with some of the regular customers at my job who fall into that demographic.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Obsidia ventures into Outland in search of her missing brother. What she finds is not exactly what she expected, in more ways than one...

Chapter Notes

Content warnings:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took days for Obsidia to make her way across the aptly-named Hellfire Peninsula, asking at each fortress and outpost if anyone had seen dragons about. The answers were all negative, so she continued westward. Outland was a large place, and there was no sense to get discouraged yet.

Her luck was no better at the Cenarion Expedition camp in Zangarmarsh, but when she reached Telredor she was encouraged by a tidbit of gossip from one of the guards. He told her that his brother was stationed at Orebor Harborage to the north-west, and he had mentioned in his last letter that he wanted to avoid the Blade’s Edge Mountains because of the many hostile creatures there, including ogres, demons, gronn and dragons. The draenei had no information on the color of the dragons in question, but it was a better lead than anything Obsidia had uncovered so far. She immediately bribed the flight master to send her to Orebor on his fastest mount.

It was the middle of the night when she landed, so most of the old draenei settlement was asleep, but the sentries told her all she needed to know. There were indeed dragons to the north, and they were said to be dark in color. They convinced her to get some rest before setting out again, warning her that the tunnel into the Blade’s Edge Mountains was dangerous. Confident in her own abilities, she considered forging ahead anyway, but in the end it seemed wise to heed their advice. She got a room at the local inn and caught a few uneasy hours of sleep on one of the strange, slanted draenei cots.

Early morning sunlight through the enormous mushrooms cast grotesque shadows over Zangarmarsh. Obsidia awoke with the dawn and was fully alert. No point in
dawdling here. As promised, the tunnel into the mountains was treacherous, inhabited by spiders ranging from the size of her hand to gargantuan adults that seemed to fill the entire tunnel. All were easily dispatched by her shadowflame, and Ashy gorged himself on the charred spider meat.

It was still well before noon when Obsidia emerged into the sunlight at the northern end of the tunnel, squinting as her weak mortal eyes adjusted to the change in light. Ashy was quiet in her knapsack, sleeping off his huge breakfast. The landscape was markedly different from the one she had seen in Zangarmarsh. The sun was brighter, baking the reddish, rocky canyons. The ground was dry, and any wind sent swirls of dust into the air.

The vague directions provided by the guards at Orebor sent her further north, winding along narrow mountain trails and down the slopes of steep gorges. She gave the nearby Horde fortress a wide berth, knowing that her human form would attract unwanted attention there.

Soon the midafternoon sun blazed relentlessly down, and she shaded her eyes with one hand to survey the landscape as she came around a corner, out of the cliffs’ shadows. The trail she had been following disappeared into the expanse of a barren plateau.

Nelashrion poked his head out of the top of her knapsack and joined her in looking around. Suddenly, he gave a loud “YEEP!” and dived back into the bag.

"What?" Obsidia said. "What’s the matter with you?"

"Yeeep!"

Obsidia looked left, right and behind her, finding nothing amiss. “What are you —” Her voice trailed off as her gaze wandered upward to the titanic spires of rock that jutted outward from the mountains above.

Dragons. Black dragons. Dozens of them, from young drakes to mature wyrms… all dead.

Some were wedged between the spikes of rock, others were impaled, but all had been dead for quite some time. The dry sun had turned their hides to shriveled leather, devoid of any shine of life.

Obsidia covered her mouth with both hands to stifle a scream. No! This could not be! She hadn’t come so far, and hoped for so long, to find only desiccated husks. There had to be survivors. From down on the ground she couldn’t recognize any of the individuals, so there was no reason to assume that Sabellian was among them. Still, so many of her flight, slaughtered so horribly! Who or what could have done such a thing?
She recalled her father’s tales of the gronn, towering one-eyed brutes who had attacked the hatchery he had tried to establish here. They had to be responsible. She felt an odd shiver of fear. Dragons on Azeroth had no natural predators, and the thought of no longer occupying the apex of the food chain was unsettling.

Nelashrion fluttered out of the knapsack and into her arms with a forlorn “yeep.” She hugged him tight, keeping her own horror in check as she comforted him. “Come on, Ashy, let’s keep going. There must be more of us around here somewhere.” She trudged onward, doing her best to ignore the macabre tableau looming above.

The trail wound back up another mountainside, and as she climbed the terrain began to show signs of plant life. The wind carried the scent of pine needles, and by the time the trail leveled out again a sparse forest surrounded it. Intrigued, Obsidia paused just long enough to let her aching legs stop burning from exertion before continuing on.

Before long she spotted the unique wooden arches associated with night elven architecture, and the creaking, thumping sound of an Ancient moving around. Whether kaldorei or Cenarion, the settlement was most likely friendly. As she drew closer she saw a variety of races including tauren, night elves, humans and children of Cenarius. So, a neutral town, then. Just as well, as it would provide a larger pool of knowledge to draw from.

"Greetings," said a tauren sentry in perfect Common, bowing his head as she approached. "Welcome to Ruuan Weald."

"Hello," she said, nodding back. She refrained from asking about dragon sightings right away, choosing to orient herself a bit first. A large moonwell glowed faintly from the main square, and the town’s few buildings surrounded it in a ring. She stopped at a vendor’s cart to buy herself a cold drink, gulping down the fresh juice with gusto. It was so sweet and cold that her eyes watered, but after hiking the arid mountains it was the best thing she had ever tasted.

A muffled “yeep” from her knapsack made her realize that her nephew was thirsty, too, and she wondered if it was safe to let him out here.

She caught a glimpse of small black wings out of the corner of her eye and instantly panicked, thinking Ashy had escaped. But no, her knapsack was still as heavy as it always was, and when she shifted her weight there was another small “yeep” from inside. So who…?

She whirled around to get a better look and saw a black whelp flying toward the moonwell at a leisurely pace, apparently unnoticed by anyone. He was about half again Nelashrion’s size.
Noting her astonishment, the juice vendor said, “Oh, don’t worry, ma’am, that little
dragon isn’t dangerous. He just runs messages back and forth for the Baron.”

"The what for who?" she said, turning back to the gnome.

"Baron Sablemane. He and Ms. Inkling over there are helping us deal with the
wyrmcult that’s been causing problems lately."

Baron who? Obsidia’s heart leapt with hope. She thanked the vendor and rushed
in the direction the strange whelp had flown. She found a druid by the moonwell
talking to what appeared to be a dark-skinned human woman. The whelp was
hovering beside her, nipping at her sleeve to get her attention.

"I said just a second, little one," she snapped with half-hearted annoyance. "I’m
sorry, Chawn, you were saying?"

The tauren chuckled. “Nothing that important, I assure you, Samia. Best attend to
the whelp before he takes your arm off.”

The woman sighed. “Thank you.” The druid wandered away and the woman gave
the whelp her full attention. “What does he want now?” To Obsidia’s amazement,
she began speaking in draconic. “I told him I would let him know when I had
progress to report.”

"He says to come home at sunset," the whelp said. "Blackscale brought piles and
piles of arrakoa! We’re going to have a feast! Insidion, Furywing, everyone is
going to be there!” His young voice was full of giddy excitement.

The woman snorted. “Really? We’re surrounded by gronn, demons, ogres,
ethereals, wyrmcultists, and now Horde and Alliance besides, and he wants to have
a party.”

"Yep!" the whelp said happily, doing a backflip.

"Ugh, fine. I’ll be there, if only to remind him that we have more important things
to do."

Obsidia finally gathered the courage to speak. Also using draconic, she stepped
closer and said, “Excuse me?”

The woman and the whelp both froze in surprise. “Who…?”

"My name is Obsidia," she said. "I’ve just come from Azeroth to seek out any
members of the flight who might have been trapped here after the last war."

The woman stared at her for a moment with wide eyes, then shook her head.
“Well, how about that? I guess I owe Sabel an apology. He’s always said someone
would come looking for us if the Portal reopened, but I never thought…”
"Sabel… Sabellian? He’s alive?" Obsidia said, practically bouncing on her heels in excitement.

"Yes, he’s our leader. I’m Inklia, and this is Blazerion."

"Hi!" said the whelp, fluttering in circles around Obsidia.

"Yeep?" Nelashrion poked his head up out of her bag. "Yeep!" At the sight of another whelp he sprang into the air and started play-chasing the other.

"Um, yeah," Obsidia said awkwardly. "This is my nephew, Nelashrion. He’s… well…egg-touched."

"I see," Inklia said, noting the vapid expression on the smaller whelp’s face as he tumbled around with Blazerion. "Haven’t seen one of those in awhile…"

She watched the whelps playing for a few moments, then said, "Well, it seems Sabellian is calling everyone together for a feast tonight, so you’ll get the chance to meet most of us. Those of us who are left, anyway."

"I saw the fallen in the canyon to the south-west of here," Obsidia said with a haunted expression, gesturing toward where so many of her relatives were impaled. "What…happened?"

"Gronn."

"I had heard tales, but… Are they really that strong? Some of those were full-grown wyrms!"

Inklia nodded grimly. “Their patriarch is Gruul, who calls himself the Dragonkiller. It’s a title he’s earned many times over, trust me. Anyway, let me say good-bye to Chawn and I’ll show you to Sabellian.” She went around the moonwell to speak to the tauren druid, and Obsidia heard her say something in Common about a family emergency.

As they walked down the trail leading north from Ruuan Weald, Obsidia bombarded Inklia with questions. “What are you doing there among mortals? Do they know you’re a dragon? What’s this wyrmcult you mentioned? Can’t you just fly away from gronn? They can’t fly, can they?"

"No, gronn cannot fly," Inklia said with a shudder. "They’re quite adept at catching us and making sure we can’t fly, either, however. The wyrmcult business is complicated; I’ll let Sabellian explain it. And the mortals at Ruuan Weald think I am a human named ‘Samia Inkling,’ some kind of dragon expert. Of course, they believe the same of ‘Baron Sablemane.’"

"That’s Sabellian, right?"
"Yes. You... know him?" Inklia asked carefully, a tinge of jealousy in her tone.

"He’s my brother!"

Inklia stopped in her tracks. “Your... Wait, what did you say your name was?”

"Obsidia."

Inklia scrambled to kneel before her. “My Lady! My deepest apologies, I did not realize exactly who you were!”

"It’s fine," Obsidia said quickly, motioning for her to stand. "Please don’t make a fuss."

"Did Lord Deathwing send you?"

"No. I’m here of my own volition," Obsidia said, trying not to frown. "I have a lot to tell Sabellian."

Inklia led Obsidia down a steep section of trail, boots scuffing on the dusty gravel. The trees of Ruuan Weald were far above them on the top of the cliff, and down here in the canyons only scraggly weeds grew. Nearby stood a large building of some kind, constructed in the rough, jagged style of the orcs. Blazerion darted off at top speed with Nelashrion right behind him. They beat the adults to the structure by a full minute.

"He should be right over there," Inklia said.

Despite her fatigue, Obsidia sprinted after the whelps. “Sabellian!” she called. “It’s me! Obsidia!”

A tall, dark-skinned human man in gaudy orange robes came out from behind a wooden pillar, his bearded face contorted in disbelief. “Sister?”

Obsidia launched herself into his arms, squealing in delight. “Sabellian! You’re alive!”

"Obsidia!" he laughed happily. "Where did you come from?"

"Azeroth," she said, drawing back to get a good look at him. "As soon as I heard the Dark Portal was open again I had to find you! We’ve been so worried!" She hugged him again.

"I’ve missed you all, but I kept telling Inklia that the rest of the dragonflight had not forgotten us."

"Yeah, yeah," said the other female, strolling up to join them. "I deserve an ‘I told you so’ or two."
He chuckled and put a hand on Inklia’s back to draw her into a kiss. “When will you learn that I’m always right?”

"Oh, don’t start," she scoffed.

At Obsidia’s startled expression, Sabellian realized an explanation was in order. “I’m sorry, Obsidia, I assumed since you arrived together that Inklia had already introduced herself.”

"I may have forgotten to mention that I’m your mate,” she said with a shrug.

"Oh!" Obsidia exclaimed. "I didn’t… I mean… That’s great!"

"Well, when the Portal closed I figured we were all trapped here for the foreseeable future, maybe forever, so…we made ourselves at home." Sabellian smiled and hooked an arm around Inklia’s waist. "This one took some convincing, though."

"Oh, please," Inklia said, rolling her eyes. "Just because I turned you down the first three times you asked me…”

Obsidia giggled. “Here I was worried you were dead, and instead you’re thriving. I’m so happy for you!”

Sabellian’s smile faded. “Well, it’s not all as idyllic as it seems. We face a number of threats here, both new and old alike.”

"I know. I saw, on the spires, south of here…”

He nodded grimly. “You have an inkling, then.”

His mate cleared her throat.

"No, that was not a reference to your mortal pseudonym, dearest."

"Whatever you say, Baron.”

The two whelps stopped playing long enough to join the adults, with Blazerion landing on Inklia’s head and Ashy swooping onto Obsidia’s shoulder.

"Yeep?" Ashy tilted his head curiously at the stranger.

"This is Nelashrion, one of Onyxia and Sartharion’s whelps," Obsidia said.

"Hello, little one," Sabellian said, reaching out to pat his tiny snout.

"Yeep!" Ashy said happily, slurping all over his uncle’s hand.

"He’s… Yeah," Obsidia said apologetically.

"I see." Sabellian wiped his hand on his orange robe, regarding his small nephew
with a clinical eye. "How long have you two been in Outland?"

"Almost two weeks, I guess. I asked all over the place if anyone had seen any dragons, but it took me awhile to track you down."

"Hmm… Have you noticed anything different since you came through the Portal?"

"Like what? The floating rocks, the castle-size mushrooms, the red orcs, or the weird two-headed flying things that spit poison?"

He held up a hand. "Listen."

Obsidia frowned and strained her ears but all she noticed was the wind whistling through the canyons, and Ashy’s soft breathing on her shoulder. "I don’t hear anything."

"Exactly!"

"I don’t get it."

"The whispers."

Obsidia fell silent again, eyebrows rising in realization. "I don’t hear them."

Sabellian gave her a triumphant look. "I don’t, either. None of us do. They can’t reach us here."

"Why didn’t I notice it before?"

"There is some bleed over in the region closest to the Dark Portal. These mountains seem the quietest for reasons I’m still trying to pin down. Also, you’re strong enough to block them out most of the time, and it’s become automatic for you to do so, but now you’re shielding against something that isn’t there. Open your mind, sister. Listen to the silence."

Obsidia closed her eyes and took a deep breath to relax. It was true. The nagging presence that had been at the edges of her consciousness for as long as she could remember was gone. No barely audible whispers teased her mind, urging to her anger and aggression. No subtle instinct for chaos tickled her brain. She probed inward and found only her own thoughts.

She opened her eyes and said simply, "How?"

"The Old Gods have not infested Draenor. Or if they had, they perished when the planet split apart. There are also strange crystals in this region that seem to ward against corruption. I’m still investigating them, but I have hopes that perhaps they can help protect us on Azeroth."
"That’s amazing!"

"I’ve been busy during my exile," Sabellian said with a grin. "I trust the rest of the family is well?"

Obsidiana’s face fell as she remembered the news she carried. “Um… Onyxia is fine. I haven’t seen Mother since before you disappeared. Father is…Father. But Nefarian, he…”

Sensing her grief, Sabellian put his hands on her upper arms and met her eyes with an intense look. “What? What happened to Nefarian?”

Tears welled up in her eyes as she gazed upon his face, so like their late brother’s. “Horde-allied mercenaries raided his lair and killed everything in sight. Nefarian died defending his work.”

"No," Sabellian whispered, bowing his head. "Brother…"

"I’m so sorry."

They melted into an embrace, Obsidiana’s sobs successfully covering up her brother’s own struggle to maintain composure.

It took quite some time to fill Sabellian in on the details of what had happened on Azeroth in his absence. Besides Nefarian’s death, there was Deathwing’s defeat at Grim Batol and subsequent retreat to Deepholm, as well as the trial he imposed on Obsidiana. It was nearing sunset by the time she finished telling him everything. With only minimal teasing about her inability to transform, Sabellian volunteered to let his sister ride on his back on the way home.

Sabellian’s lair was a sprawling complex of caverns and ledges on the western edge of the Blade’s Edge Mountains, facing out into the Twisting Nether. The vista of slowly roiling clouds of energy stretched as far as the eye could see. The lair was impossible to reach without flying, making it secure from gronn and most other threats.

Sabellian proudly showed off a nursery chamber deep inside the mountains that was littered with eggshells and several piles of unhatched eggs.

Now in her natural draconic form, Inklia fussed around the chamber, making sure the eggs were all arranged properly and accounted for.

Sabellian had reverted to his human guise after flying Obsidiana into the lair, a courtesy to make her feel less awkward. “These should be ready to hatch in five to
seven days,” he said, nodding in approval at the collection of eggs.

"Do all these belong to you two?" Obsidia asked.

"At the moment, yes," he said. "We also try to rescue as many eggs and whelps as we can from the wyrmcult."

"Yeah, what is that all about? Inkia said it was complicated."

"It is," Sabellian said with a sigh. "Some of our mortal servants rebelled after the Dark Portal closed, led by the drakonid Maxnar the Ashmaw. They believe that if they can steal enough eggs and create enough dragonspawn, they can become powerful enough to rule the mountains on their own. They want all the benefits of an alliance with our flight with none of the responsibilities."

"So they kidnap babies?" Obsidia gasped, clutching Ashy to her chest. "Those monsters!"

"Both whelps and eggs, yes. Inkia and I have tried to steal back as many as we can, but it’s an ongoing struggle."

"But they aren’t your own eggs?"

"No, all of our own are laid here in our lair where it’s safe, but not all members of our flight are so lucky. Furywing and Insidion are a mated pair who live north of here, and they’ve been particularly hard-hit by the cult’s thefts. I’ve even invited Furywing to lay her next clutch here in our lair but…you know how it is."

Obsidia nodded. Broodmothers were highly territorial, and sharing a hatchery with another was nearly unheard of.

There was a greeting roar from the entrance of the caverns. “Sounds like our company’s arriving,” Sabellian said. “Come, I’ll introduce you to everyone.”

The news about Nefarian’s death made the tone of the feast a more subdued one than Sabellian had planned, but it was still a festive gathering. He introduced his little sister to the members of the flight who had managed to survive the dangers of Outland. There weren’t many full-grown black dragons present: Blackscale, Furywing, Insidion, Hemathion, Nihilion and Rivendark. They gathered on a broad ledge near the entrance to Sabellian’s lair, where a mound of dead arrakoa and a bonfire were the feast’s centerpiece.

As soon as she was introduced to Hemathion, she asked to have a word with him alone.

"Hi," she said nervously. "I suppose you’re wondering how Nyxondra is."

"Yes!" he said earnestly. "You are her sister, correct?"
"Yeah. And I hate to be the one to tell you this, but...she’s found another mate since you disappeared. She said to tell you that she had moved on." She winced apologetically, but Hemathion reacted calmly.

"I thought perhaps that would be the case. I couldn’t imagine her having an empty nest for long. Motherhood was always the most important thing to her. I...thank you for conveying the message."

"I’m sorry."

Hemathion gave a guilty-sounding cough. "It’s all right. I... Well, I’ve moved on, too. Tell her I’m glad she’s doing well, and wish her all the best."

Obsidia’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Oh! Okay. I’ll, um, pass that along if I talk to her again. Which I may not. You know how she is about the rest of the family."

"I do." Hemathion bowed his head to her and returned to the main gathering.

Obsidia watched him, trying to determine who his current mate was, but the only other females present were Inklia and Insidion’s mate, Furywing. Before Obsidia could get too confused, however, she saw Hemathion sit down next to Nihilion. The other male greeted him with a fond nuzzle which Hemathion returned.

Oh. Of course. Due to her complete lack of personal experience with such matters, sometimes Obsidia forgot how many forms romance could take. There were plenty of reasons to have a mate besides reproduction, after all.

It seemed everyone in Outland had moved on with their lives, never expecting to be reunited with the rest of the dragonflight. It made sense, she supposed, but some part of her was irrationally disappointed. After all the worrying she and her siblings had done over those “lost” on the other side of the Portal, Sabellian and the rest were doing quite well without them. So much for any grand ideas she had had about “rescuing” them.

An unexpected pang of loneliness struck her, along with the realization that perhaps here in Outland, if the whispers were truly unable to reach them, she might finally dare to raise a family of her own. The concept was not nearly as daunting as it had seemed before she became her nephew’s guardian.

Obsidia sat on a log near the fire, Ashy on one side of her and Blazerion on the other. She felt very small and weak in her human body and wished for the thousandth time that her father had removed this ridiculous curse long ago. Besides, the arrakoa leg she was eating was delicious and she was disappointed to be getting full so quickly when her extended family was wolfing down ten times as much meat.
Sabellian started out the evening at her side but eventually had drifted away to socialize with the others, and was now deep in conversation with Blackscale about the wyrmcult. Inkia was similarly distracted sharing tales about motherhood with Furywing.

Obsidia sat back to digest for a bit and simply take in the marvelous sight of black dragons relaxing in each other’s company. It had been so long since she had witnessed such a scene! On Azeroth at least one fight would have broken out by now, she mused. The whispers seemed to feed on each other, and the more dragons who gathered in one place the more likely that someone would lose control. A scuffle was usually enough to defuse the situation, but still, to see everyone happily gorging themselves on fresh meat and getting along so well…

"Hi," came a sudden voice behind her, making her jolt from her reverie to turn around. She found herself looking up into the face of a…blood elf? No, this was clearly a member of her flight, judging by the jet-black hair and eyes. He wore black pants, boots, and gloves, and a dark vest with a loose white shirt beneath.

"You looked lonely," he said with a wink, sitting down on the log with a drowsing Ashy between them. "I’m Rivendark, by the way. I don’t expect you to recognize me like this; I just thought it’d be easier to talk if we were both in mortal forms." He smiled widely at her.

"Thanks," she said, suddenly feeling shy for some reason.

"So how do you like Outland?"

"It’s…different," she said, shrugging. "I think I’d like it better if I could fly."

He shook his head in sympathy. “That must be rough…not to mention dangerous.”

"I’m not totally helpless," she said, raising her chin defiantly. "I’ve trained myself to use my shadowflame magic quite effectively in this form."

"I didn’t mean to imply otherwise. No offense."

Her expression softened. ”None taken.”

Ashy woke from his nap and regarded the strange “elf” with confusion.

"Hi, little one," Rivendark said gently, patting him on the head.

"Yeep!" Ashy popped up and gave him a messy greeting slurp across the cheek.

Obsidia covered her face in embarrassment. “Sorry,” she said on behalf of her nephew.

Rivendark wiped a sleeve across his cheek and laughed. “Don’t worry about it.”
He tickled Ashy under the chin, and the whelp made a happy noise. "Most of my clutchmates were egg-touched, too."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

His smile was wistful, his eyes slightly unfocused as memories took over. "No need to be sorry. Sometimes I think it's not such a bad way to be. No worries, no obligations...just live in the moment."

Obsidial said nothing, watching him stroke the whelp's belly until Ashy fell asleep at his feet.

"So far, none of the whelplings hatched here in Blade's Edge have been egg-touched," he said quietly. "There are other dangers, but no place is perfect." He raised his eyes from the sleeping whelp to meet her gaze. "When you're ready to start a clutch of your own, you could certainly do worse than right here."

His double meaning was clear, and she felt her cheeks turn red. "I... Um..." she fumbled.

Sabellian's voice saved her from answering. "Rivendark, are you trying to seduce my little sister?"

"Who, me?" he said innocently, putting a hand to his chest in mock surprise. "I'm offended that you think me capable of such a crude thing. I was merely trying to help her feel at home."

Obsidial giggled nervously. "It's all right, brother. He wasn't bothering me."

Rivendark carefully extricated himself from the snoring Ashy and stepped back before shifting into his true form. Obsidial couldn't help but note that he was a rather handsome dragon, with ebony scales that shone in the firelight and high, sweeping horns. "My apologies if I made you uncomfortable, Lady Obsidial." He bowed his head to her, then to Sabellian.

She smiled. "You didn't."

Sabellian stood between them, warning him away with a snort. Rivendark backed off, heading toward the pile of arrakoa for a second course.

"You didn't need to do that," Obsidial told her brother.

"I beg to differ. You haven't heard him complain for years about the lack of eligible females in Outland." Sabellian glared across the bonfire at the other male, who was now chatting with Insidion and seemed to be ignoring them both.

"Don't worry, brother, I don't plan to stay here long enough to think about such things."
Sabellian shrank into his human form and sat down beside her, scooping Blazerion into his lap. “Oof, you’re getting too big for this,” he muttered.

"No, Papa, you’re too small," he laughed.

"Go see if your mother needs help with anything."

"Okay!" The whelp zoomed off with the bottomless energy of youth, leaving his father alone with Obsidia.

"He is too cute,” she said, watching Blazerion fly away. ”Even if he does have your snout."

"Hey!"

Obsidia giggled. “Onyxia will be so thrilled to see you all, and I’m sure Father will be glad to know you’re all right. He hasn’t said much about what happened to Nefarian, but he must be devastated. Having you back will help.”

Sabellian leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and studied the ground, obviously deep in thought. “Obsidia,” he said at length, “I’m not going back to Azeroth.”

She stared at him, not trusting her ears. “What?”

"I said I’m not going back with you. In fact, I’d rather you didn’t go back either, unless it’s to bring the rest of our family to Outland with you."

"What are you talking about? Azeroth is our home. The Titans charged us with protecting it, and—" 

"The Titans were short-sighted fools!" Sabellian burst out. "They should have known what would happen when they chained the Old Gods in the middle of Father’s domain. They should have warned him, or taken precautions, or found another way to banish them. Instead they abandoned Azeroth, assuming the Old Gods were neutralized, and left us at their mercy."

Stunned, Obsidia struggled for a response. “I guess the Titans just thought it was under control, and when they left it was. I mean, the Old Gods were sealed away.”

"Physically, yes. But their influence was still strong—strong enough to twist our flight into a hideous mockery of what it used to be. Strong enough to destroy our father’s mind, and to doom our children before they even hatch!" He gestured at Ashy, who was miraculously sleeping through their heated words. "But we are safe here. Safe from them, anyway. The whispers are gone, and our minds are our own. Can’t you feel it?"

"Yes, but… Azeroth is where we belong."
"Says who? The Titans? They may have charged us with protecting Azeroth, but through their own shortsightedness they made it impossible for us to do so. We owe them nothing."

Inklia wandered over, having overheard the topic of conversation. “Oh dear, did you get him started ranting about the Titans?”

Obsidia shrugged helplessly.

Sabellian glowered at them both, unamused. “I will never willingly set foot on Azeroth again. We’ve made a new start here, free from the Old Gods’ influence. With each successive generation, their corruption wanes. In time perhaps we can be as we were in ancient days, helping to shape and heal this shattered world.”

"But this isn’t our world,” Obsidia protested.

"It is now. Azeroth is beyond saving." Sabellian shifted back to his draconic form and flew off into the cavern, unwilling to argue further.

Inklia shook her head apologetically. “He’s stubborn. But…I also believe he’s right. I’m sorry, Obsidia.” She turned back to her guests, who were slowly getting ready to take their leave.

One by one the other dragons dispersed back to their own territories across Blade’s Edge, until Obsidia was alone with the dying bonfire and a mountain of arrakoa bones. She hung her head and stared into the glowing embers. This was not going the way she had expected.

A silent hour passed. Obsidia sat by the fire, munching on leftover scraps of charred arrakoa meat that the others had found too small to bother with. The more she thought about it, the more sense Sabellian’s arguments made. The Old Gods were responsible for destroying and defiling so much she held dear. It made perfect sense to get as far away from them as possible. Yet somehow it still seemed like admitting defeat, a concept she had been trained to abhor.

She resolved to return to Onyxia and tell her about all she had learned. Together they would pass on the information to their father, who could make the final decision. He was still their Aspect, even if he had been distant the last few years. If he believed it wise for the flight to move to Outland, they would. If not, they would have to obey.

A creeping disquiet plagued her mind at the thought of leaving their fate up to Deathwing, however. Now that she was free of the whispers she was struck even more strongly by the sense that something was wrong with him. At first she had
chalked it up as the result of his injuries after Grim Batol. Then she had made excuses about the difficulty of communicating from Deepholm, or other schemes keeping him busy, but since his cool reaction to Nefarian’s death she had been unable to reconcile his behavior with the father she knew. At last Obsidia was forced to admit her suspicion, at least to herself, that the Old Gods had regained influence over Deathwing. It had been a daily struggle to keep control, she knew, and when he was weakened by battle wounds…

Obsidia sighed and tossed an arrakoa wing bone into the barely-smoldering bonfire, sending up a puff of ash. Perhaps Sabellian was right. Perhaps it was wisest to start over here in Outland. That was all fine and well for him, but she was still trapped in a human body. She had to make her father lift the spell before she could make any further plans. Maybe bringing back word that Sabellian lived and thrived in the whisper-free haven of Outland would be enough to prove that she was a responsible adult now.

The flap of huge wings made her look up at the cavern mouth, and she tensed warily when she recognized her brother’s silhouette. He landed before her and shifted to human form. “Sister, I am sorry for losing my temper. It’s just… I have a mate and children of my own now, and as the Aspect’s son the rest of the flight here look to me for leadership. I truly believe that staying here is in our best interests.”

"I understand," she said with a thin smile. "I wish I had the luxury of staying here forever, but until Father returns me to normal I have no choice. I don’t blame you, though." She stepped into his embrace and they stood quietly for a moment, enjoying each other’s presence after so much time apart.

At last he stepped back and reached into a woven pouch that hung from his belt. “There’s something I want you to carry with you when you go back to Azeroth.” He held up a spike of crystal the size of two of her fingers. It gleamed with faint blue light that seemed to emanate from deep inside the stone.

"Oooh, shiny!" Her expression brightened immediately.

He gave a short laugh, expecting this reaction from her. “Yes, shiny, but more than that. This is called Apexis crystal. I haven’t been able to determine its origin yet, but it seems to grow on the plateaus east and south of here. It’s increased the intelligence of the local ogres—not that that takes much—but more importantly it seems to dilute corruption.”

"I saw you had some in the hatching chamber."

"Yes. When we first settled here we noticed that those who had struggled the most with their corruption seemed to calm when they spent time near the crystals. Prolonged exposure even seemed to stop the progression of madness among the
worst of us. Nihilon was practically a berserker when we first came to Outland, and he’s still a blowhard but his rages are manageable, and getting more so as the years pass. You and Onyxia are not nearly as tainted as he was, but I believe that carrying these crystals will help you block out the whispers. If you must return to Azeroth, please bring some back with you. Give them to every member of our flight you can find. I can’t be certain that their power will work on a different world, but it can’t hurt."

Obsidia stared into the depths of the semi-clear crystal, sensing a glimmer of power hidden within. “Fascinating. Shiny, and useful!”

Sabellian chuckled. “Some things are, believe it or not.”

She smirked, thinking of the riches her mining business had produced. “Thank you, brother. I will see to it that Onyxia and Sartharion get some right away, and we’ll distribute them from there.”

"And Father."

Her smile faded. “If he ever returns from Deepholm.” And, she added to herself, if it’s not too late.

The figure known as “Lady Katrana Prestor” sat at her desk, carefully editing official correspondence to direct attention precisely where she wanted it. It was early morning and Prince Anduin wouldn’t be awake for at least an hour, so she had time to catch up on such mundane matters before she was needed in the throne room. A knock at the door made her look up with slight annoyance. “Enter,” she called, hoping it would be a brief interruption.

A human she recognized as one of Stormwind Keep’s pages opened the door. “Pardon the intrusion, Lady Prestor, but there’s a delivery for you.”

"Bring it in," she gestured with her quill and resumed writing.

She expected an envelope or other small parcel, but to her surprise two servants entered the room, straining under the weight of a large crate. “Where…d’ you… want it…milady?” wheezed one of the porters.

Onyxia stood and guided them to a spot on the floor near her desk, where they gratefully set down their burden. She stooped over to read the label, which was stamped with postal markings from Shattrath and addressed to Katrana Prestor, Stormwind Keep, Stormwind City, Elwynn, Azeroth. It must be the eagerly-awaited word from Obsidia! But what in the world could be in such a large box?

The instant the servants were gone and the door shut, she shifted one hand to a
slightly more draconic form and used her claws to easily open the crate. Eagerly
ripping through the packaging, she found a folded chunk of parchment on top, and
the rest of the container filled with some kind of strange crystal.

Curiosity and confusion swirled through her mind as she grabbed the parchment
and sat back at her desk to read.

"Dearest sister," the letter began. "Without delay, let me assure you that I have
located our brother, and he is well."

Onyxia exhaled sharply in relief, beaming at the news.

The letter continued, “Our forces left in Outland suffered great losses in the past
years, but he is alive and leading them. In fact, he has a mate and children now!
One of his lieutenants has taken a shine to me, but don’t worry; I won’t settle down
here any time soon. I still have some pretty important unfinished business in
Azeroth, as you and Father well know!”

Onyxia gave a twisted smile. Indeed, she thought. At least her little sister was
wise enough to write in general terms in case her letter fell into the wrong hands.
She had been diligent in maintaining “Lady Prestor’s” cover.

"I won’t be coming back to Azeroth for a few months, however," the letter said.
"Some of the dragon eggs Deathwing left here were mutated by the crazy energies
when Draenor exploded, and they’ve hatched into some kind of dragon like nothing
ever seen before."

Onyxia’s eyes widened, first at the thought of mutated eggs, and then at the
suddenly blatant wording. So much for hiding her identity, but…wait. She re-read
the sentence and realized that Obsidia was writing the way a human researcher
would. It wasn’t “Father” who had left the eggs; it was “Deathwing.” Phew.

She continued reading. “They don’t seem very intelligent. Sentient, yes, but child-
like. They’re called Nether dragons, and they don’t appear quite solid, like they’re
partly made up of energy. Needless to say, I will investigate further. I’ll tell you
more in person when I return. In the meantime, as I’m sure you’ve noticed by now,
I sent along some souvenirs. Please pass them out to our extended family as soon
as possible. Our brother is convinced they help with a certain chronic, aggravating,
noisy, old problem we all have."

This made Onyxia pause. What problem was she talking about? Aggravating and
noisy? And why the emphasis on “old”? Ah…it suddenly made sense. The Old
Gods. Somehow these crystals were supposed to help with Old God corruption. It
seemed far-fetched, but Sabellian had always been highly intelligent, and if he felt
it was important enough to make Obsidia mail this heavy crate all the way to
Stormwind, it was worth looking into.
The letter concluded, “I’ll write again soon if I find out anything important. If you need to get word to me, send mail care of ‘Samia Inkling’ at Ruuan Weald in the Blade’s Edge Mountains. (She’s our new sister-in-law!) I hope everything is going well for you and the rest of the family. Love you all… Obsidia.”

Relieved, intrigued and slightly confused, Onyxia folded the letter away in her desk and returned to other matters.

The silence in her mind was more welcome than Obsidia had even realized at first. She found herself more reluctant to leave Blade’s Edge as the days wore on. Rivendark’s awkward but oddly endearing attempts to court her in humanoid form were also a pleasant diversion—much to Sabellian’s dismay.

Several weeks passed wherein Obsidia explored the mountains, gathering new and exciting shiny objects from the adamantine and khorium veins. She also tried to study the nether dragons in the south-eastern part of Blade’s Edge, but they were hostile to any outsiders. At first she assumed it was because they thought her to be a human, yet even when she spoke in draconic to them they drove her off with attacks so aggressive she barely escaped serious injury.

Presently she crouched behind a large boulder a safe distance away, observing the nether dragons through a gnomish spyglass she had picked up at nearby Toshley’s Station. “It’s hard to believe they began as black dragon eggs,” she said quietly to Rivendark, who sat behind an adjacent boulder in his elven form, entertaining Ashy with a pendant of azure moonstone. “They look nothing like us. Their colors are different, the shape of their skulls is different, and they seem so simple-minded.”

"Yes, and don’t think we haven’t tried making an alliance with them," Rivendark said. "We assumed they would be as interested in us as we are in them, but they want nothing to do with us. Your brother thinks perhaps they can sense our corruption somehow."

"Which would mean that whatever happened to turn them into…that," Obsidia said, with a gesture at the ethereal shapes in the distance, "cleansed the Old Gods’ taint from them as well."

"If they won’t talk to us, we may never know."

"Sabellian mentioned that there are other nether dragons outside these mountains."

"Yes, we’ve encountered a pocket of them to the north-east, in the broken region now known as Netherstorm. You’d blend in well there; everything is purple.” He eyed her robes, which were indeed purple and black.
She stifled a giggle, something she found herself doing often when he was around.

"There is a second, larger group much further to the south and east, however. When the gronn proved too dangerous to make these mountains the main hatchery, Lord Deathwing ordered Vhel’kur to lead a unit as far away from here as possible. They took most of the surviving eggs to Shadowmoon Valley. The same transformation happened to those eggs when the planet shattered, though, and they’re just as unfriendly as the ones here."

Obsidia pondered this for a moment. “Is anyone from our flight still in Shadowmoon?”

Rivendark shook his head. “You can practically taste the fel corruption in the air there. Broken up though it is, Blade’s Edge is much closer to its natural state.”

"Hmm." She put the gnomish telescope away in her backpack and stood up. "I’ve seen enough here. But I think I should take a look at the situation in Shadowmoon before I go back to Azeroth."

Rivendark stood and faced her with an alarmed expression. “Obsidia, please don’t. You really shouldn’t go anywhere near that foul place!”

"These nether dragons could hold the key to freeing our flight from the Old Gods’ influence. I have to investigate!"

"The Apexis crystals are the key. Leave these glowy freaks alone, and let Sabellian continue his research."

She straightened her posture defiantly. “Then it would be his achievement, not mine. I must prove myself worthy of Father’s respect if I ever want to inhabit my own body again. I can think of no better way to do that than to purify our flight of its corruption.”

He sighed and hung his head. “You’re just as stubborn as your brother.” Then, looking up into her eyes, he added, “But so much prettier.”

She gave him a half-hearted smack on the chest. “Oh, stop it. You’ve never even seen what I really look like! And if you’re attracted to humans we have a problem.”

He laughed. “No, I haven’t seen your true form, but it doesn’t matter. I can tell that you’re beautiful inside.”

"You are so full of elekk droppings." She rolled her eyes but was unable to stop a grin from taking over her face. "Let’s go home. I have to talk to Sabellian about some things."
"As you wish, my lady," he said with a dramatic bow, backing up to give himself room to shift from an elf into his natural form. Obsidia got Ashy safely into her knapsack and climbed onto his back.

Rivendark spread his enormous wings and launched himself into the air, riding the strong mountain air currents until the jagged spires of rock appeared no larger than pine needles.

"No fancy tricks this time," she warned.

"I said I was sorry for almost losing you that first flight. I was just trying to make a good impression."

"Showing off for a potential mate is fine unless she’s stuck in a human body trying to hang onto your back at the time," she scolded with exaggerated severity.

"Ah, so you do see me as a potential mate," he said, turning his head to grin at her.

She blushed. "I didn’t say that; I just meant that’s what you were thinking."

"Oh, don’t pretend like you don’t like me."

"Riv, you know I do, it’s just… Please understand. I’m trapped in this body until I can convince Father than I’m a responsible adult. I’ve fought trolls, undead, ogres and demons, but nothing has impressed him yet. I can’t take a mate or make any long-term plans at all until he lifts the spell."

"So when he does, will you give me a chance to court you properly?"

She gave an enigmatic smile. "Maybe."

"Please?"

"I said maybe."

"Is there someone else?"

"Well…no."

"All right! I’m number one!" He swooped as if about to do a barrel roll but stopped himself at the last second. "Assuming I don’t drop you five thousand feet onto spiky rocks."

She clung tightly to one of his back spines. "Exactly."

"I should have known I was your one and only. You really seem to enjoy…riding me," he said with a suggestive smirk.

"Oh, shut up. You can fly, that’s all."
"Aww yeah, you can ride me anytime you want," he teased.

She covered her face with her hands. "Just...be quiet."

He laughed and flew faster.

The next day, Obsidia had her belongings packed and ready to go, except for a sizable pile of gems and ore which she left stashed in Sabellian’s lair for safekeeping. Her brother had been hesitant at first to endorse her decision to investigate Shadowmoon Valley, but soon his natural curiosity won him over. He found the Netherwing dragonflight fascinating but had too many responsibilities to leave Blade’s Edge.

"Baron Sablemane" and "Samia Inkling" accompanied her to Ruuan Weald, where she planned to hire a gryphon to fly her south. "We’ll be very interested to hear your report," Sabellian told her, "and I know you don’t need to hear it again, but... be careful. If you do something stupid and get yourself killed, I’ll never forgive you."

"I will, I promise," she said, hugging him tightly.

"You have your crystals?"

"Yes, brother," she said for the fifth time that morning, pulling down the collar of her robes to show him the necklace of Apexis crystals he had given her.

"Good, good," he said, nodding in satisfaction. "I feel better knowing you have them."

Obsidia gave her sister-in-law a good-bye hug as well, then began to strap her bags onto the waiting gryphon’s saddle. Ashy poked his head out of her knapsack with a cheerful “Yeep!” She had considered leaving her nephew with her brother and his family, but Nelashrion had gone into such a panic when she suggested it, flying in dizzying circles around her head and then latching into her shoulder so tightly it hurt, that she dropped the idea. It would have been safer for him to stay behind, but she had to silently admit that she would have missed his company.

Once her belongings were securely fastened, she hopped onto the saddle and took the reins. “I’ll try to send word when I arrive at Wildhammer Stronghold, assuming there’s mail service down there.”

"Please do," Sabellian said.

"Obsidia!" They all turned around at the unexpected yell. A black-haired elf was running clumsily toward them, stumbling over his own feet every few steps. He
tried to stop himself in time to avoid colliding with the gryphon, managing instead to fall flat on his face in the dirt at the mount’s front feet.

"Rivendark!" Obsidia said in surprise. "Are you all right?"

"Nothing wounded but my pride," he said, sheepishly standing up and dusting himself off while pointedly avoiding Sabellian’s mocking gaze. "I have a new respect for you, my lady. Mortal bodies are awkward as hell to run in."

"You get used to it," she giggled.

"At least you knew better than to come into town in your true form," Sabellian groused.

Ignoring him, Rivendark came up to the side of the gryphon and took Obsidia’s hands in his. “I will miss you terribly. I understand this is a journey you must make on your own, but please…promise you’ll come back to me when it’s finished.”

Obsidia glanced at the amused face of her sister-in-law and the aggravated face of her brother, and felt herself blush. “Of course I’ll come back. My brother and his family are here, and—”

Her words were cut off when he pulled himself up on the saddle and kissed her. It was not an unwelcome gesture but took her so much by surprise that she had no idea how to react.

"Get your face off my sister!" Sabellian barked, pulling Rivendark away with a yank on the back of his black tunic.

"That is how the mortal races express affection, is it not?" he said with a cocky smile, feigning innocence.

"We are not mortals," Sabellian growled in draconic, his voice low enough to avoid being overheard.

"For the present, I might as well be," Obsidia said, trying to regain her composure. "Perhaps when next we meet, however…” She shrugged. "I will come back, I promise. To all of you.”

Rivendark beamed. Sabellian put a hand to his forehead as if fighting a sudden headache, and Inklia patted him on the back.

"Until then, good-bye." Obsidia pulled on the reins and dug her heels into the gryphon’s sides, and the majestic animal spread its feathery wings. She waved to the figures on the ground as they rapidly shrank into the distance. When her mount leveled off and set its course to the south-east, she slumped forward in the saddle
with a deep sigh. Her heart was pounding and her head was awhirl with confusing emotion. "Oh my."

Dragons did not kiss as the lesser races did: a nuzzle, a caress, a playful bite, perhaps a lick here and here, but nothing like what Rivendark had just done to her. It was strange and unexpected, but…she liked it. She liked him. It was just the worst possible time for such feelings to appear.

She recalled what her father had told her, the last time she had talked to him face-to-face, shortly before the disaster at Grim Batol: “There may come a time before too long when you’ll want to settle down and start a brood of your own.”

A flash of anger burned through her chest. “Sure, Father, I’ll get right on that, as soon as you take this stupid spell off me!” she said aloud.

"Yeep?" Ashy inquired from her knapsack.

"Nothing," she muttered. It just reinforced her suspicions about the Old Gods’ renewed influence on her father’s mind. The father she had always known was strict, yes, because he held his offspring to the same high standards as himself. He expected great things from them, and sometimes discipline was necessary to achieve their goals. But being forced to spend years in a mortal body just because she was tardy and a bit unmotivated? She had long since learned whatever lessons he wanted to teach her. Onyxia could make all the excuses she wanted for their father, but this was simply not reasonable.

Obsidia hardly dared think about it, but in her nightmares nothing she did could ever convince Deathwing to lift the spell. Nothing was ever good enough in his twisted mind.

"I have to cure him," she said under her breath. "For both our sakes. There has to be a way." She was not at all convinced that the Netherwing flight would provide any answers, but it was somewhere to start.

Obsidia spent a fitful night’s sleep at the Temple of Telhamat in Hellfire Peninsula before starting out early the next morning on a fresh gryphon. The Allerian Stronghold in Terrokar was her next stop before preparing to head into Shadowmoon Valley on the third day. The gryphon master there warned her that the skies were not safe in Shadowmoon due to demons and predatory wildlife, but assured her that he’d only lost one animal so far. For the millionth time, she wished she could simply fly under her own power, for few creatures were foolish enough to confront a dragon.

Instead she gritted her teeth at the thought of spending more hours in the saddle,
made sure Nelashrion was snug in her knapsack, and took to the skies once more. The gryphon knew the route well, bypassing the Horde settlement nearby and giving the demon encampments a wide berth. It circled away from where infernals were raining down to assault the front gates of Wildhammer Stronghold and landed safely within the fortress’ grounds.

It took no time at all to find directions to where dragons had been sighted, and by dusk she was warily gazing out over a barren plain of black, rocky ground. Huge crystals jutted out of the ground in scattered clumps, pointing upward to a greenish sky that constantly flickered with lightning but never seemed to rain. These formations were somewhat similar to the Apexis crystals in Blade’s Edge, yet felt distinctly different in a way she couldn’t quite pinpoint. Sabellian would know, and she made a mental note to try gathering a sample for him if she got the chance.

The crystals were a secondary concern, however. What drew Obsidia’s eye were the faintly-glowing dragons circling high above her. Most were drakes, not yet fully grown, and all looked malnourished. She could only imagine how dismal the hunting was around here. Nearly all the wildlife was tainted with fel energy and very little vegetation grew.

Movement caught her attention some distance away on the rocky plain. It was a humanoid figure whose race she couldn’t quite identify from her current vantage point, and it was being attacked by a few of the spiky rock flayer creatures that made their home near the crystal formations.

Obsidia moved closer to investigate and found what appeared to be a high or blood elf—she couldn’t see the eyes from here—slaughtering the rock flayers with an impressive broadsword. His movements were a whirl, cutting down any creature who dared venture in range. Soon he stood surrounded by a messy heap of slain foes, looking grimly pleased with himself. Obsidia watched as he raised his bloody sword to the sky in what was clearly a signal. He stepped aside as one of the scrawny nether drakes plummeted from the sky and began to devour the fresh meat.

"Eat well, brother," the elf said…in draconic?

Obsidia opened her mouth in shock. A nether dragon in humanoid form? She had assumed they were not intelligent or evolved enough to shapeshift like their black precursors.

"Thank you!" the drake said through a mouthful of food.

As soon as the meat was gone—which wasn’t long, considering how famished he seemed to be—the drake shot back into the sky as if afraid to be on the ground any longer than necessary.

She had to know more, but considering past dealings with the Netherwing had been
less than friendly she decided to play dumb and approach him as a human greeting
an elf. “Hello!” she called in Common. “Are you all right? I heard the sounds of
battle.”

The “elf” stopped wiping gore from his broadsword and looked up in surprise.
“Greetings,” he said in flawless Common. “Thank you for your concern, but as
you can see everything is under control.”

"What happened to all the bodies?" she asked innocently, looking around at the
bloody dirt.

He smiled and gestured at the sky. “Dragon food.”

"Since when do dragons need help killing their food?"

"Since those damned orcs started hunting and capturing them to use as taken by the
Dragonmaw."

She raised an eyebrow. “Well, that’s awfully nice of you to help feed them. Most
people wouldn’t.”

He eyed her carefully, apparently trying to judge her trustworthiness. “Would
you?”

"Would I what? Help feed those poor, starving dragons?" She gave an
exaggerated sweet smile. "Of course!" Without further ado she sprinted toward the
nearest group of rock flayers and unleashed a torrent of shadowflame magic. The
spiky creatures hardly knew what hit them. In mere moments a half dozen of the
bizarre creatures were lying dead at her feet, smoking slightly.

"I hope those drakes like their food well done," she said with a smirk.

Her companion signaled to another drake, who wasted no time in swooping down
to devour the meat.

"Thank you!" the drake said, too hungry to question her involvement.

"You’re welcome," Obsidia said in draconic.

The drake took off without questioning her identity, but the “elf” whirled to stare at
her in shock. “You speak our language?”

"I’m not all I appear to be. But then neither are you."

He nodded warily and backed up a few steps, uncertain if she was a threat or not.
“Who are you?”

"A friend."
"A relative?" he asked shrewdly.

"Perhaps. But a friend first. I mean you no harm. In fact, I want to help if I can. No dragon should have to serve as a beast of burden for one of the lesser races."

He considered this, finally relaxing a bit. "If you truly wish to help, you should speak with our patriarch, Neltharaku. He should be circling high above the Dragonmaw fortress where our matriarch is being held prisoner."

Obsidalia raised her eyes skyward and tried not to look forlorn at her inability to fly. "Thanks. And I’ll try to kill some more of those rock flayers on my way. They don’t look very tasty to me, but if you’re desperate I suppose they’re better than nothing."

"Exactly. I’m Mordenaku, by the way."

For a second she considered lying about her name, fearing it would give away her identity as a member of the black dragonflight, but on a whim she decided to try honesty. "I’m Obsidalia. Pleased to meet you."

He studied her with a curious eye but said nothing.

"Until we meet again, good luck." She bobbed her head in respect—a rather draconic gesture—and walked away.

When Mordenaku was out of sight, she sat down on a boulder to think over what she had learned. She reached into her bag for a drink and decided it was safe to let Ashy out for awhile. The whelp eagerly stretched his wings, fluttering in circles around her before chasing a beetle for a snack.

So the Netherwing flight here was in jeopardy thanks to Dragonmaw orcs. Their…Aspect? No, he could not be called such without the blessing of the Titans. Their leader, then, was called Neltharaku. Interesting that he chose a name so similar to Neltharion; it implied they had some knowledge of their origins.

There didn’t seem to be all that many nether dragons, but then the black dragonflight’s numbers were also abysmally low these days, so ironically the Netherwing probably outnumbered them now. If only they had hatched without mutation, the black flight’s numbers would have been received a much-needed boost.

It was too late, now, of course, but if there was a way to bring them back into the fold as an ally… It was a good idea, but first she would have to figure out a way to fly up to talk to Neltharaku, and that would require a mount, something she could not afford at the moment. The rented mounts she had been using to get around Outland were trained strictly to fly from Point A to Point B without deviation. If she went all the way back to Azeroth to sell more of her gems, she could easily buy
a stable full of gryphons, but that would delay her by weeks.

Obsidia was pondering this dilemma when she heard footsteps approaching. On guard, she stood and looked to see who was there.

A black-haired blood elf woman in fine leather and chainmail armor was walking toward where Nelashrion was obliviously chomping on a large beetle. Her face was covered from the nose down by a gauzy ebon veil.

"Hey, the whelp is mine!" Obsidia called sharply. "Back off."

The blood elf stopped and regarded her with an expression of regal disdain. “I haven’t seen a black whelp in many years,” she said in Common without a trace of a Sindorei accent.

Ashy finished eating his beetle and looked up curiously at the stranger. “Yeep?”

The elf knelt and frowned deeply in concentration, inspecting him.

"Yeep!" Ashy said cheerfully, flapping up to give her a greeting slurp across her veiled cheek.

She made a disgusted noise and stood. “Ah, you’re one of those,” she said with a dismissive gesture.

"What’s that supposed to mean?" Obsidia said defensively, scooping her nephew back into her knapsack for protection.

The strange elf didn’t answer. Instead she turned her attention to Obsidia, emerald eyes boring into her as if seeing more than a normal person would. “And you…” she said at last. “You are very familiar somehow. Your name?”

"None of your business," she snapped.

"You are not human."

"Also none of your business."

The elf raised her chin with the manner of someone used to being obeyed, and spoke in draconic. “Actually, I think it is my business. Who are you?”

This was the second time today that Obsidia had met an “elf” who turned out to be a dragon, so the surprise was not quite as great as it could have been. Also switching to draconic, she said. “Are you of the Netherwing flight?”

The stranger looked vaguely offended. “Hardly. And you should watch your tone. You don’t know with whom you are speaking.”

"Not an elf, I assume," she said, unimpressed.
She snorted in disdain and shapeshifted into her natural form: a black dragon even larger than any of Obsidia’s siblings, with regal frills on either side of her head. She had been beautiful, once, but now her ebon hide was marred by hideous burn scars and glowing, fiery wounds that made her identity clear: Sintharia, estranged prime consort of Neltharion.

Obsidia gasped, steadying herself on a boulder before her suddenly weak knees gave out. “Mother?” she cried.

"Who…?"

"Mother, it’s me, Obsidia!"

The older dragon’s impetuous attitude crumbled into one of amazement. “Obsidia? My baby girl? Here?”

Tears welled up in Obsidia’s eyes. “Oh, Mama, I’ve missed you!” She rushed over and threw her arms around one of Sintharia’s legs.

"Obsidia, dear! Let me see you!"

She began to cry and buried her face against her mother’s scales. “I can’t!"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I can’t change my form. F-father cast a spell on me to keep me l-like this until I can prove myself worthy to him!"

Sintharia’s expression hardened. “He would.”

"He wouldn’t have, but he’s ch-changed," she sobbed.

"Believe me, I know. Let’s not have this discussion right now," Sintharia said with a sigh. "I grew tired of you and your siblings trying to defend him many millennia ago."

"But he’s worse now than ever! They must have him again. The Old Gods must have taken control again, I swear, it’s the only thing that makes sense," Obsidia babbled through her tears.

Sintharia gently patted her on the back with a paw that dwarfed her in size many times over. “Dear, please calm down. I’ll take you back to my lair and we can talk there.”

Obsidia wiped her cheeks dry and grabbed her knapsack with Ashy inside. Her mother carefully held her in one paw and launched herself into the lightning-streaked sky.
Many hours later, Obsidia sat by a bonfire in the cavern Sintharia called home for the moment. The floating mass of rock drifted in space off the southern edge of Shadowmoon Valley itself, and the entrance to the cave was well concealed on the underside of the “island.” It wasn’t a large space, only four times the length of her body, and the ceiling was barely tall enough for her to stand without scraping it with her horns, but it was certainly secure.

Obsidia had done most of the talking so far, filling in her mother on everything that had happened since their last meeting. Considering how seldom they crossed paths, there was a lot to cover. Sintharia knew some of it from other sources, including Nefarian’s demise. She was stone-faced when Obsidia told her the details.

"I still can’t quite believe he’s gone," Obsidia said, fighting the return of her tears.

"He was his father’s son, through and through," Sintharia said quietly, her tone making it sound like an insult.

"Mother, please," Obsidia said with a pained expression.

"I’m sorry, Obsidia, but it’s true. He, Onyxia, Sabellian…they all sided with him. They could see what he did to me, and they still stayed by his side.” Sintharia’s claws raked furrows in the stone beneath her.

"They—"

"Don’t make excuses for them. You’re little better than they."

"Mother! I never took sides. I love you both. You’re my parents. And I would have spent more time with you if I had been able to find you!"

"I couldn’t risk him following you to get to me. You have no idea the pain he caused…the pain I still feel." Sintharia gingerly put a paw across her chest, where glowing claw marks were clearly visible.

"Please," Obsidia said with an embarrassed grimace. "Nobody wants to think about their parents…you know…"

"He should have known better. He had to have metal plates bolted to his body by those damned annoying goblin creatures just to keep from splitting apart. He should have known what would happen if he tried to mate with one of us. And after seeing what it did to me, he should have stopped, but no. Pyroclastia… Basaltia… He killed them and didn’t even notice!"

Obsidia covered her ears. “I don’t want to think about it.”
"Well, get over your squeamishness and think about it. You’re old enough now. Think about what he did to me and his other consorts, and try to understand why I want nothing to do with him ever, ever again." Sintharia bared her teeth and lashed her tail back and forth in agitation.

"Mother, I know what he did was horrible, but he wasn’t in his right mind. The Old Gods were controlling him, and—"

"And he was able to break their hold when they threatened his precious Dragon Soul, but not when he was maiming and killing the females he supposedly loved!" Sintharia burst out, her voice cracking.

Obsidia was silent a moment. “He’s sorry.”

Sintharia snorted. “I’m sure he is. Ten thousand years is a long time to be celibate.”

"No, he’s sorry he hurt you. I know he is. He told me once he doesn’t even really remember doing those things.”

"How convenient.”

"He—" Obsidia stopped herself. "You know, I was about to say that he wouldn’t hurt you again, but now…I don’t know anymore. A decade ago I wouldn’t have imagined he could punish me with this exile to a human body, either. He didn’t even act sad when Nefarian was killed. He’s so short-tempered and evasive, and… He’s not himself anymore.”

"He hasn’t been himself since before the Sundering," Sintharia said bitterly.

"I know, but he was better, for awhile. I’m sure you don’t believe me, but he really was. Now…”

"For ten centuries the Old Gods have been trying to get him back. They are timeless beings of unfathomable power. It was inevitable that they would succeed eventually," Sintharia said with a grim expression. "Someday we will all lose ourselves to their madness.”

"They can’t reach us here in Outland, though. Surely you’ve noticed that.”

"So? The damage is already done.”

"For your generation, yes, but there is hope for future ones. Sabellian and his mate have been hatching whelps in Blade’s Edge, and they are less corrupted than those born on Azeroth. In time, perhaps we can be free of the whispers and—"

"Your optimism is admirable, Obsidia, but futile," Sintharia interrupted. "The black dragonflight is finished, and probably for the best. We have been weak,
corrupted, useless! The Netherwing flight will be a poor legacy unless we can
 guide them, mold them in our image… That is why I am here. The orcs do not
deserve to shape the future of the Netherwing flight. That task belongs to me.”

"They have their own leaders, though: Neltharaku and his mate."

"Mere children. The chaotic magics of Outland have made them physically mature
very quickly, but remember they are not even a half century old. They need a more
experienced hand to take care of them." Sintharia gave a sly smile. "Nefarian may
have been a failure with his genetic experiments, but the idea of designing a new
dragonflight to be better and stronger than any before is still an intriguing idea."

"Nef wasn’t a failure! He was making great progress with the Chromatic flight
when he was cut down in his prime."

Sintharia shook her head with a patronizing smile. “But he still lost his life to the
lesser races’ attacks. Most unbecoming for the eldest son of an Aspect. Then
again, as I said, he was very much Deathwing’s son.”

Obsidia scowled but refrained from arguing further. It wouldn’t have done any
good. Instead she decided to change the subject. “Mother, is there any chance you
might be able to lift the spell that keeps me from shifting forms?”

Sintharia gave a thin smile. “I already tried, my dear. Magic cast by an Aspect is
far too strong for a normal dragon to break, I’m afraid.”

Obsidia’s shoulders slumped in disappointment, and she sighed out a profanity.
“Oh well, back to Plan A.”

"Which is?"

"Trying to convince Father that I’ve learned whatever lesson he was trying to teach
me and am worthy of being cured."

"If he’s truly fallen under the sway of the Old Gods again, that may never happen."

"I know," Obsidia said, her voice sounding terribly small. "Believe me, I know."

"As I said, the black dragonflight is doomed. Stay here and help me mold the
Netherwing into something better. Do something meaningful with your limited
existence."

Obsidia hugged her knees to her chest and stared into the bonfire. “I’ll think about
it.”

She dreamed that night. As usual her nightmares included Deathwing completely
ignoring her as she pleaded for his favor and attention. This time they also featured
Rivendark flying toward her as fast as he could but never getting any nearer. She
had to leave him to his struggle when a swarm of Netherwing drakes began chasing her. Somehow she knew that if they caught her, they would devour her alive. In a panic to get away from them, she blindly rushed into a fog bank, only to find herself trapped in a seething forest of tentacles.

She took the crystal necklace Sabellian had given her and used the rocky spikes to stab at the tentacles, but every time she injured one it split into two. The maniacal laughter of the Old Gods came from all directions. She spotted another dragon caught in the tangle of tentacles and realized it was Onyxia. She watched helplessly as they tightened around her sister, strangling her until she fell limply to the ground.

"No!" Obsidia shrieked, flailing her limbs in a desperate effort to free herself.

Suddenly, she was fighting her sleeping bag by the dim light of the dying campfire.

Beside her, Ashy tilted his head and looked at her strangely. "Yeep?"

"Obsidia, are you all right?" came her mother’s sleepy voice from across the cavern.

"I was…dreaming," she panted, swiping tangled hair and sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. "A nightmare."

Sintharia made a sympathetic noise. "You’re safe here. Go back to sleep."

Obsidia laid back down and watched the smoldering embers glowing from the depths of the fire pit, trying to calm her pounding heart.

Ashy wiggled into her arms and trilled a comforting sound.

"Thanks, Ashy," she whispered, hugging him tightly. "I’m okay." I just have no idea what I should do next, she added silently.

Chapter End Notes

It is widely speculated but never confirmed that the human-appearing NPC in Ruuan Weald named “Samia Inkling” is a dragon. Given black dragonflight naming conventions, it’s probable that “Samia” is indeed her name. However, other fanfic writers before me have done interesting, cool things with the character under that name, so I decided to give my own version of her a different name. And since “black as ink” is a thing, “Inklia” seemed like a reasonable choice.

It’s also highly likely that Sabellian had a mate (or two or three) before going to Outland, but since the family tree is complicated enough I decided to omit any mention of them. He started over with Inklia when he was stranded in Outland, and anything that came before is in the past.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The king’s return means celebration for Stormwind and yet another tragedy for Obsidia and her family. With Deathwing still in Deepholm and Sabellian refusing to leave Outland, it falls to Obsidia to lead the black dragonflight on Azeroth.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings:
- Character death (Onyxia, and references back to Nefarian).
- Mentions of child death (Onyxia’s “many whelps”).
- Mentions of beheading (also Onyxia).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next morning, Sintharia flew her daughter back to the mainland of Shadowmoon Valley, then accompanied her to the Sanctum of the Stars in her blood elf form. They stood outside the inn for several minutes, talking while the flight master prepared a mount for Obsidia.

"I will be back to help with the Netherwing. I just need some time to think about everything else that’s going on, and I need to get this crystal sample to Sabellian. I know you think they’re useless, but he’s really made some interesting discoveries and he should get the chance to look at these."

"As you wish," Sintharia said curtly. "When you’re ready to return send word to ‘Lady Sinestra’ here at the Sanctum."

"Sinestra?"

"Your father isn’t the only one who can change his name to better suit his new outlook on life," she said with a self-deprecating smile.

"I see. And it goes without saying, but I promise I won’t tell Father that I’ve seen you."

"Much appreciated."

"I’m glad we got to spend some time together, though. I know things haven’t been easy, but…I love you." Obsidia embraced her tightly, and Sintharia returned the gesture.
"Your mount is ready," the flight master called to her from across the street, indicating a sunhawk with her bags strapped to the back.

"Thank you," she said. "I’ll be right there." She turned back to her mother. "Good-bye for now, Mama. Hopefully not for as long, this time."

"Indeed. Take care, my dear."

The flight out of Shadowmoon Valley was, fortunately, a smooth one, despite passing rather too close to a chimera for Obsidia’s liking. She made as few stops as possible along the way, choosing to fly straight through the first night before spending the next night at the Cenarion refuge in Zangarmarsh. Once there she sent a letter ahead to Ruuan Weald to let her family know she would be arriving the next day.

As expected, Sabellian, Inkia, Blazerion and Rivendark were waiting to greet her when she landed. One face was entirely unexpected, however, and his presence combined with the somber expressions on the others filled her with immediate dread.

"Sartharion? What are you doing here?" she asked, quickly dismounting to approach them. If Onyxia’s prime consort was here, did that mean…? No no no, oh please no, she thought. Not my sister, too.

"Obsidia," he said, the fuzzy black eyebrows of his human form arching in a clear expression of sadness. "I’m so sorry."

"Oh Titans," she said breathlessly. "Onyxia?"

"King Varian returned," he said. "Her plans were uncovered, her enchantments broken, and…"

"No! No, she can’t be…"

Sartharion swallowed hard to contain his emotion. “Her head hangs above the gates of Stormwind.”

Obsidia burst into tears and collapsed into his arms.

"I’m sorry to greet you like this," Sabellian said, putting a hand on her shuddering back. "We just found out yesterday."

A curious “yeep?” from her knapsack, lying forgotten on the ground, made Obsidia freeze. “Ashy,” she whispered. “Oh dear.”

She stepped aside as Sartharion went to kneel by his son. “Nelashrion,” he said
with forced cheerfulness. “You’ve grown since I last saw you.”

"Papa!" The whelp hopped up and gave him a greeting slurp, and Sartharion took him in his arms, holding him protectively close.

Fresh tears streamed down Obsidia’s cheeks. The only words besides “yeep” that Ashy ever produced were “mama” and “papa.” And now his mama…

Obsidia clung to her last remaining brother and sobbed.

"He won’t understand," Sabellian whispered in her ear. "Out of sight, out of mind, for one who is egg-touched. If he saw her again he would recognize her, but if he never does...he won’t wonder why."

This somehow made it sadder, and Obsidia cried harder.

"Yeep?"

She turned to look and saw her nephew fly from his father’s arms to perch on her shoulder.

He trilled softly and nuzzled his head against her neck, clearly trying to comfort her even though he couldn’t understand the cause of her grief.

"Oh, Ashy," she sighed, hugging him tightly. "I love you, too."

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Somehow, Onyxia’s death changed Obsidia’s outlook on everything. The Netherwing could wait. Rivendark would, too, as he told her many times. Bless him, he had been so supportive as she grieved, letting her ramble and cry when she needed to and gently distracting her when she didn’t. Even Sabellian had finally relented and stopped trying to keep them apart, although the glares he gave the other male made it clear that he was treading on thin ice.

Sartharion stayed in Outland only a few days before returning to Azeroth. King Varian’s forces had slaughtered everything in Onyxia’s lair, including the whelps and eggs tucked away in side passages. Only a few of their children had escaped to take refuge in Emberstrife’s cavern nearby.

Sartharion had accompanied the Obsidian shrinekeeper, Serinar, to Dustwallow to retrieve Onyxia’s body—minus her head, which had been taken back to Stormwind as a trophy. He returned to Northrend in a haze of grief to lay his mate to rest at the shrine, and left the few surviving whelps in the care of Wyrmrest Temple for the time being. He would return to his post as guardian of the Obsidian Sanctum after bringing the grim news to his beloved’s siblings in Outland.
Sartharion and Serinar held honored positions at the flight’s ancient bastions in Dragonblight, but they were not leaders. The scattered remnants of the black dragonflight were on their own unless Deathwing returned from Deepholm to resume control, or unless one of his children stepped in. Sabellian reiterated his vow never to set foot on Azeroth again, which left Obsidia.

The thought of filling her father’s role and leading the flight was a daunting one to say the least, but she wasn’t sure what choice she had. There were distressingly few mature black wyrms left, and Obsidia was only personally familiar with Seara, Atramedes, Darkblaze, Myzerian, Seldarria, Nalice, Serinar, Sartharion, and, of course, Nyxondra. There were many drakes and younger adults out there, true, but it was still a small population spread out over three continents.

Part of her said to heed her mother’s pessimistic advice and leave the rest of the black flight to its fate. They were doomed to fade away into corruption and extinction. But another part of her insisted that hope remained, especially when their Aspect still lived. So it was that she decided to seek out her father before making any further decisions.

By now he might have tried to summon his children to the meeting cavern, and if no one was on Azeroth to answer… There was no telling what he might do. Based on his bland reaction to Nefarian’s demise, perhaps he would do nothing. Or perhaps he would erupt from his self-imposed exile and rain vengeance down upon the mortal kingdoms. Obsidia would certainly have preferred the latter.

For reasons of safety and sanity, she avoided Stormwind completely and went directly from the Dark Portal to Ironforge, where her small apartment near the Great Forge was just as she left it. In her months away a layer of dust had accumulated on everything, but otherwise it had been undisturbed.

Obsidia stood in the middle of her room, feeling oddly out of place. Once she had actually thought of this place as “home,” but now she realized that she didn’t belong here. She was not a dwarf or a human. She was a dragon: a black dragon, one of only three surviving offspring of Neltharion the Earth Warder and his prime consort.

Steeling her courage, she packed up the few valuables she had left there and walked out of the apartment for the last time.

By the end of the day she had liquidated enough of her gem collection to purchase a gryphon. The beast was skittish at first, sensing her true identity, but eventually it accepted her in the saddle. Soon the cold wind of Dun Morogh was whipping through her hair as snow-covered peaks and valleys raced by far below. Oh, how she missed flying! If she ever managed to regain her true form, she would never again take for granted the freedom of spreading her wings and zooming off to
wherever she pleased.

Without her father’s summoning beacon, it took an hour of searching to find the seaside cavern where Deathwing spoke through the strange portal. At last she spotted the opening in the side of the sheer cliff face, and directed her new mount to land on the narrow ledge.

The white gryphon hesitated, sensing sinister forces in the air, but obeyed. She secured it with a rope around a boulder, gave it a treat of some dried fish, and let Nelashrion out of her knapsack.

"Come on, Ashy. Let’s go see if we can get your grandfather’s attention."

"Yeep!"

Obsidia lit a torch with her magic and started walking into the cavern with an expression of grim determination.

The floor of the rocky tunnels still bore the pawprints and dragged tail impressions of her siblings, and a fresh wave of grief clenched her throat. Such tracks made it easy to find her way through the winding passageways, however, and soon she found herself in the enormous chamber with the stone archway at the far end. The portal was silent, but a vaguely nauseating pall of darkness still surrounded it, once again reminding her of the Old Gods. The collar of Apexis crystals around her neck seemed to tingle.

She marched up the slope and stood directly in front of the portal. “Father, we need to talk,” she said loudly.

No response.

"Deathwing!" she called.

Nothing.

She made a grandiose gesture and shouted, “I, Lady Obsidia, daughter of the black Aspect, Neltharion the Earth Warder, hereby demand to speak to my father!”

Silence.

Ashy looked at her oddly. “Yeep?”

"Well, it could have worked,” she said sheepishly. “Hmm.” She inspected the archway, which appeared to have been formed out of solid rock without the use of tools. In a dry cave with no erosion, there was no way to tell how old it was, but something about it sparked a distant memory.

Once the Earth Warder had used his powers to create amazing structures out of
stone, adorning their lair with intricate pillars, arches and stairs on a scale far larger and more delicate than any mortal hands would ever hope to match. Could this portal arch date back to before his madness?

She ran a hand over the elegantly curving stone and gave a wistful sigh. “Oh, Father…”

If this was his handiwork, perhaps trying to damage it would get his attention. It might also spark his Old God-augmented temper, but it was a risk she was willing to take.

"Stand back, Ashy," she warned, rolling back the long sleeves of her purple robes. Closing her eyes to concentrate, she conjured a bolt of shadow energy and aimed it squarely at the top of the arch. At first it seemed to have no effect, but after a few moments the stone began to crumble off in small flakes.

“WHO DARES?!” The entire chamber shook violently, knocking Obsidia off her feet and sending stalactites crashing down around her.

She immediately stopped her spellcasting. “Father!” she cried. “It’s me, Obsidia!”

The quaking ceased as swirling crimson energy blossomed within the portal. Through the haze, a draconic silhouette with glowing red eyes became visible. “What is the meaning of this?” he roared. “You ignore my last two summons and now try to destroy my work?”

"Father, please listen! I have been in Outland for the last few months. Sabellian is alive! But I’ve come back to Azeroth now because Onyxia has been slain."

"Stormwind is lost?"

Obsidia’s heart sank. She had been afraid that would be his reaction: concern for his schemes, not for his children. “King Varian returned and uncovered Onyxia’s plotting. He killed her and her babies, chopped off her head and hung it from the gates of Stormwind.”

"He will pay," Deathwing growled. "They will all perish when the Hour comes."

"When? How long will you stay away? Everything is falling apart here!" Obsidia was unable to hide her anger, but he seemed not to notice.

"The Hour of Twilight will come when the time is right, no sooner."

"Hour of Twilight? What is that?"

"You will see. All will see, and all who stand in the way of my perfect world will die."
Obsidia frowned. “I don’t understand. Why can’t you just come back to Azeroth and continue your plans here? The flight needs you. I need you.”

"There is much to be done," he said cryptically.

She waited for him to elaborate, and when he didn’t her temper flared again. “Then at least lift the spell so that I can be a dragon again! I can’t help lead the flight like this.”

"Sabellian lives."

"Yes, and he refuses to leave Outland."

That piqued Deathwing’s interest. “And why is that?”

"Outland is actually safer than Azeroth now. Fewer mortals to interfere, and…the whispers can’t reach us. The whelps hatched there are less corrupted, those who are already mad find some peace, and in time Sabellian believes we could be like we were in the old days. Please, Father. It may be the flight’s only hope. Come back from Deepholm, gather those of us who are left, and go to Outland with me. We can make a new start, away from the whispers."

Deathwing was silent for some time. “No,” he said at last, sounding disoriented. “Our mission is here.” His head twitched as if shaking off a fly.

"What mission? To protect the earth of Azeroth? We haven’t done that in ten centuries."

"There are bigger tasks, now."

"Like what?"

"You will understand in time."

"How? Help me to understand. Father, I’m begging you; give me back my real body and I will do everything I can to help the black dragonflight. We can’t go on like this. We’ve lost Nefarian and Onyxia, and with Sabellian in voluntary exile and me trapped like this, there is no one to lead the flight. If you won’t come back, at least turn me back to normal!"

"Trust me, Obsidia. All is as it should be."

"No, it isn’t!" She stomped her foot in agitation, a gesture that was common among dragons but looked childish from a human. "Nefarian and Onyxia should not be dead! I should not be a stupid human! All is not how it should be!"

"There are greater things afoot than you realize, my daughter. Have patience."
"But—"

"I will summon you when I have a task for you." The red mist dissipated, leaving the portal arch lifeless once again.

"Father!" she yelled. "Come back! You can’t just— Arg!” Obsidia threw her head back and screamed in frustration.

Disappointed and aggravated beyond words, Obsidia had no choice but to wait for her father’s next summons. She untied her gryphon and flew off to the north and east, toward Blackrock Mountain. It was past time to visit her sister-in-law.

Nefarian’s widow was gracious, welcoming her with open arms and inviting her to stay as long as she liked. They sat on stone chairs overlooking a chasm of lava, Seara adopting her human form out of courtesy.

"I am so sorry about Onyxia," she said, grasping Obsidia’s hands across the table. "I understand your grief only too well."

"Thanks," Obsidia said, breathing deeply of the sulfurous air to help compose herself. "It’s almost unbelievable that they’re both gone."

"Not a day goes by that I don’t wake up wondering why Nefarian isn’t beside me," Seara said quietly. "Then I remember, and only the thought of carrying on his work and protecting Ivoroc, Maimgor and Pyrecraw keeps me sane."

Obsidia bowed her head in sympathy. “Speaking of sanity, did Onyxia get a chance to send you any of the Apexis crystals before she…?"

Seara nodded. “Yes, she sent a servant with a supply for all of us here.”

"Have you noticed any difference?"

"The boys say they concentrate better when wearing them, but honestly, I haven’t noticed anything." She shrugged apologetically.

"Well, you’re not as corrupted as some," Obsidia said.

Seara looked away modestly. “Well, I don’t know about that, but thank you.”

"Oh, come on. I’ve never seen you angry. You’re always so…nice."

She laughed. “Oh, I get angry, trust me. But only when it’s really necessary. You know, things like minions screwing up weeks of work in the lab.” Her face darkened. “Or mortals slaughtering my mate and children.”
"Have you given any thought to moving to Outland? Sabellian is there along with quite a few other members of our flight. It’s not without its dangers, but at least the Old Gods’ power is weak there."

"I have thought about it," she said, "but I just can’t imagine leaving Blackrock. I have so many memories of Nefarian here, as well as our laboratories. I will not give up on the Chromatic flight. It was his life’s work, and I take solace in knowing I can carry on that legacy.”

"How are the Chromatics doing? Any breakthroughs?"

Seara grimaced. “Well…it could be better, to be honest. I’m not Nefarian, but I try to muddle along. Gyth’s death set us back quite a bit. There are plenty of Chromatic whelps, but so few thrive past a few months.”

"And that big project, what was it called? Chromatus?"

"Still in stasis. It was Nefarian’s last and greatest experiment, and I am hesitant to tamper with it for fear of messing something up. Only when I am confident enough from smaller projects will I dare to touch it."

"But you helped him with it."

"He always gave me more credit than I deserved," she said with a wistful half-smile. "I would suggest ideas and do busy work, but the genius was all his." She swallowed, blinking hard to keep back her tears.

"I’m sorry," Obsidia said quietly. "I didn’t mean to…”

"It’s all right," Seara said, dabbing at her eyes with her sleeve. "I just miss him so much, even after all this time."

"I understand. I do, too."

"Anyway, no, I haven’t done anything with Chromatus. It was nearly finished, but we could never figure out how to concentrate enough energy to animate a body so large. And honestly, at this point, I don’t know what I would do with such a monster. Your father seems to have lost interest in the Chromatic flight."

"My father seems to have lost interest in just about everything," Obsidia said bitterly. "I don’t know what has happened to him since he went to Deepholm to recover, but he’s not himself. Since Sabellian insists on staying in Outland, it’s up to me to lead the flight until Father comes back. After I leave here I’m going to Wyrmrest to see what I can do."

Seara nodded. “That’s a good idea.”

"I’m not a leader, but I don’t see that I have a choice right now."
"You may be stronger than you realize."

Obsidia gave a scornful laugh. “I’d better be, or we’re all doomed.”

Chapter End Notes

Notes:
I think it’s implied by the quests in Dragonblight that Serinar is just at the shrine to drive out the Scourge, since Nalice is annoyed that he doesn’t return to Wyrmrest as soon as you’re done helping him. Since this is an AU and I needed a character to be the shrinekeeper, I gave him the job. He doesn’t really play a role in this fic otherwise, so forgive the non-canon quirk.
Also, this chapter was a little shorter than some, but the next one covers the entirety of Wrath of the Lich King.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Obsidia picked a turbulent time to try leading the black dragonflight, just as the Lich King makes a resurgence and the Nexus War splits dragonkind. And it all takes place in Yogg-Saron’s back yard…

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: ”Off camera” character deaths (Sarthurion, Sinestra and Malygos.) Emetophobia warning. Brief mention of Sintharia’s rape. Themes of mind control and mental illness. Spoilers for the novel Night of the Dragon.

The icy winds of Dragonblight seemed to cut right through Obsidia’s gown, and she shivered involuntarily as she waited outside the temple. The Dragonqueen was making her wait on purpose, she just knew it. Although Wyrmrest was sacred and neutral ground, that did not guarantee that warring flights would be friendly there —only that no blood would be shed.

A muffled “yeep” came from the knapsack hanging across her shoulder.

“Trust me, Ashy, you don’t want to get out right now. It’s much warmer in there, out of the wind,” she said.

A large red drake dropped out of the sky to land before her. “The Life Binder has decided to grant you an audience now,” he said.

"Kind of her to see me before I froze to death," Obsidia said with a sniff.

"Watch your tongue, black worm," the drake snarled. "In any other place I would not waste breath speaking to your kind."

"Which is why I am here,” she said with a smirk. "Now let’s not keep the Life Binder waiting."

With an expression of disgust, the drake crouched to let her climb on his back. Obsidia held on tightly in case he decided to “accidentally” drop her, but he gave her a smooth flight to the top level of the temple. Obsidia covered her embarrassment at needing a ride by being as condescending as possible as she thanked him and dismounted.
Although this highest terrace was open to the air, enchantments kept the temperature comfortable, and Obsidia gratefully put back the hood of her cloak and attempted to make her hair presentable.

"Greetings, daughter of Neltharion," came a warm, female voice from behind her.

Obsidia turned to see a figure resembling a blood elf, though taller than any elf who had ever lived, with curved horns jutting from her thick, apple-red hair.

"Life Binder," Obsidia said, dipping her head very low in respect. "Thank you for seeing me."

"All are welcome at Wyrmrest," the Dragonqueen said, with an unspoken "even your kind" hanging in the air.

"My lady, I come as a representative of the black dragonflight. Since my older sister’s death, I am the only direct child of the Earth Warder left on Azeroth." There was no point mentioning Nyxondra in such a context. "As such, leadership of the flight falls to me in my father’s absence.” Obsidia’s tone was formal but the courtesy was forced. Neither dragon needed to be reminded that it was Alexstrasza and the other Aspects who had beaten Deathwing to within an inch of his life at Grim Batol. Although the other flights did not know he was recovering in Deepholm, all knew his long absence was thanks to his defeat there.

"I was saddened to hear of the loss of so many whelplings in Dustwallow," Alexstrasza said diplomatically. "Too often it is the youngest who suffer in these perilous times."

"Sadder still that my sister is no longer alive to lay eggs to replace those lost," Obsidia said, visibly trying to control her temper.

"She chose to involve herself with Deathwing’s schemes. She could have stayed in her lair, mothering her children."

Like Nyxondra does, Obsidia could not help thinking. "With all due respect, Life Binder, no good can come of this line of conversation. I am not here to discuss my dear sister’s fate. I am here to inform you that until my father chooses to involve himself in the world again, I am the highest-ranking member of the black dragonflight on Azeroth, so any matters concerning us should be addressed to me."

"I see." Alexstrasza tilted her head, studying Obsidia carefully. "I sense pain in you, young one. You are not here at your father’s request, are you?"

Obsidia had considered asking the Red Aspect to try removing the binding spell from her, but pride and anger made her reject the idea. "My father is not currently able to lead our flight as he once did,” she said with an accusing glare.
To her surprise, Alexstrasza reacted with an expression of deep sadness. “No, indeed. And all Azeroth suffers. You were very young when he fell into madness, weren’t you?”

"I was from one of Sintharia’s last clutches, yes," Obsidia said warily, unsure what the Dragonqueen was getting at.

"So you never knew him as he truly was," Alexstrasza said with pity.

"I remember a little," Obsidia said. "He was…happier."

"You cannot imagine the difference between the Neltharion I knew in our youth and the Deathwing who visits horrors upon the world now. Had I not seen his transformation before my eyes I would never have guessed them to be the same dragon."

"The Old Gods will do that to you, yeah," Obsidia said flatly. "Especially when they’re basically your next-door neighbors. The Titans were too busy patting themselves on the back over the decorating job they’d done on the planet to think about that little detail."

Alexstrasza’s delicate red eyebrows came together in a disapproving frown. “I will tolerate no disrespect of the Titans in this temple. We owe them our sentience, our powers and our world.”

Obsidia wanted to say more but wisely held her tongue.

"If you wish to speak to Nalice or Sartharion while you are here, you will find the ambassador’s quarters on the second level of the temple, and I believe you know the way to the Obsidian Sanctum."

Recognizing this as the Dragonqueen’s way of dismissing her, Obsidia bowed and backed away. “Thank you for your time, Life Binder,” she said tersely.

"Safe travels, daughter of the Earth Warder."

Obsidia returned to where the red drake was waiting to take her back, and said nothing on the ride downward.

Each dragonflight kept an official ambassador at Wyrmrest temple, and for many years the black flight’s representative had been a dragon named Nalice. She was surprised to see Obsidia, but welcomed her into her quarters with proper formality.

"My lady," Nalice said, bowing in her human form. "Do you bear word from Lord Deathwing?"
"Not…exactly. He remains in seclusion and will not say how much longer he will be indisposed." Obsidia set down her knapsack on a marble table and unfastened her traveling cloak. "In the meantime, he—"

"Yeep!" Nelashrion burst out of her bag and fluttered twice around the room before spotting Nalice. He immediately dived down to give her a messy greeting slurp across the forehead.

"Ashy! How many times do I have to tell you not to slobber on people?" Obsidia said wearily.

Nalice did her best not to look disgusted as she wiped off her head with her sleeve. "It’s…all right, my lady. Frankly, it’s nice to get a friendly greeting, even if it is on the slimy side. I’m not exactly the most popular dragon in the temple."

"The reception has been rather chilly for me, too," Obsidia said. "Funny what ten centuries of open hostilities can do for common courtesy."

"The other flights can pretend to be superior to us, but we both know that only the black dragonflight is worthy of dominance." Obsidia raised her nose disdainfully.

"Yeah," Obsidia said automatically, though her mother’s words echoed in her brain. Weak…failures…extinction…

"Yeah," Obsidia said automatically, though her mother’s words echoed in her brain. Weak…failures…extinction…

Nalice continued, "After all, Lord Deathwing is the strongest, the most cunning, the most resilient of all the Aspects."

"Of course," Obsidia said with a forced smile. "I’m sure when he returns he will be pleased with your work here."

It was a transparent attempt at flattery, but Nalice proudly soaked in every word. "I live to serve, my lady."

"How is Sartharion?"

"Devastated, poor thing," Nalice said. "I don’t think he’s left the Sanctum more than once since he returned."

Obsidia sighed, regretting all the times she and Nefarian had teased their sister and her mate for being mushy and affectionate. "I plan to stay around here for a week or so. Maybe I can cheer him up a little."

"There are bigger problems on the horizon, my lady. Have you heard the rumors about Malygos?"

"No. I’ve been in Outland for months. What’s going on?"

"Word has it that he’s finally coming out of his stupor and taking an interest in the
“Figures, one Aspect comes out of his shell while another is hiding in Deepholm and ignoring us,” Obsidia thought wryly. “I suppose he found thrashing my father at Grim Batol quite invigorating.”

“No, my lady. That was the beginning, perhaps, but it was something that a member of his flight brought back from Outland that perked him up—at least, according to the rumors.”

“How reliable are these rumors?”

“Of varying authenticity, but there are enough independent ones agreeing on Malygos’ renewed activity that I tend to think that part is true.”

“How does this concern us?”

“Well, my lady…” Nalice paused to plan her wording carefully. “It is said that Malygos is alarmed by the state of the world’s magic. In his absence, the arcane arts have been embraced by the mortal races at an alarming rate. The blue ambassador swears he has no knowledge of it, but there are reports of members of his flight issuing ultimatums to certain groups—namely the Kirin Tor and Quel’thalas—warning them to give up the use of all magic.”

“That’s crazy. Nobody’s going to stop using magic—especially not the elves! What is Malygos thinking? And what will happen when his demands are ignored?”

“That is the big question, isn’t it? Perhaps nothing. Perhaps more. No one knows, but it has made for some tense moments of late. I cannot complain about some of the hostility being aimed at another flight for awhile, but it still bears watching.”

A memory flickered through Obsidia’s consciousness of her father and Malygos hanging out together near the entrance of the lair, talking and laughing so hard that they woke up a nearby chamber full of sleeping whelplings. Sintharia scolded them, which only made them laugh more, until they were falling into each other, too weak to stay upright.

All the Aspects considered themselves siblings, but Neltharion and Malygos truly acted like brothers. It was little wonder than the Earth Warder’s betrayal had hit the Spellweaver the hardest.

Obsidia’s brow furrowed in thought. This wasn’t right. None of it was. At last she sighed and told Nalice, “Thank you for the information. Keep your ears open and report to me if you hear anything significant.”

“Of course, Lady Obsidia.”
In the following weeks it became more and more obvious that the blue dragonflight had crossed a dangerous line. Convinced that mortal practitioners of magic were abusing the arcane resources he was charged with protecting, Malygos lashed out at Dalaran and mages everywhere, manipulating ley lines and jealously hoarding as much magical power as he could siphon into the Nexus.

With Nozdormu out of contact in a tangle of timelines and Ysera preoccupied with the Emerald Nightmare, it was left to Alexstrasza to react to the blues’ sudden aggression. Reasoning failed, and Alexstrasza was finally forced to call for the Spellweaver’s destruction.

No one asked the black dragonflight to contribute to the war effort, and Obsidia did not offer. Mortal allies of the Wyrmrest Accord accompanied the Dragonqueen and her flight’s forces into the Eye of Eternity and killed Malygos.

For the first time, a dragonflight was without its Aspect. They all held their collective breath to see what would happen. No one knew. Would all the blues lose their powers? Die? Would magic disappear from the world? Would it be stronger than ever? Would some hidden signal alert the Titans and cause them to return?

It soon became apparent that the only real impact was a lack of leadership in the blue flight. Magic continued to work as it always had and there were no ill effects on the blue dragons themselves.

Alexstrasza retrieved the crystal Heart of Magic from Malygos’ remains, and when the moons next came into the proper alignment, the blues would be able to select a new leader.

Obsidia found it all rather anticlimactic, but then her flight had been operating without a proper Aspect for some time now. The Earth Warder had not been fulfilling his duties for ten centuries and the planet had not fallen apart, after all.

Of more immediate concern was the reemergence of the Lich King. At the first sign that the Scourge was mobilizing for a fresh attack, Obsidia looked up her old contacts in the Argent Dawn and joined the effort to repel the undead. She was far from the only dragon to join the war effort, as Scourge necromancers began to desecrate the hallowed burial grounds of Dragonblight, even daring to disturb the remains of Galakrond, the primordial precursor of all the modern dragonflights.

Exhausted from a long day of combating the seemingly endless waves of undead, Obsidia slumped onto a cot deep inside the hold of the Alliance airship Skybreaker. Despite the frost wyrms and gargoyles, it was still safer in the air than anywhere on the ground in Icecrown. Ashy curled up on a spare pillow and was immediately
asleep. Rest did not come so easily to his aunt, however.

Obsidia lay awake for some time, reliving the horrors she had witnessed. Dragons routinely tore apart their prey in a gloriously bloody frenzy, so she was certainly not squeamish about the insides of bodies. The enemies she fought now, however, were far from the fresh, red, appetizing meat she was used to. The undead were a festering mess of bones and rot, radiating malevolence and unnatural energy. Even these ghouls were at least familiar from her battles in the Plaguelands several years ago, but the frost wyrms haunted her. These were her people being resurrected into skeletal monstrosities, and in every bony wing that flapped overhead she saw her own possible fate. By simple virtue of being in Northrend, most of the dragons raised by the Scourge were from the blue flight, but in undeath the color of scales no longer mattered.

Finally, Obsidia sat up and lit a candle, rummaging in her bags for some parchment and ink. She slipped into a chair at the tiny desk in her cramped cabin and began to write.

"Dear Rivendark,

"I miss you very much. Northrend is colder than anywhere I have ever been. I would say I wish you were here to keep me warm, but I wouldn’t wish this place on anyone. It is bleak and dangerous, unfit for any living thing. Of course, it is the unliving we have to worry about. I’ve lost count of how many Scourge I’ve returned to their graves. My days are a blur of shadowbolts and bones.

"Take heart, however. We are making progress! It seemed impossible when this war started, but we are pushing the front ever closer to Icecrown Citadel. We must succeed. The Lich King poses a tremendous danger not just for mortals, but for dragons and every other living thing on Azeroth. I know Sabellian thinks this world is doomed anyway, and maybe it is, but it won’t be falling to the Lich King if I have anything to say about it.

"I do worry about the Netherwing flight and how they are faring in Shadowmoon. I wish I had been able to stay there longer to help them fight the Dragonmaw and to learn more about them, but as soon as I got back to Azeroth things started happening very quickly. I didn’t plan on staying away from Blade’s Edge this long, either. I miss you.

I already told you about the Nexus War in my previous letters, and I have nothing new to report on that front for the moment. Please let me know if you hear anything about the Netherwing. Write to me care of the Argent Crusade for the time being, as I won’t be back to Wyrmrest for awhile yet.

"I hope you and the rest in Outland are doing well. I’ll write a separate letter to Sabellian updating him on what’s been happening, but if this one arrives first you
can let him read it—well, except that first bit about wishing you were here to warm me up. He’d probably set the parchment on fire if he saw that part!

"Love,

"Obsidia

"P.S. Ashy says hi. Or yeep. You know how it is."

She smiled and waited until the ink was dry before folding up the letter and sliding it into an envelope. Thinking about Rivendark opening and reading it made her feel better, somehow, and she felt calm enough to attempt sleep in earnest.

The next day Obsidia saddled her gryphon and flew down to the Argent Crusade’s base camp to mail her letter. She double-checked the amount of stamps—it wasn’t cheap to send a letter all the way to Outland—and handed it to the gnome who was manning the postal station.

"Oh, Lady Obsidia!" the green-haired gnome said, perking up. "I have an urgent communiqué for you from Wyrmrest. Just came in a few minutes ago. Good thing you stopped by so we didn’t have to chase all over trying to track you down." He handed her an envelope.

"Thanks," she said, frowning in concern. Such letters rarely held good news. She tore open the envelope as she walked back to the place where she had tied up her gryphon.

"My Lady," the letter began, and a glance at the signature told her it was from Ambassador Nalice. As her eyes traveled back up to the top of the parchment she saw Sartharion’s name, and her feeling of dread multiplied. "I am deeply sorry to inform you that your brother-in-law has been slain."

Obsidia stopped in her tracks.

"Mortal mercenaries invaded the Obsidian Sanctum last night and killed everything inside. I understand Sartharion fought valiantly and took many mortals with him when he fell. My condolences on your loss. We will, of course, need to find a new guardian for the Sanctum soon, but that can wait until other matters are resolved. If the Scourge overtakes the temple it will not matter, after all."

A familiar surge of grief overtook her, but no tears came. Instead, a rush of fury blazed in her chest. Again. Mortal mercenaries had killed one of her family members again. In one of their flight’s most sacred places! And under Alexstrasza’s nose! The audacity of it sickened her, and she felt an uncontrollable urge to kill something.
She jumped onto her gryphon and dug in her heels, urging the beast to fly as fast as it could. One could not go far in Icecrown before finding Scourge, so it wasn’t long before she was unleashing her anger on ghouls and gargoyles. It wasn’t like hunting as a dragon, but being free to lose control and lash out at everything in sight was a liberating feeling. Nerubians, humanoid skeletons, lumbering abominations, necromancers…all fell before her storm of shadowflame. She wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but at last she fell to her knees, exhausted and panting, in the middle of a field of obliterated undead.

The world no longer made sense. No matter what she did, things spiraled further out of control. Her flight was dwindling. The Scourge were endless. The Old Gods were too powerful, patient and unpredictable to combat. No amount of begging would make her father turn her back into a dragon, so she was stuck in the body of one of the same type of creatures who had killed Nefarian, Onyxia, and now Sartharion.

Her father…she wanted nothing more than for him to swoop down from the skies in perfect health and nuzzle his glimmering head against her, telling her that it was all right. He would take care of everything. She didn’t need to worry. He would make the mortal races rue the day they thought of crossing the black dragonflight.

Somewhere to her right she saw one of the skeletons twitch, and without even turning around she carelessly flung a blob of shadow energy at it. The bones clattered back to the frozen dirt and lay still.

She stood, clenching her fists in determination. There were only two options. One was to simply sit here and die to the cold or to undead, whichever wore her down first. That would accomplish nothing but leaving Nelashrion without a guardian, breaking Rivendark’s heart, heaping even more grief on Sabellian, dooming the scattered remnants of her flight on Azeroth, and providing the Scourge with another frostwyrm. Or, she could dust herself off, grit her teeth, and carry on.

She stomped back to her gryphon and climbed into the saddle.

"Yeep!" her nephew greeted from her bag.

"Yeep is right, Ashy. Let’s go back to Wyrmrest and get some answers." She snapped the reins and held on tight as the gryphon took to the skies once more.
"A regrettable breach of security," Alexstrasza said calmly.

"I find it hard to believe that the first security breach since the dawn of time just happened to occur in our sanctum at a time when our flight is at its most vulnerable!"

Korialstrasz took a step forward, putting himself between Obsidia and his mate. "If you’re implying that the Life Binder was complicit in this attack—"

Obsidia bristled. "Stay out of this. You’ve done enough damage to my flight on your own, you meddling mortal-lover."

Alexstrasza raised a hand, and a gentle surge of magic swept over them, leaving both Obsidia and Korialstrasz unable to speak. "Enough! I had no knowledge of the attack on the Obsidian Sanctum until after it was over. You can choose to believe me or not, but it is the truth. I would never have sanctioned such sacrilege. You will recall that although I personally led the operation to end Malygos, the Azure Sanctum remained untouched. Wyrmrest is sacred ground." Alexstrasza’s demeanor shifted from defensive to accusatory. "Which makes it even more detestable that your flight was using its sanctum to hide its twisted experiments."

Rendered silent by the spell, Obsidia mimed confusion.

"Twilight dragons." Alexstrasza spat out the name as if merely speaking it was unclean. "Three drakes and Titans only know how many eggs and whelps, all stashed under our very noses. I don’t condone the actions of the mercenaries who violated the Obsidian Sanctum, but without them we would not have known about the disgrace festering beneath the temple." She studied Obsidia’s expression carefully, realizing that the black dragon had no idea what she was talking about. "Can it be you truly don’t know about this?"

Obsidia shook her head and shrugged, looking completely lost.

Alexstrasza frowned, her striking golden eyes piercing Obsidia’s soul. At last she gestured to lift the silencing spell. "Korial, beloved, you didn’t mention seeing this one at Grim Batol."

"True. I did not."

"Grim Batol?" Obsidia said, her confusion only deepening. "I haven’t been there in years. Why would I want to, considering what happened to my father there?" She scowled at the Dragonqueen.

"Don’t trust her, my love," Korialstrasz said, putting a protective hand on her arm. "She’s one of them."
"Seriously, I have no idea what the hell you’re talking about," Obsidia said, crossing her arms on her chest.

Alexstrasza nudged her mate aside and turned to Obsidia. “Answer honestly or you will very much wish you had,” she said, her voice low. “Were you aware of your mother’s operations at Grim Batol?”

"My mother… What? She’s in Outland. Or she was last time I saw her, anyway. She was investigating the Netherwing."

Alexstrasza nodded slowly. “I do believe you speak the truth.”

"Of course I speak the truth. The freaking Life Binder just threatened me. I’m not stupid."

Korialstrasz glared at her for her rude tone, but Alexstrasza seemed unfazed. “Interesting. Your flight is more fractured that we thought.”

Obsidia snorted. “Tell me about it.”

"Your mother has been busy since you last talked. She did not stop at merely studying the Netherwing. She used powerful sorcery to take elements of the Netherwing and elements of Azerothian dragons to create a new breed. These ‘Twilight’ dragons are unstable but not as ethereal as the Netherwing, and so chaotic that not even Sinestra could fully control them. In the end we thought them all destroyed but apparently your mother was clever enough not to put all her eggs in one basket…or lair. Thus the nasty surprise in the Obsidian Sanctum."

"But I was just here a few weeks ago. I was in the sanctum. I talked to Sartharion. He never mentioned any of this, and I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary."

"For some reason it appears they did not want you involved."

Obsidia’s brow furrowed. “Mother knows I’m in contact with Father. I’m sure she wouldn’t want him to know about her plans or whereabouts.”

Alexstrasza’s expression softened. “Obsidia, I’m afraid your mother was destroyed along with the Twilight dragons at Grim Batol.”

Another gone. Her heart was already so overflowing with grief that another loss barely registered. Of course her mother had died. Everyone in her family died. She almost expected it now. She said nothing, merely fixing her blank stare at her feet.

Korialstrasz showed no sympathy. “Sinestra was every bit as twisted and evil as Deathwing.”

"If you had any idea what she’d been through…” Obsidia growled.
"Oh, we all know. It’s no secret what happened to the targets of Deathwing’s, shall we say, burning passion. Disgraceful."

Obsidio felt her cheeks flush with anger and embarrassment. “Physical scars are only part of the story.”

"Please," Alexstrasza said wearily, "no more. What’s done is done. As I believe that you truly had no knowledge of the Twilight dragons, you are free to go."

"But my queen—" her mate protested.

"There are other factors at play," she cut him off.

"You aren’t still trusting what Noz—"

"Not now," Alexstrasza said curtly. "Obsidia, we may not always part on such amicable terms, but for today I have no quarrel with you. Keep it that way."

"Yes, Life Binder," she said, bowing her head as she backed away.

Obsidio returned to the fight against the Scourge. As the front drew ever closer to Icecrown Citadel, the number of frostwyrms in the area increased. The sight of the skeletal dragons with their icy blue eyes unnerved her, especially the way the Lich King’s magic allowed them to fly despite having little more than bones left for wings.

As the Ashen Verdict’s elite strike force battled its way through the Citadel itself, Obsidio helped clean up scattered pockets of Scourge across the glacier, enjoying the excuse to mindlessly destroy things. It occurred to her that she had these violent urges much more often lately, and at first she blamed it on grief. As the weeks wore on, however, she found herself barely sleeping, spending hour after hour in the field mowing down scores of undead.

After one such marathon of slaying, she staggered back to the small fortification the Argent Crusade had erected against one of the inner gates surrounding Icecrown Citadel. An orc provisioner offered her a hot drink, which should have been a welcome gesture. Yet she suddenly found herself fighting the urge to blast him with shadowflame. Filthy orc, for all she knew he had been among the mercenaries who killed Nefarian!

No. Stop. This was an ally. Of course. What was she thinking?

She accepted the steaming mug from the orc, who looked confused by her hesitation but shrugged it off as battle stress. She flopped down to rest on a pile of supply sacks and sipped the hot cider.
A human paladin sat nearby, sharpening her broadsword with meticulous pride. Obsidia watched her out of the corner of her eye. Disgusting vermin. She could have been at King Varian’s side when he beheaded Onyxia. That very sword could have taken the life of her nieces and nephews. It would be so easy to snuff out her existence…just one spell, catching her off guard… Obsidia clenched her teeth and forced herself to look away.

What was wrong with her? She had always been able to put aside such grudges in the interest of combating the greater threat of the Scourge. Humans and orcs had been bitter enemies since the latter first came through the Dark Portal, but they were working side by side here. There was no reason why she couldn’t do the same. It was just cold and fatigue making her irritable. That’s all.

Finally relaxing a fraction, she slumped back against the dark metal wall that encircled the Citadel.

Immediately, her Apexis crystal collar began to tingle, and otherworldly voices filled her mind.

*Destroy. Kill. Everyone is an enemy. Unleash your anger. Feel your hatred burn. Kill. Trust no one.*

Obsidia gasped and jolted forward, breaking contact with the wall. The whispers were no longer understandable as words, but the feelings of aggression and hostility remained.

A nearby high elf medic noticed her distress and addressed her with concern. “Are you injured, my lady?”

Heart pounding, she shook her head and glanced back at the strange black metal wall. “No, I’m… What are these fortification made of, anyway?”

The elf turned up her nose and looked at the wall as if it were made of dung and garbage. “It’s called saronite.”

"Saron… As in, Yogg-Saron?” Just when she thought she couldn’t possibly get any colder, a sudden chill made her convulse.

"Metallurgists believe it is somehow derived from the Old God, yes. Some even call it ‘the Blood of Yogg-Saron.’ Foul stuff."

Obsidia recoiled from the wall, grimacing with a sudden wave of nausea. “That explains a lot.”

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. Just…” She swallowed hard to keep her stomach contents where they
belonged. The elf cast a soothing aura over her to ease her distress. Obsidia took a 
deep breath to calm herself and put a hand to the Apexis crystals around her neck, 
which had grown quite warm to the touch. "I need to get away from here for 
awhile."

The elf nodded in sympathy. “You’ve been a tremendous help, my lady, but 
you have been at the front much longer than most can tolerate. You deserve a rest.”

Obsidia nodded and said no more, hurrying toward the gryphon post.

The cold, clear air high above the glacier helped clear her head, but her skin still 
crawled and her stomach churned. The Blood of Yogg-Saron. The substance of an 
Old God. And she had been exposed to it repeatedly over the last several months. 
Without the Apexis crystals protecting her, she would probably have been 
completely lost to madness weeks ago.

Obsidia closed her eyes and clung to the gryphon’s reins, trusting it to know the 
way to Dalaran.

No wonder she had felt an irresistible urge to slaughter everything in her path. No 
wonder her patience had been paper-thin, and her dreams a chaotic swirl of 
nightmares. How had she not noticed? It had come on so slowly…insidiously… 
chipping away her defenses bit by bit until the Old Gods began drawing her in like 
a fisherman with a shiny lure.

Was that what it was like for her father, all those centuries ago? A stray thought 
here, a hostile urge there, gaining momentum so slowly that he could not realize 
what was happening until it was too late… It was a horrible feeling to realize that 
your thoughts were not really your own. She felt a renewed surge of pity for him.

At least she had only slaughtered hundreds of undead in her mania, a cause so 
righteous she was elbow-to-elbow with paladins and priests. But to shake off the 
Old Gods’ influence to discover that you had betrayed your closest allies, killed and 
maimed your mates, recklessly gotten dozens of your own followers killed, 
decimated your best friend’s dragonflight… She had been far too young to grasp 
the magnitude of it all at the time, but now she realized it was a miracle that her 
father had regained any shred of sanity at all after that.

This line of thinking reminded Obsidia of Sindragosa’s fate. Last she heard, the 
Ashen Verdict was preparing to assault the part of Icecrown Citadel where the 
queen of the frostwyrms lay in wait. Bad enough that the prime consort of the 
Aspect of Magic was killed by Deathwing’s first betrayal, but then to became an 
undead pawn of the Lich King… Obsidia hoped she would soon be put to rest so 
she could join Malygos on the other side of the sky.
She successfully distracted herself with thoughts of the assault on Icecrown Citadel, so that by the time the gryphon landed in Dalaran she was at least composed enough to face others. The first order of business was to find an inn to cleanse herself. Her hands shook as she dug through her coin purse to pay the innkeeper, and she wasted no time in hurrying upstairs to her room.

*I touched the blood of an Old God,* she kept thinking, trembling all over as she scrambled to take her clothes off. *I’m unclean. Tainted. Get it off! Off off off!* She tore the seam of her robe’s sleeve in her haste but she didn’t care. A trail of wadded clothing marked her path to the bathtub, where she began to run scalding hot water. She couldn’t wait for it to fill; she leaned over the side of the tub and began washing her hands in the stream of water, then her arms, then her face. *The Old Gods’ influence has been all around me for months and I never noticed,* she thought, scrubbing her skin so hard it hurt. *They almost had me. So close. I have to get rid of them! Get them off! Out! Away!* A spike of nausea returned and she sat down heavily on a nearby stool with the wash basin between her knees. *Get rid of it,* she thought, letting her body do what it had needed to do since realizing what saronite was. Dragons had very hardy stomachs adapted to eating all kinds of strange and less-than-fresh meats, and she couldn’t recall the last time she had vomited. She made up for lost time now, however.

When the sickness passed she felt strangely better, as if she had indeed purged herself of some of the Old Gods’ influence. The tub was full now, and she gratefully plunged into the steaming water. She took a deep breath and submerged her entire body. The water was scalding, hotter than a normal human could tolerate, but it reminded her of the natural springs she had enjoyed so much before her exile.

When she could hold her breath no longer she popped her head up with a gasp and reached for the bottle of soap on a shelf nearby. She lathered up every inch of her body and scrubbed until her skin was red before she finally began to feel clean again.

Floral-scented bubbles billowed up over the edge of the tub and plopped onto the floor, but she didn’t care. When the water grew cold she drained the tub and ran a second bath to rinse with. At last allowing herself to relax, she floated on her back with her eyes closed, breathing in the sweet steam.

It would be all right. She had realized it in time and gotten away from the Old Gods’ influence. No lasting harm done. Probably.

In her haste to get her tainted clothing off, she had jumped into the bath with the Apexis crystal collar still around her neck. She unlatched it now, swinging it over
to rest on the shelf beside the half-empty soap bottle.

The crystals had turned black.

She gave such a start that she splashed water onto the floor. What…?

The Apexis crystals had always been a milky, yellowish color with a hint of blue energy if one gazed intently into their depths. Now they looked sooty, as if a fire had burned them from within.

Obsidia gulped, a chill running down her spine despite the steamy bathwater. The crystals had drawn the corruption away from her. If she hadn’t been wearing them, she would have been lost for certain. She could easily have gone berserk and attacked anyone near her, whether they were were Argent Crusade allies—or even, gods forbid, her own family. She shivered and lowered herself until her nose was barely out of the water.

Thank all the gods and Titans that she had left Nelashrion at Wyrmrest several weeks ago. As the war drew closer to the Lich King’s doorstep, Obsidia had decided it was too dangerous for her nephew to accompany her, even if he stayed back from the fighting. She wasn’t entirely sure how safe Wyrmrest was right now, either, but it seemed a wiser alternative, and Nalice did not dare complain when the Aspect’s daughter ordered her to watch the little one.

Sabellian had crafted tiny ankle bracelets for Ashy to wear with Apexis crystals sewn into the fabric. At the time she was still skeptical about the crystals’ value but Ashy seemed happy so there was no harm in letting him wear them. Now Obsidia felt a rush of relief at the thought of her nephew being protected from stray tendrils of the Old Gods’ influence.

She eyed the blackened crystals of her own necklace and realized that she would be unshielded until she could get back to Outland. It felt wrong to walk away from the war against the Lich King now, after investing so much time and effort to the cause, but the Titans themselves could not convince her to set foot in Icecrown again. She doubted she would ever want to return there, even if Sabellian made her a suit of armor made of nothing but Apexis crystals.

No, her only option was to drop everything and head straight to the Blade’s Edge Mountains.

A yawn swept over her, and she realized how exhausted she was. Sleep first. Outland later.

Obsidia let the water out of the bathtub and dried off with the fluffy towels the inn provided. A blast of magic dried her hair in seconds, and she clumsily got into the complimentary nightgown, which appeared to have been tailored for a tauren.
Leaving the mess in the bathroom and the trail of discarded clothing on the floor, she flopped face-first onto the bed and was sleeping almost immediately.

It was snowing lightly when Obsidia landed at Wyrmrest the next afternoon, and she was glad to be out of the cold wind. She headed straight to the ambassador’s chambers and found Nalice writing at her desk with Nelashrion sound asleep on a pillow by her feet.

"My lady!" Nalice said in surprise, hurrying to stand and show the proper respect. "I was not expecting you! I trust all is well?"

Obsidia gave a thin smile. "Not much worse than usual, I suppose."

At the sound of her voice, Nelashrion awoke and sprang into the air, flying around her in circles until she felt dizzy. "Yeep! Yeep yeep yeeeeeep!" He gave her messy greeting slurps across both cheeks and then nuzzled under her chin with a happy trilling noise.

"I missed you, too, Ashy," she laughed, hugging him tightly. "Have you behaved yourself while I was gone?"

He made a slightly guilty-sounding "yeep" and Nalice gave an awkward, noncommittal shrug.

Obsidia raised an eyebrow and decided not to ask. "Well, I’ll take him off your hands, now. I’ve had my fill of slaughtering Scourge, and I need to pay a visit to my brother in Outland. There are some things I need to tell him in person rather than in a letter."

Nalice seemed to be waiting for her to elaborate, but she didn’t. The ambassador had denied any knowledge of the Twilight dragons in the Obsidian Sanctum, but Obsidia was skeptical. If Nalice was on the side of whomever didn’t want Obsidia to know about the Twilights, the less said about them the better.

To deflect attention from the issue, Obsidia sighed and said, "I hated to be the one to tell Sabellian about what happened to Nefarian. Now I must break the bad news about both Sartharion and our mother. I’m not looking forward to that."

"Of course," Nalice fawned, oozing exaggerated sympathy. "You have my deepest condolences once again, my lady."

Obsidia nodded, successfully hiding her disgust at the politically-motivated flattery. "I’ll be going, now. Send word to me at Ruuan Weald in the Blade’s Edge Mountains if you need to contact me with matters concerning the dragonflight."
"I will, my lady," Nalice said, bowing low.

Obsidia guided her nephew to perch on her shoulder as she walked down the corridor. “Come on, Ashy. Let’s put some distance between us and this saronite-infested hellhole of a continent.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

For years Obsidia had been longing for her father to return from Deepholm and retake control of the black dragonflight. When it finally happens, it’s nothing like she had hoped it would be…

Chapter Notes

Content warnings:
Implied rape via mind control. Threats of neck injury and/or decapitation.

Once again avoiding Stormwind and the memories and dangers left there in Onyxia’s wake, Obsidia sailed from Northrend to Menethil Harbor. As each day brought her further and further from Northrend, she felt the influence of the Old Gods wane slightly. By the time the ship docked in the Wetlands her mind was much clearer and her thoughts calmer.

She seriously considered investigating Grim Batol while she was in the area, but decided against it. From the way Alexstrasza and Korialstrasz spoke of what had happened there recently, her flight’s operations had been completely destroyed. Whatever it was her mother had been scheming, it had ended in disaster, and Obsidia suspected she was better off not knowing the details. Her curiosity nearly got the better of her but she stuck to her course and flew south toward the Dark Portal.

Her route took her past the Badlands, and she considered stopping to tell Nyxondra about their mother’s death, but she chose to leave her in blissful ignorance for now. Nyxondra had said that their parents were dead to her already, after all, so the news would only bring her additional pain.

It took nearly a week for her gryphon to travel such a long distance over the Eastern Kingdoms, which was fine with Obsidia. A few days spent peacefully flying and not killing anything were exactly what she needed.

It was getting late in the evening, so she decided to stop at Nethergarde Keep for the night before making the last leg of her journey to the Portal. As she circled down to land she noticed what appeared to be a party going on.
There was a bonfire lit in the square with a makeshift ring of boxes and chairs around it, and a small group of musicians was playing a happy tune. Humans, dwarves, gnomes and a few night elves were dancing and drinking—their success at the former depending on how much of the latter they had been doing. Judging by the volume of some of the dwarves’ singing, they were well into their second or third cask of ale.

Obsidia found the stables unattended and tied up her gryphon with a flash of annoyance. Apparently even the stablehands were in on the festivities.

Judging by the muffled snoring coming from her knapsack, Ashy was already asleep. She slung the bag over her shoulder and headed across the square toward the inn. As she passed the bonfire, a female dwarf waved at her. “Oy there, lass, come join us!”

Obsidia was weary and wanted nothing more than sleep, but she couldn’t help but ask, “What’s the occasion?”

"What’s the occasion?" the dwarf echoed in disbelief. "Och, you mean ye haven’a heard? They did it! The Lich King is dead!"

The news was not entirely unexpected, but Obsidia still gasped and let out a whoop of joy. “Yes! Finally!” Despite her fatigue, she joined the people around the bonfire to celebrate.

A small part of her regretted not sticking around until the end of the campaign, but she had done her part. The Argent Crusade and the Ashen Verdict had accomplished their goals, and that was the important thing. The Scourge was no longer a threat, and the shrines of Dragonblight would be left in peace.

When she finally did find a bed that night, her sleep was the deepest and least troubled it had been in months. She awoke the next morning feeling refreshed and excited about seeing everyone in Outland again. She had hoped to be back in her true form the next time she saw Rivendark again, but at least now she had a bit of good news to temper the ill tidings.

When her gryphon landed at Ruuan Weald, Obsidia surprised herself by ignoring her brother’s greeting and throwing herself into Rivendark’s waiting arms. He held her tightly, resting his chin on her shoulder, and whispered, “I’m so glad you’re safe.”

"I missed you," she replied, angling her face to initiate a kiss.

Sabellian cleared his throat noisily, and Obsidia drew back with an embarrassed
smile before her mouth could meet Rivendark’s.

"I missed you guys, too," she said sheepishly, joining her brother and his mate in an embrace. "And Sabellian, your crystals saved my life."

He perked up and looked to her throat only to find her Apexis crystal collar missing. “What happened?”

"I’ll tell you when we get back to your place," she said, glancing at the Cenarion druids and merchants in the area. "A lot has happened since I last saw you."

Sabellian was triumphant at the news that the Apexis crystals had served so well. If they could ward against corruption when faced with the blood of an Old God, there was no telling what their true potential was. Obsidia soon regretted joking about a suit of armor made from the stuff, because her brother’s eyes lit up at the suggestion and she could practically hear his brain kicking into overdrive with ideas.

For now, he fitted her with a far more reasonable necklace, similar to her old one. She put it on and immediately felt safer.

There was a feast to welcome her back, this time with lynx meat as the main course, and some ogres and nether ray on the side. The black dragons of Blade’s Edge were eager to hear about the fall of the Lich King, which all agreed was a wonderful development, and the destruction of Malygos, which met with mixed opinions.

Some were angry at Alexstrasza for appointing herself judge, jury and executioner for a fellow Aspect, believing she had overstepped her authority. Some saw the death of Malygos as inevitable, only coming ten thousand years after he should have perished alongside Sindragosa and so many others of his flight. A few thought anything happening on Azeroth was irrelevant to their new lives in Outland.

Others were more interested in the fact that the blue dragonflight had apparently suffered no serious side effects from losing their Aspect. No one dared to suggest that their own flight was headed in a similar direction, but the worry was clear: Deathwing hadn’t been seen in years and showed no sign of returning any time soon.

This last topic occupied the thoughts of Obsidia and her family as they lingered over the bonfire after the guests had departed. Sabellian and the others had remained in their normal forms through the feast so they could enjoy the food, but now they shifted down into humanoids to better converse with Obsidia. Rivendark
sat beside her in his elven guise, one arm comfortably draped around her shoulders. She leaned into him with a contented smile.

"The Heart of Magic," Sabellian said, staring out at the starry depths of the Twisting Nether. "The stuff of legend…"

"What is this ‘heart’, anyway?" Rivendark asked.

Sabellian glanced at him with mild annoyance but relented when he saw Obsidia’s warning expression. “When the Titans imbued the Aspects with their powers, they also embedded small, magical stones inside their bodies. In the event of their deaths, the stones could be retrieved and used to pass on the powers of the Aspects to another, suitable member of their flight. The transfer of power would be an extremely delicate undertaking, relying on secret rituals known only to the highest-ranking members of each flight under very specific conditions. It was a measure of last resort, as in their hubris the ‘mighty’ Titans never expected their guardians to fail.” Sabellian gave a sharp, bitter laugh.

"So if an Aspect is killed, their powers are not lost forever?" Rivendark asked.

"If their Heart is still intact and can be retrieved, and if there are members of their flight surviving who know the correct rituals…yes. Theoretically."

Inkia snorted. “That’s a lot of ‘ifs.’”

Obsidia frowned. “I wonder if the Heart of Earth still exists, or if it melted to slag thousands of years ago.”

Sabellian’s expression was somber. “I have wondered about that, too. There’s no way to know unless Father…well, dies.”

"And if he dies and the Old Gods continue to use his body as their puppet? Then what?"

"That’s a terribly morbid thought."

"I know, but…it may happen. It may have already happened."

Obsidia shook her head sadly. "You haven’t talked to him since he was injured at Grim Batol. You don’t know what he’s like now. You wouldn’t even recognize him. I’m positive he’s being influenced by the Old Gods again. I just don’t know how much, or if it’s too late to reverse it."

He nodded slowly. “I believe you. And, Obsidia, I must be honest…he’s already done the impossible and broken free of their will once. I cannot imagine anyone doing it a second time. Not even Father.”

"I know," she said quietly. Rivendark tightened his hold around her shoulders to
comfort her. "I can’t imagine… I felt just a taste of it in Icecrown. I heard their voices in my mind. Not just whispers, but their full voices, loud and clear. I felt the pull of their will creeping up on me until it was almost too late to snap free. Without those crystals, it would have been. It would have been so easy just to give in…to stop fighting and let them make all the decisions. They made it feel good to slaughter indiscriminately, like finally being able to scratch an itch that’s been out of reach for so long.”

She shivered, and Rivendark leaned his forehead against her temple, rubbing her back.

"It was horrible. I didn’t know where my thoughts ended and theirs began. I felt…violated. If that’s what Father’s been battling against for all these centuries, then he’s stronger than I ever realized."

Sabellian gazed into the fire, deep in thought. “He is still an Aspect. Whatever I may think about the Titans, that power has been the only thing keeping him alive for a very long time.”

"Power that may be falling into the hands of the Old Gods," Inklia said with a shudder.

"Yes, my dear," he said. "Which is yet another reason why I will never set foot on Azeroth again."

She reached over and squeezed his hand with a grateful smile.

"But if there was some way to free him, to heal him, to undo the damage they’ve caused…” Obsidia let her voice trail off, knowing how absurd such hopes sounded.

"Certainly," Sabellian said with a sarcastic roll of his eyes. "And when you figure out how to do that, find a cure for undeath and invent a way to stop murlocs from smelling so bad. Oh, yes, there’s one more reason I won’t go back to Azeroth: murlocs."

"I heard a rumor that some trolls tried to introduce them to Zangarmarsh," Rivendark said.

"Remind me to kill any trolls I see," Sabellian told his mate. "In the meantime, we should all get some sleep." He stood and stretched, then backed up several feet to give himself room to shift back to his natural body. "That’s your cue to leave, by the way," he told Rivendark.

"Sabellian," Obsidia scolded. "You can’t order him around like that."

"Actually, as the Aspect’s oldest living son and leader of the dragonflight in
Outland…yes. I can.”

Rivendark sighed and stood up. “He’s right. Unfortunately.” He stooped and kissed her hand. “Good night, my lady.”

She smiled fondly. “Good night, Rivendark.”

He shifted back into a dragon, struck an unnecessarily dramatic pose, and flew away into the night.

Sabellian grumbled under his breath and disappeared into his lair, leaving his mate and sister alone.

Inklia gave Obsidia a knowing smile. ”If you were freed from the curse, would you take Rivendark as your mate right away?”

Obsidia only hesitated a moment. “Yes. I really think I would, if he’d have me.”

"Oh, he would. You should have heard him moping around the whole time you were away. At first I just assumed it was his usual theatrics, but I really do think he cares about you."

Obsidia smiled, feeling slightly giddy. “That’s good to hear.”

Inklia resumed her normal form and stooped to let her sister-in-law climb on her back to fly into the lair. “I just hope for your sake he’s still interested when you finally get your own body back. He’s not known as the most patient of dragons.”

Obsidia’s brow creased, first in worry and then in determination. “If his feelings for me aren’t strong enough to last through this, better to know before we become mates.”

Inklia gave an approving chuckle. “That’s the spirit. Why do you think I made your brother propose three times before I accepted?”

"Aha!"

"Well, that, and the first time he asked he was way too confident, like he couldn’t imagine any female would ever turn down an offer from the great son of Deathwing. He needed to be knocked down a peg. The other two times I was just making sure he meant it."

They were still giggling when Inklia landed in the main chamber of the lair and let Obsidia climb down. Sabellian was reclining on his stomach against the far wall, already half asleep. “What are you two conspiring about now?” he asked grumpily.

"Nothing," they said in unison, then began to laugh again.
"Keep it down," he muttered. "Some people are trying to sleep."

Inkia came over and nuzzled her nose against his cheek. "I love you, too, grouchy face."

"Harumph." He nevertheless wrapped one forelimb and his tail around her as she settled down to sleep beside him.

Grinning, Obsidia retired to the side chamber where Ashy was snoring inside her sleeping bag. Her family might be dwindling, but that only made the ones who were left that much more precious.

Obsidia stayed in Blade’s Edge for two months before she grew nervous about staying away from Azeroth for so long. There had been no missives from Wyrmrest, which she assumed meant everything was the same as ever. But if Deathwing tried to contact her and she was not around to hear his summons, it would only anger him—something she could not afford to do.

"You can’t go back," Rivendark protested when she told him of her plans. "It’s too dangerous." They sat atop a mountain peak near Bash’ir Landing, and if anyone had happened to fly past they would have wondered how a human and a blood elf managed to get stranded up there without a flying mount. Rivendark delighted in finding spots with spectacular views to show her.

"I have extra Apexis crystals this time," she said, showing him the bracelets Sabellian had added to her outfit. "And I’ll stay in the Eastern Kingdoms. I’ll be fine."

"Then let me come with you. I can protect you, help you, keep you company." He grasped her hands and gave her a pleading look that melted her resolve.

It would be nice to have an ally who wasn’t stuck in human form, and she certainly enjoyed his companionship. Perhaps if she introduced him to her father…

“Rivendark, I’m going to ask you something, and whatever you answer I will understand and accept. If you accompanied me back to Azeroth, would you stand before my father and proclaim yourself as my mate?”

She expected him to hesitate, for the prospect of facing Deathwing under any circumstances was a daunting one, much less announcing one’s intention to mate with his daughter.

He immediately nodded, however. "Absolutely. I would be honored."

"Really?"
He chuckled. “You act surprised. Have I ever made a secret of my intentions toward you?”

"Well, no, but…to face my father…"

"Terrifies me, frankly. But if it will make him free you from this curse, it’s a risk I will happily take."

Obsidia threw her arms around him and blinked back happy tears. “Oh, Riv…I love you.”

"I love you, too, Obsidia."

Sabellian took the news better than expected. He glared at Rivendark at first, but when the younger male did not look away he nodded slowly. “I must say, I thought you’d have lost interest long before this, considering my sister’s… limitations.”

"Hey!" she protested.

"No offense, Obsidia, but that body makes you look more like a light snack than a potential mate. And Rivendark has a reputation for flirting with any female who crosses his path until a prettier face comes along to distract him."

"That’s not true," Rivendark said with an indignant sniff. "Anymore," he added under his breath.

Obsidia raised an eyebrow at him.

He shrugged. “I tried quantity and wasn’t happy. So now I’m going for quality.” He planted kisses from the palm of her hand all the way up her arm until he reached her neck, at which point Sabellian made a disgusted noise.

"Fine, fine. If you can get Father’s approval, you’ll have mine, as well. Good luck." Sabellian’s tone made it clear what he thought of their chances.

A week later, someone looking high in the air above the Redridge Mountains might have spotted an increasingly rare sight: a full-grown black dragon soaring freely through the skies. It was an awe-inspiring spectacle from a safe distance, though slightly less intimidating if one got close enough to overhear the conversation between the dragon and the figure riding on its back.

"How about this? ‘My love overflows from my head to my toes / Your eyes shine
like the sun / I know you’re the one / It’s got to be fate / We should become mates.’ Pretty good, right?”

Obsidia groaned. “Please, I think I’d rather listen to the Old Gods for awhile than hear any more of your tortured poetry.”

"Yeep," came Ashy’s muffled voice from her knapsack.

"Everyone’s a critic," Rivendark sighed.

"At least that one rhymed. Mostly," Obsidia admitted.

"C’mon, give me credit for that, at least. It’s not easy to fly and compose verse at the same time."

"Thank goodness you fly better than you rhyme, or we’d be a smudge on the side of a mountain by now."

She knew this would make him want to show off, so she held on tightly to the collar of Apexus crystals around his neck as he banked and did a double loop-the-loop.

"Very nice," she said, patting his scales. "Now can we stop for a bite to eat? We’ve been flying all morning and I’m famished."

He flew lower, peering down at the rocky canyons below in search of prey. “I’m not familiar with this area. What’s the hunting like?”

"Decent. Boar, deer, gnolls, sometimes a worg or two. Try near that lake."

Rivendark swooped down over the glimmering expanse of water that filled one of the valleys. He spotted a large condor flying low over the lake, apparently on the hunt for fish. “Watch this.”

"Don’t do anything stupid and knock me off," she warned.

"Me? Do something stupid?"

"I know, I know, silly me."

Rivendark kept his distance from the condor until it had successfully snatched a large fish from the water and began to fly back to its nest. Then he followed at a distance, unnoticed by the bird. The raptor landed on a rocky ledge where a tangle of sticks and leaves surrounded four large eggs. It immediately began to tear at the fish, using its sharp talons and beak to shred the tender flesh. It was so preoccupied with its meal that it never saw Rivendark coming. He lunged out of the sky and snapped the bird in two with his powerful jaws, killing it instantly.
He landed and slouched to let Obsidia slide off his back. “There you go,” he said through a mouthful of feathers and meat. “Fresh fish, eggs and bird. How’s that for a lunch?”

"I have to admit, I’m impressed." Obsidia used part of the nest as kindling and cast a quick spell to ignite a small fire. Soon the fish and bird meat was cooked enough for her human body to handle, and she eagerly devoured her fill.

Rivendark finished his half of the bird and helped himself to the eggs, noisily cracking open shells and slurping up the contents. Ashy fluttered around, snapping up any bits too small for the others to bother eating.

They were picking the bones clean, chatting in contentment, when Obsidia suddenly bolted to her feet.

"What?" Rivendark said in alarm.

"I sense—" she began, but was interrupted as the entire canyon rocked violently. Bits of stone broke free and tumbled down the cliff as a thunderous grinding noise came from deep in the earth.

Rivendark stood over her, his huge body shielding her from debris pattering down the mountain. She hugged a frightened Ashy and fell to her knees. Still the shaking continued.

"Something is happening," she shouted over the rumbling of stone.

"An earthquake. Come on, I can fly us to—"

"No, more than that! I sense… There’s a rift. The elemental planes…"

Rivendark frowned in confusion. “I don’t feel anything but the shaking.”

"I can. I can hear it. It’s as if…"

The ledge beneath them suddenly began to disintegrate, and for one terrible moment she felt herself falling amid a shower of gravel and boulders.

"I’ve got you!" Rivendark cupped her in his front paws and held her snugly against his chest as he darted high into the air, away from the tumbling rocks. When they were safe he spread his digits enough to let her stick her head out for fresh air.

"It’s Father," she gasped.

"What?"

"He’s doing this. I don’t know how or why, but I feel his power behind this. And I feel…the earth, crying out in distress. But that’s impossible. Our flight was
corrupted before I was old enough to learn about our duties."

"Maybe being the Earth Warder’s daughter gives you some inherent connection," Rivendark suggested, reaching around to set her carefully on his back.

"It’s possible, but I never felt it before, unless… The crystals! Could the Apexis crystals really make that much of a difference?"

"Could be."

"Well, whatever the reason, I can definitely feel something huge is happening." She paused. "I think Father is back from Deepholm."

"What?"

"The elemental rift. It makes sense. But why now, and why didn’t he warn me? I’ve been back on Azeroth for days now, surely he could have summoned me."

"Unless whatever he’s plotting now doesn’t involve you."

"But he would never set something this significant in motion without informing Nefarian and Onyxia. Why should I be any different?"

"Unless."

"Unless what?"

"Two words, and they rhyme with Gold Rods."

Obsidia closed her eyes and held onto his collar more tightly. “I’m not giving up.” She straightened her back and shouted at the distant ground. “You hear me, you noisy, tentacled parasites? I’m not giving up! You’re going to give me my father back, and you’re going to regret ever messing with the black dragonflight!”

"Yeep!" Ashy added indignantly.

A surge of doubt and despair flooded her mind. Impossible. Hopeless. Futile. Surrender. It’s too late. The Hour of Twilight is upon us.

She clutched her head, feeling the Apexis crystals around her neck and wrists grow hot. “Get out of my head, you slimy freaks!”

"Obsidia?" Rivendark said in alarm, trying to look over his shoulder to see what was wrong with her.

We will have you, and your would-be mate, too. You will serve us just as your parents do. All will serve or die. Most will serve and die. But we are eternal.

The crystals vibrated with power, so hot they burned her flesh, but she did not dare
remove them. Then, as quickly as they had invaded, the Old Gods were gone from her brain, reduced to only the faintest of murmurs in the distance.

She slumped forward with a gasp of relief.

"Obsidia!"

"I’m all right, Riv. They’re gone."

"They? The Old Gods spoke to you?"

"Uh huh. Your typical ‘all is lost, everyone’s going to die, just give up already’ speech. It’s over now. These crystals just about burned a hole in my skin, though." She gingerly lifted the crystals up an inch or so, wincing at the angry red impressions they left.

"Then they did their job. Your brother will be pleased."

"Yeah." She frowned, thinking back on something the voices had said. "You will serve us just as your parents do." Parents, plural? But Sintharia was dead… wasn’t she? Troubled, Obsidia fell silent for some time.

Deathwing sat beside a glowing pool of magma deep under the Twilight Citadel, listening to the voices in his head. They were pleased. He liked it when they were pleased.

*Good, yes, very good… Chaos. So much chaos and destruction. Look at them scurry, look at them panic. They fight each other but they cannot fight us. The Hour of Twilight draws ever nearer.*

It was a familiar refrain, and Deathwing found himself nodding off. Shattering the world was hard work, after all. He never truly slept anymore. The pain and the whispers saw to that. But he could sometimes drop into a sort of trance that was enough akin to sleep to make him feel more rested when it was over. He lay on his stomach, resting the considerable weight of his metal jaw on the ground.

*Chaos. Death. All life must be extinguished. Azeroth will no longer be our prison, but a graveyard for all things!*

Yeah, yeah, genocide and destruction, same old, same old… Deathwing’s breathing slowed as he made a conscious effort to relax. Searing pain pulsed through his fiery body as always, but he did his best to ignore it.

*Pain is good. Pain is part of destruction. Soon all the world will feel your pain.*

The Old Gods were practically giddy, talking over each other in their excitement.

He concentrated on the randomness of the gas bubbles bursting through the surface of the magma, counting them to distract himself from the constant litany in his mind.

One, two, three, four, five—

*Twilight falls on this doomed world.*

Six, seven, eight—

*All will perish in agony. Only the worthy will remain to serve us.*

Nine, ten, eleven—

*Death is our plaything. The Hour of Twilight is coming.*

Eleven, twelve, thirteen…wait, didn’t he already say eleven? Blast!

"Don’t you ever shut up?" he snarled, clutching the sides of his head.

*We are eternal. We are the true masters of this world. We are chaos.*

"You are annoying! You are obnoxious! You are repetitive!" He was surprised to be able to voice such rebellious thoughts. The Old Gods must be too busy reveling in the destruction they had wrought through him to control him as closely as usual.

Now, now, Destroyer…behave or we won’t give you your gift. The voices laughed deviously.

Deathwing froze, sensing the approach of one of the Faceless Ones down a nearby corridor.

*We like your Twilight dragons. They do our bidding well. But we need more. Many more. You will make them for us. Both of you will serve us now.*

He stood, rooted in place by a combination of dread and curiosity, as the Faceless One known as Yor’sahj the Unsleeping lumbered into sight. The tentacled creature ignored him, concentrating instead on the pool of molten rock. It raised its loathsome appendages high and channeled a stream of purple energy into the hissing magma, which began to spin like a whirlpool.

Deathwing watched, fascinated, as a dark shape began to materialize in the center of the spiral. It appeared to be a dragon, judging by the outstretched wings. Its scales were far too dark to be a member of the Twilight flight, however. The elegant fins on the sides of the dragon’s head looked familiar, somehow, but it wasn’t until the figure was fully manifested that recognition came crashing down.
Sintharia.

But how? She had been vaporized in the explosion of energy when the Twilight behemoth Dargonax was destroyed...hadn’t she?

The Old Gods shrieked laughter inside his head. *Do you like our gift? We enjoyed it so much the last time we brought the two of you together. She was not as strong then. We have remade her for you. Together you will make us all the Twilight dragons we need.*

Deathwing reeled in shock, unable to process what he was seeing.

Sintharia—his beautiful, wonderful Sintharia—was a twisted shell of the gorgeous creature she had been in ancient times. She bore the burning scars from their last mating, of course, but now her eyes glowed with the kind of madness that inevitably came from the touch of the Old Gods. She turned to look at him, and he fully expected her to attempt escape or even to attack him.

Instead she grinned in delight and rushed to embrace him without the slightest hint of fear. “Deathwing!”

"S-Sintharia?" he stammered. She had regarded him with nothing but terror and revulsion for so long he had nearly forgotten what her smile looked like.

"No, my love. Sintharia is dead and gone, just like Neltharion. I am Sinestra now. And I am yours."

In the foggy recesses of his mind, Deathwing recoiled from the notion of the Old Gods interfering with his mate again. He had been haunted for millenia by the things they had forced him to do to Sintharia and the others.

*Ah, but isn’t this what you wanted?* the Old Gods mocked. *Look! Your precious consort no longer hates you and flees from your touch. She is yours again. And you are both ours.*

Sinestra nuzzled against him, apparently unaffected by the lava oozing from his chest. “Oh, Deathwing, my beloved,” she sighed happily. “I’ve missed you so.”

This wasn’t right. Sintharia hated him. He had hurt her. She would never act this way. She had once, of course...so very, very long ago... But even if she truly did want him back, he would only hurt her again...even kill her.

*Not yet,* the whispers assured him. *Death will come to all, in time. But for now we need you both alive to serve. Go ahead. We have remade her just for you.*

He tried to resist, to turn away from her, to push her back, but his own limbs were not obeying. He watched, helpless, as he reached out to caress her.
"I love you," Sinestra said, eagerly responding to his touch. She didn’t mean it. She couldn’t mean it. She hadn’t meant it for thousands of years. It had been so long… Oh, how he had missed her.

Yes, yes, the voices encouraged. She is yours again at last. All yours…

The feeble bit of consciousness that resisted the Old Gods’ will flickered and guttered like a candle by an open window. He heard himself say, “Welcome back, my dear…”

It no longer made sense to continue on to the seaside cave where Deathwing had communicated with his offspring from Deepholm. Obsidia decided a stop in Ironforge would be prudent to gather information on what was happening. However, it took Rivendark several minutes to figure out how to shift his form into that of a human, since his blood elven guise would not have been welcome in an Alliance city.

"No, no, no, your ears are still too pointy," Obsidia fretted, walking around him in slow circles. The biting cold wind of Dun Morogh whipped her black hair around her face, momentarily obscuring her vision. It reminded her all too much of Icecrown, and she had to keep reminding herself that there were no undead lurking nearby.

Rivendark concentrated, and his ears slowly shrank to more human proportions. “Better?”

"Yes. Now, you’re still too skinny. Bulk up a bit."

He scrunched up his face, looking as if he was suffering from intestinal distress, and slowly altered his shape until he had a somewhat more muscular build. “How’s that?” he asked, panting.

"I think that’s good enough. Someone might guess you have a high elf grandparent or something, but you should pass without any real trouble."

"Phew."

She let him catch his breath before leading him out of the snowy grove of trees and back onto the road winding up the mountainside toward the dwarven capital.

Dragons all had innate shapeshifting abilities, but taking a new form for the first time required intense concentration. The more often they used a particular shape, the easier it was to remember the proportions, which was why most stuck with a favorite humanoid form that rarely changed.
Obsidia smiled and nodded at the guards posted at the city gates, who greeted them as they would any random humans. Rivendark tried not to gawk at the architecture but could not help being impressed at the sheer scale of the city chiseled into the mountain. “I can see why you chose to live here for awhile,” he said quietly. “Plus, dwarves taste like rocks so you wouldn’t be tempted to eat any.”

"Ssh!" she warned, although he had whispered the comment and there was no one close enough to overhear. "I can’t eat anything like that in this stupid form, anyway, you know."

"Ah, right. Shame."

Obsidia noticed a swarm of activity by the military district, and headed in that direction. Dozens of people were loading crates of supplies onto carts pulled by teams of sturdy mountain rams, and regiments of both dwarves and gnomes were assembling in rows. Military commanders walked up and down the lines, barking orders that Obsidia could not quite make out from this distance.

She stopped by a supply station where three gnome medics were hurrying to roll up bandages to fill another crate. “Excuse me,” she said. “Is all this because of the earthquake?”

"Yes," said the oldest of the three gnomes, not pausing in her work. "Kharanos is a shambles and a cave-in has cut off Coldridge Valley completely. Some are still trapped in the rubble. The local militia have called for aid. And I hear it’s even worse in Loch Modan, if that’s possible! It sounds like the dam is in danger."

"How far does the damage extend?"

"How far?" The gnome gave a humorless laugh. "Where doesn’t it? Haven’t you heard the reports? Tidal waves in Stranglethorn, volcanoes coming out of nowhere in Ashenvale, landslides in Stonetalon, catastrophic flooding in Thousand Needles and Tanaris, islands sinking into the ocean off Feralas, a chasm full of lava in the Barrens, I don’t even know what is happening in the Badlands but the reports sound just awful, and I’m sure I’m forgetting something.” She was speaking so quickly in her high-pitched voice that Obsidia had difficult understanding everything, but one thing was clear: this was a global disaster, and few forces were capable of causing it.

She thanked the gnome for the information and hurried off down a side street with Rivendark in tow. “It’s Father’s doing. Only the Earth Warder is capable of such things. But why hasn’t he contacted me?”

"Are you sure he hasn’t tried? The crystals block the Old Gods, and if he’s under their control…”
Obsidia’s eyes widened. “Rivendark, that’s brilliant.”

He grinned smugly. “I have my moments.”

She pulled him into an alleyway where they had a bit of privacy. “I’m going to take off some of these crystals. Be ready to hold me down and put them back if something goes wrong.”

"I’d love to hold you down and—"

"Riv, please. This is serious."

"Right. Sorry."

Hands shaking nervously, she slid off one of her bracelets.

"Well?” he asked.

She listened hard for a few moments, then shook her head. “Nothing.” She carefully removed her other bracelet and handed it to him. The murmurs of the Old Gods were barely audible at the edge of her senses, giving off a feeling of chaos that made her suddenly annoyed, but nothing more dangerous.

She took a deep breath and unhooked the collar of Apexis crystals.

*Death to all beings of flesh!* *Die, die by the millions, and decorate our new world with your bones!*  

Obsidia took a sharp breath and staggered back under the weight of the hatred assaulting her mind. Rivendark reached out to steady her and tried to hand over one of her bracelets, but she motioned for him to wait.

*The world of mortals is over, shuddering with its final, feeble gasps. The Hour of Twilight draws ever closer, and all will perish!*  

She tightly shut her eyes and concentrated on a single thought: her father. She imagined him as clearly as she could, focusing all her energy on his image.

*The Destroyer destroys all, and then will be destroyed,* the voices chattered. *All will be destroyed!*  

Refusing to be distracted, she balled her hands into fists and braced herself as if holding up a physical weight.

*Father,* she called out with her mind. *Father. Deathwing. Earth Warder.*  

*Obsidia.*
Her eyes snapped open. His voice was so clear she half expected to see him standing in front of her, but the only ones with her in the alley were a confused and concerned Rivendark and Ashy.

"Father?" she said aloud.

_Come to Blackrock, my daughter. We have much to discuss._

Yes, Father! she replied happily.

"Can you hear him?" Rivendark asked urgently.

She felt Deathwing’s presence recede and was bombarded by a fresh chorus of the Old Gods.

_Death chaos kill destroy betray slaughter defile despair—_

She grabbed the crystals out of his hands and quickly put them back on. The cacophony abruptly stopped.

"Obsidia! Are you all right?" Rivendark took her by the shoulders and gently eased her to sit on the stone floor.

"Y-yes, I’m fine. Now." She took a deep breath and put a hand over her pounding heart. "I heard _them_, but I heard my father, too. He wants me to come to Blackrock Mountain."

"Are you sure it was your father? They could be trying to trick you."

"No, I’m positive. I felt him. He may be under their control, but he is alive."

Rivendark hid his trepidation behind a rakish smile and pulled her to her feet again. "Then let’s go."

Volcanic ash drifted like a permanent halo around the soaring peak of Blackrock Mountain. Other kinds of dragons would have found it difficult to fly in such conditions, but the black flight was perfectly adapted for them. Rivendark wheeled around on the thermal currents until he spotted the balcony that Obsidia had told him to watch for. With her human eyes itching and burning in the foul air, she had no hope of seeing it herself.

As soon as they landed, she moistened a handkerchief with her canteen and dabbed her eyes until they stopped watering from the ash. She offered Nelashrion a drink before putting everything away in her knapsack. The whelp flew up to land on Rivendark’s head, but he barely noticed.
"There’s no one here," he said, looking around nervously.

"So I see." She stepped toward the door leading into the mountain and called out, "Hello! Anyone home? It’s me, Obsidia!"

There was the sound of flapping wings, and soon a black drake appeared from a nearby corridor. She immediately recognized him as Pyrecraw, one of Nefarian and Seara’s children. The resemblance to her brother in the young dragon’s eyes and chin made a fresh pang of grief flash through her.

"Aunt Obsidia! Th-thank goodness you’re here!" the drake said, a panicked look in his golden eyes. "It’s… He’s… They’re…"

"Slow down, young one." She felt slightly odd addressing a creature four times her size with such a name, but it was accurate. "What’s the matter? Is my father here?"

"Yes, he is, but he—he brought—I don’t understand. Mother is—"

Seeing she wasn’t going to get much of an explanation from the frantic drake, she put a soothing hand on his paw. “Show us.”

The drake nodded fearfully and scurried down the corridor on foot. Obsidia hurried to follow him, glancing at Rivendark with a wary look.

Pyrecraw led them into a vast chamber deep in the mountain that had been a banquet hall in the days when dwarves still lived here. Now it was bare of furniture, except for the shattered remnants of some stone benches that had been pushed off to the sides. The far right corner was hidden from view by a glowing dome of purple energy.

Obsidia stepped into the room and froze in her tracks.

As expected, her father was there. She knew he would bear the scars of his defeat at Grim Batol, but the shadowy silhouette she had spoken with in the portal did nothing to prepare her for how he had changed.

A massive wedge of metal stretched across the lower half of his face to replace his mangled jaw. Several of his horns were snapped off at odd angles. Razor-sharp blades had been affixed along his tail, with a large spike at the end. The adamantite plates that had previously held his molten hide in place had been replaced by something even sturdier…elementium, perhaps?

All these physical changes were disturbing enough, but his eyes… Obsidia suppressed a shudder, staring in horror at the insane gleam in his glowing red eyes. She had seen that look before, in fleeting glimpses when he was particularly upset or angry, but he had always fought it back eventually. It was clear from his
expression that he was unable or unwilling to fight it anymore.

Obsidia wanted nothing more than to turn around and leave, shape-binding curse be damned, but she had been seen.

"Ah, Obsidia. If only Sabellian and Nyxondra were here, too, the family reunion would be complete," Deathwing said, and the distorted, metallic sound of his voice did nothing to reassure her.

Determined not to show weakness, she walked into the banquet hall with slow but steady strides. Rivendark trailed a respectful distance behind her. In her shock over her father’s appearance, she had not noticed the other occupants of the room. Now her attention was drawn by the sound of a female voice sobbing in the corner.

Seara was clinging to the front limb of a dragon she did not recognize, crying hysterical tears that could have been from either joy or grief, or some mixture of both. The stranger turned to look at Obsidia, and with a sickening jolt she realized his identity.

"Nefarian?" she gasped. "How…?" But she knew how, even if the details were still unclear. Her brother was just as undead as the frostwyrms she had faced in Northrend, even if most of his scaly hide was still in place. He looked almost mummified, the once-vibrant hues of brown, orange and black faded to a shriveled, musty gray-brown.

Nefarian recognized the pity on her face and snorted. “Don’t look at me like that. I may not have my good looks anymore but my mind is as sharp as ever.”

Conflicting emotions tore at Obsidia’s heart. On one hand, she was glad to see and hear her beloved big brother again. Yet there was a visceral pain at seeing him in such a state.

She looked at Seara, whose face was hidden behind Nefarian’s leg, still shaking with gulping sobs.

"Please, my sweet," he said tenderly, stepping back to lift her chin with one paw. "I hate to see you like this. Calm yourself before you get sick."

"Nefarian, you’re dead. Or, you were dead. You can’t be here. This can’t be…" she babbled, looking at him with a mixture of awe and fear.

"Seara, it’s all right. I’m sorry I had to leave you, but I’m back now."

"You’re undead," she wailed.

"An inconvenience, I admit, but—"

"Nefarian," Deathwing’s loud voice interrupted, making them all wince. "If you
can’t keep that useless mate of yours quiet, send her away. We have work to do."

Obsidia saw a flash of anger in Nefarian’s eyes, but his voice was calm. “Yes, Father.” He walked Seara to the door, whispering something to her that seemed to calm her slightly, and motioned for Pyrecraw to go with her.

"Come on, Mother," the drake said, shying away from Nefarian as if undead were contagious. "Let’s go." He led her away, but even as she walked she turned to stare at Nefarian until he was out of sight, shaking her head slowly with a blank look in her teary eyes.

"Nef," Obsidia breathed, "how did this happen? Did Father do this to you?"

"Don’t ask me, I’ve haven’t even been awake a full hour yet," he said with a grimace, flexing the stiff tendons in his front paws.

She put a hand on one of his claws. “I’ve missed you so much,” she said, her voice choked with emotion.

"Who’s your friend?" he asked, looking past her to where Rivendark stood awkwardly by the door.

"That’s Rivendark. He’s—"

"I didn’t send that blubering fool away so you two could stand around gossiping," Deathwing boomed from across the chamber. "Come here."

Obsidia heard a low growl deep in her brother’s throat at the continued insults to his mate. Still, they approached the raised area where their father sat and both bowed with respect. The closer she drew to him, the more the crystals around her wrists and neck tingled warmly, and she desperately hoped he would not notice them.

"Your work on the Chromatic dragonflight was…disappointing," Deathwing told his son. "But no matter. The Twilight dragons created by your mother are well-suited for our Masters’ needs. I have a new task for you."

Nefarian fidgeted in confusion. This was all unfamiliar to him, after all. “What would you have me do, Father?”

"Work on her." With a simple gesture, he caused the opaque energy dome in one corner of the room to dissipate.

Nothing should have shocked her at this point, but Obsidia still nearly lost her composure when she recognized the body lying there. “Onyxia?”

"Yes," Deathwing said, sounding pleased with himself. "I had to pay a little visit to Stormwind to retrieve her head, but you should have everything you need to put her
back together again."

Obsidia forced herself to look closer, and saw that yes, her sister’s head was there—not attached to her body, but there.

"But— But—" Nefarian stammered, looking aghast. The last he knew, his sister had been alive and well in Stormwind. "Why can’t you revive her as you did me?"

"Our Masters have already been generous," Deathwing said, as if that explained everything.

"But—" Nefarian tried again.

"They are not in the habit of giving life. They seek to eradicate it," Deathwing said in the tone of a parent explaining something to a particularly stupid child. "And I am the Aspect of Death."

Obsidia pressed her lips together to prevent herself from protesting aloud. “No, you’re the Aspect of Earth!” she wanted to scream. “The Old Gods are our enemy, not our masters!” She knew better than to give voice to such thoughts at the moment, but it was a struggle to hold her tongue.

Nefarian bowed his head. “I will do as you ask, Father.”

Seeing her opening, Obsidia spoke up. “What can I do, Father? Lift the spell binding me in this pathetic mortal form, and I will do anything you ask of me.”

"Help your brother," Deathwing said dismissively. "You are too weak to serve the Masters in other ways."

"I am not!" she cried. "Every single day I’ve spent in this body, I have worked to make myself stronger and worthy of your respect!"

His slightly unfocused, mad gaze passed by her as if only half-listening. “The Hour of Twilight will come regardless of anything you do.”

"I don’t care about the Hour of Twilight. I don’t even know what that is! I just want to be a dragon again. For us to be a family again. Please, Father. I have fought trolls, naga, demons, giants, gronn, and beasts of all kinds. I have slain undead Scourge behind counting. I have tracked down my lost brother in Outland, and researched the Netherwing flight that arose from our own mutated kind. I have even found a good, strong mate to begin my own brood with," she said, pointing to Rivendark. "I have done everything you could possibly ask of me. Please, please lift this spell."

She laid down on her back on the stone floor at his feet, a human approximation of the most contrite posture a dragon could assume. It was a position of utter
vulnerability, as the soft underbelly and throat were exposed, and indicated that she
was submitting completely to his will.

It seemed like an eternity passed with the only sounds her shallow, quick
breathing, and a faint sizzling where his molten body was cracked open.

When Deathwing finally spoke, she felt the vibrations ripple through the floor, his
deep voice enveloping her like a wave. “What are those stones you wear?”

"Stones?" she said dumbly, sitting up. "Oh, these? Mere decorations. You know
how much I love shiny things." Her voice shook despite her best efforts to seem
nonchalant.

His fiery gaze was riveted on the crystals, which reflected his red and orange glow.
“I sense power,” he rumbled as quietly as he could manage—which was still rather
loud.

"You sense my power," she said quickly. "I told you, Father, I have been working
tirelessly to get stronger, to help you. Allow me to resume my true form and I will
show you!"

Deathwing brought one paw down on top of her, carefully trapping her between his
claws without harming her. “You know I can tell when you are lying,” he said
calmly.

Rivendark darted forward as if to defend her, but Nefarian swing his tail around to
block his path, stopping his suicidal charge. Deathwing didn’t seem to notice.
“Father,” Nefarian said, “she is only trying to please you, and—”

"She should worry about pleasing our Masters," Deathwing snarled. Obsidia
trembled as he brought one of his claws nearer to her neck, inching slowly toward
the collar of Apexis crystals. His talon alone was many times larger than her entire
body.

"F-father," she gasped, then dared say no more with his sharp claw so close to her
throat.

He lowered his gargantuan head to get a better look at the crystals, giving her a
close view of his bright, crimson eyes. There was no hint of Neltharion in that
gaze, no trace of the proud father she had known and missed. Only madness shone
from those orbs now, and her heart sank. He was truly lost.

She closed her eyes, no longer able to face the monster he had become, and felt the
edge of his claw come into contact with the side of her neck. **Goodbye, Ashy.**
**Goodbye, Rivendark. I’m sorry you had to see this.**

At any second she expected to feel the spray of blood that would mark her death,
but it never came. At last she opened her eyes and found herself looking into her father’s enormous eye again. The glow was dimmed slightly, his brow furrowed in confusion. He looked disoriented, as if he had awoken from a nap to find himself in an unfamiliar place.

Not daring to move her head, she looked down as best she could. His claw was touching the Apexis crystals.

Could it be…? Could the crystals really have enough power to break through even his extreme corruption?

She stared into his eye with a pleading expression. *Father…if you’re still in there, somehow, please… I want to help you but you have to help me first.*

"Obsidia," he hissed, his voice carrying a hint of recognition that had not been there before. "My little girl."

She smiled hopefully.

His claw moved just a fraction, breaking contact with the crystal, and she watched with dismay as his expression hardened again. “Do what you will. It matters not. In the end, the Hour of Twilight will unmake this pathetic world.” He dropped her and turned away, nearly decapitating her with his spiked tail as he left the room.

Rivendark shifted into his elven form as he scrambled to reach her, and she melted into his arms, drenched in sweat. They were both shaking so hard that speech was impossible, only breathless noises of relief.

Nefarian looked at them, then in the direction Deathwing had disappeared. “Curious.”

"We are leaving. Now." Rivendark nearly dislocated her shoulder, pulling her toward the balcony where they had arrived.

"But Riv, the crystals did something! I saw it in his eye!"

"I don’t care. You were a hair’s breadth from dying."

"But if I can just get through to him—"

He stopped walking and spun around to grasp her by the shoulders. “I almost lost you!”

His stricken expression gave her pause. “I know. I’m sorry.”

"Sorry? You’re sorry you almost got your jugular ripped out in front of me?" He
gave a slightly hysterical laugh. “Obsidia, I don’t care if those crystals can cure every last member of our flight. I am not letting you go near that monster again!”

She felt a flare of anger. “Letting me? It’s not your place to ‘let me’ do anything. This is the fate of our entire dragonflight that’s at stake. My life, or yours, or even my father’s is insignificant compared to that. Our kind is headed for extinction, and our patriarch is helping the most evil beings in the world to wipe out all life on Azeroth. If I can stop that—”

"It’s not your responsibility alone! Go to Sabellian, tell him what’s going on! Go to the other Aspects! Ask the Naaru for help! Just get away from here!"

Rivendark shifted into his natural form and slouched as if expecting her to get on his back.

"I’m sorry. I can’t just walk away when there’s a chance I could—what are you doing? Riv! Stop!"

He grasped her around the waist with one huge paw and launched himself into the air.

Rivendark flew for nearly three hours before he finally landed on a small plateau somewhere in the northwestern mountains of Duskwood. Exhausted, he slumped onto his side to catch his breath.

"How dare you?" Obsidia spluttered for the hundredth time, stomping around aimlessly. “I demand you take me back to Blackrock right now! It is not your place to decide where I go or what risks I take!”

His silence only infuriated her more.

"I can’t believe this! I finally have a hint about a way to heal my father, and you ruined it! I hate you!"

"Yes, but you’re alive," he said simply.

"For now. A lot of good that’ll do when this ‘Hour of Twilight’ comes and the Old Gods pop out to kill everyone!"

"We’ll be safe in Outland when that happens."

“What?” she shrieked in disbelief. “You’re just going to abandon Azeroth and everyone on it?”

"You can’t fight the Old Gods. They’re gods, Obsidia.”
"But they aren’t invincible, or the Titans could never have sealed them away."
"Yes, and a bang-up job they did of it, too," Rivendark drawled.
"You can’t be serious! We can’t just give up and let them win!"
"They’ve already won, Obsidia."

She made an inarticulate noise of exasperation and sat down with her back to him, hot tears coursing down her wind-burned cheeks.

He let her stew in silence for awhile before getting back to his feet and approaching her. “Obsidia.”

"Go away."

"You’d have a hard time climbing down from way up here."

"I don’t care. Either take me back to Blackrock or leave me alone."

He sighed and shrunk into his elf form, then sat down beside her with a hand on her back. “Obsidia, I’m sorry if I acted rashly, but I wasn’t about to stand by and watch you throw your life away on a lost cause.”

"It’s not a lost cause!" she insisted. "If I can get enough Apexis crystals near Father, he might be able to break the hold the Old Gods have on him."

"And then what?" Rivendark asked gently. "You saw him. His body is ruined. Even if his mind is free, how long do you think he could carry on like that?"

"I don’t know, but at least he could die in peace, without them in his head."

Rivendark looked unconvinced. “I understand you want to save him, really I do. But be reasonable, Obsidia. Just because you saw a spark of his old self when he touched the crystal, that doesn’t mean that having him roll around in a room full of them would make him better. That spark may be all that’s left, period. Think about it. Would your father ever subject his own children to the horror of undeath?"

"Of course not."

"Would he ever threaten your life with his own claws?"

"Never, but…"

"Would he call the Old Gods his masters?"

"No, he wouldn’t, but… That doesn’t mean he’s beyond reach."

"Would he strive to wipe out all life on Azeroth?"
"Not all of it, no…” she said awkwardly.

"Remember how he reacted to Nefarian’s death, and Onyxia’s. Would your father have shrugged off something like that?"

"No," she said emphatically.

"Then that creature is not your father."

Obsidia regarded him with wide eyes.

He stood and returned to his normal body. “We’ll rest here for the night. I’ll leave you alone if that’s what you want, but just think about it, Obsidia. Search your heart. If you can look me in the eyes in the morning and tell me that you really, truly believe there is anything left of your father to redeem…then I will take you back to Blackrock Mountain. If not, we’re going home to Outland. If you’re stuck in that body until your father dies, so be it. I’ll wait. I have a feeling it won’t be long, one way or another.”

She considered this for a moment and finally nodded.

"I love you." He nuzzled his scaly head against hers, horribly tangling her hair, before stretching out to sleep with his back to her.

"Good night," she whispered.

Hours passed. It was a chilly night but Obsidia could not find the energy to start a fire. She just sat, huddled down in her cloak with Ashy asleep beside her in her knapsack, and stared out at the dreary vista below. Two half-moons shone down from a cloudless sky, celestial bodies which many civilizations thought of as a mother and child. Far below her rocky perch, trees reached out of a slowly-swirling sea of fog with black, claw-like branches.

Obsidia peeled back eons of memories, trying to recall her earliest impressions of her father. He had been gentle, once. She remembered how she and her newly-hatched clutchmates would perch on his horns to sleep, and he wouldn’t have the heart to wake them. He would lie still until their nap was over, except he would usually end up falling asleep, too.

He laughed so much more in those days. Malygos would come to visit and they’d play pranks on each other—and sometimes on Sintharia, which rarely ended well. She smiled wistfully, thinking back on those simple times of joy and mischief.

It was easy to forget when looking at his ravaged body now, but he had been beautiful in ancient times. Streaks of gold, silver, mithril and thorium ran through
his hide, and the finest gems and geodes shimmered in his scales. In dim light it was like looking at the night sky. All those bright stars on a field of black… Obsidia raised her eyes to admire the heavens, but in her timeless mental picture Neltharion’s scales were ten times more stunning than the display nature now spread before her.

She had learned her numbers by counting the gems in his scales. He had ten diamonds between his nose and his right ear, but only four opals. Why did she still remember that? She stifled a single, self-mocking laugh. Perhaps that was why she could never seem to collect enough shiny gems and rocks for her hoard; she subconsciously wanted that part of her father back.

Just as the madness had come on slowly and insidiously, so had the alterations in his personality. Only when she thought back on the early days with a critical eye did she truly realize how much he had changed.

Obsidia did recall being disciplined for misbehaving, of course. Sometimes she was forced to sit facing a blank cave wall for periods of time that had felt like hours to her impatient, youthful self but which in hindsight were perfectly reasonable. Harsher offenses earned harsher punishments, though never unfair ones.

Her father was strict, yes, but he had always shown tremendous pride and affection for his family. He loved his children, protected them, taught them well, and expected the best from them because he believed them capable of great things.

She remembered her first solo hunt as a young drake, how nervous she had been, and how her father had given her a pep talk about her lineage and talents until she left the lair bursting with confidence, returning the next day with a bear that was nearly as big as she was.

She recalled tales of a long-ago day when Onyxia was worried that she wasn’t growing as large as her clutchmates, fretting that she would never be as powerful as they. Neltharion had taken her aside and showed her how a small diamond could break through the hardest stone, assuring her that it was her skills and determination that mattered most.

And when Nefarian—no, she corrected herself, he was still Romathion, then—had come out on the losing side of a scuffle with another drake, Neltharion hadn’t punished him for weakness. He had stepped up his training, teaching him to out-think his opponents and turn their own abilities against them.

She also remembered when, well after the Sundering, her father was grief-stricken to lose one of his sons. Razormaw’s mother was one of his minor consorts, but that made him no less valued than Sintharia’s offspring. When word arrived that Razormaw and several others had been killed in battle with the green dragonflight
at Loreth’Aran, Deathwing’s roar of despair could be heard leagues away. He had mourned deeply, withdrawing into his most isolated lair for days.

To humans, elves, trolls and the other soft, short-lived races, the Black Aspect was a terrible monster—and rightly so, Obsidia thought. Wolves were probably seen as monsters by rabbits, too. Such was the natural order of things. But to his own flight, he was their bulwark, their patriarch, their greatest champion. They were the strongest of dragons, and justly proud of their family.

No longer.

She closed her eyes and hugged her knees to her chest, haunted by the memory of the utter madness now in Deathwing’s eyes.

Part of her had known the truth for some time, ever since his dismissive reaction to Nefarian’s death. She just hadn’t wanted to believe it. Even when he shrugged off Onyxia’s demise, she had still been in denial. Only when Rivendark said it aloud did it truly sink in.

That was not her father. Her father would have comforted her in her grief. He would have been paralyzed with sadness over the loss of his oldest and dearest children. He would have moved the heavens and earth—in the latter case, literally—to avenge their deaths.

He would not have brushed off her concerns with Old God propaganda and acted as if Nefarian and Onyxia were unimportant.

And dabbling in necromancy? The great respect the Earth Warder had once shared with the Life Binder made such a thing unimaginable.

The familiar sensation of grief settled heavily onto her chest, and fresh tears stung her weary eyes. Perhaps it wasn’t the same as having her siblings and mother die, but just as horribly and irreversibly, she had lost her father, as well.

Obsidia had no idea when sleep finally claimed her, but she awoke a few hours after sunrise to find herself curled up against Rivendark’s tail with Ashy tugging on her sleeve.

"Yeep?"

She rubbed her eyes and looked around in momentary confusion, remembering yesterday’s events with a feeling of dull resignation. “Morning, Ashy. I suppose you’re hungry.”

"Yeeeeeeep!" The whelp hopped up and down in agreement.
"All right, keep your scales on. We’ll see what we can do about that."

Roused by their voices, Rivendark groggily lifted his head and checked the sun angle to gauge the time. Deciding it was late enough, he got to his feet and stretched his wings, giving himself an extra moment to get alert before talking.

Obsidia patiently waited for him to face her. When he did, he merely regarded her with a silent question.

She stood and slung her knapsack over her shoulder. “Let’s find some breakfast around here before we head out. The hunting will only get worse the nearer we get to the Dark Portal.”

He gave her a significant look, understanding what she was really saying. “Are you sure?” he asked quietly.

She nodded and gave a small, sad smile. “Let’s go home.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Obsidia hasn’t given up on her father quite yet, despite the horrors of the Cataclysm and the Twilight Cult. But to help him she has to *find* him, which turns out to be a bigger challenge than she had counted on…

Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

The simple fact that Obsidia was riding on Rivendark’s back, still in human form, told Sabellian all he needed to know about how their journey had gone. He shook his head sympathetically and patted her shoulder. “I’m sorry, Obsidia. I was afraid of this.”

She walked past him into the lair with a numb expression. “It’s worse than you know, brother.”

Rivendark let Obsidia do all the talking as she recounted the latest developments. Inklia was too nervous to sit still as she listened, and spent the afternoon fussing around the cavern as she checked on the piles of eggs due to hatch any day.

Sabellian was stone-faced at the news of Deathwing’s return from Deepholm and the catastrophic geological consequences. He showed no real emotion when she told him of the physical changes their father had undergone. At the news of Nefarian’s resurrection, however, he smashed his tail into the wall so hard that several stalactites showered down. “What?”

Obsidia nodded grimly. “He’s more, uh, preserved than the frost wyrms raised by the Lich King, but he’s definitely undead.”

Sabellian roared in outrage and paced back and forth, occasionally stopping to crush boulders to dust with his claws. “Undead. My own brother. Sickening!
"It’s not him," Obsidia said quietly. "It’s the Old Gods. You should have seen his eyes, Sabellian. He’s completely mad. You know that crazed look he’d get when mortals thwarted his plans, or a minion disobeyed him? Multiply that a hundred times and make it permanent." She shuddered.

"As we always feared would happen someday," Sabellian mused, coming back to sit with her.

"The only thing is…" Obsidia shifted her weight, trying to decide how to word her thoughts. "He touched the crystals around my neck, and for just a moment…I saw Father in his eyes. Truly him, as he used to be. It was fleeting, but I swear he was lucid for that brief moment."

Rivendark shook his head skeptically. “I still think you imagined it. You were a heartbeat away from death. Your brain can play tricks on you at times like that.”

"It wasn’t my imagination," Obsidia snapped. "I know my own father. That lava-dripping abomination who performed necromancy on Nefarian is not my father. But that flash of recognition when he touched the crystal? That was him. I’m positive."

Sabellian sighed. "In order to wreak the kind of destruction he did in his return from Deepholm, he would need to have the powers of the Earth Warder. That means the Old Gods couldn’t completely obliterate his soul yet. But after he broke free once, at the Well of Eternity, they aren’t going to be taking any chances this time. They’ll have his will so sublimated that that tiny glimmer you saw is probably all that’s left."

"But if there was some way—" she began.

"There isn’t. The Old Gods will have seen to that."

"You don’t know that."

"They have had ten thousand years to plan for this, knowing they would get their chance someday. They are nothing if not patient. Well, and evil. Patient and evil. It’s a very bad combination."

Obsidia scowled at his faint attempt at humor.

"Really, sister, there are no good options."

"I know, but we have to try—"

"No. We don’t. Think about it this way: would Father want us to risk our lives on the very slim chance that we could free him? You know if he was in his right mind
he would want us to stay safe, and to carry on the legacy of the black dragonflight. Bad enough Nefarian and Onyxia are lost. He wouldn’t want us to give up our lives, too."

Obsidia slouched and fought the urge to pout. Her brother was making sense. She hated that.

"Bide your time," he told her. "If what you say is all true, his end is near. Either he will fall apart completely, the Old Gods will no longer have a use for him, or the mortal races of Azeroth will rise up against the threat he represents. When he dies, the spell on you should fade, and you can move on with your life here."

Obsidia bristled. "How can you speak so nonchalantly about it? This is our father!"

"Don’t think I’m not upset by this," Sabellian said quietly. "But I’ve already mourned him. I mourned when I believed myself trapped here in Outland forever. I mourned when I heard of his defeat at Grim Batol. And I have mourned again today as you’ve told me what he’s become. It is time to find whatever peace we can and move on."

Rivendark nodded in agreement and put an arm around her shoulders. "He’s right."

"Can you say that a bit louder, I didn’t quite catch that," Sabellian said with a smug expression.

Rivendark sneered at him. “I said you’re right, for once.”

Sabellian smirked and took a breath to make some witty remark, but his mate’s voice made him stop. "They’re hatching! The ones in this pile are hatching!" He whirled around and flapped over to where Inklia was riveted by cracks appearing in a group of eggs.

Obsidia and Rivendark hurried over just in time to see the first tiny snout break through an eggshell. Soon it was joined by a second and a third, and within a minute the air was filled with the snapping of breaking eggshells and the excited chirps and squeaks of newborn whelplings.

Sabellian beamed with pride, all his sharp teeth showing in a great smile. Inklia nuzzled her head under his chin and then set about licking slime off the hatchlings.

Healthy dragons were aware of many things while still in the egg, and emerged with a level of intelligence that human children had to wait years to develop. These latest additions to the family were no exception.

"Mama!"
"Papa!"

"Hi!"

"I’m hungry!"

"Me too!"

"Wow, everything’s so much bigger than I thought it would be!"

"I’m so glad to be out! It was getting cramped in there!"

Inkia laughed happily as her newest children hopped and fluttered around, exploring the nest area and greeting their family.

Obsidia found herself blinking back tears. Rivendark, still in his blood elf form, leaned his head against hers and gave a hopeful smile. He didn’t have to speak. She knew he was thinking about the eggs they might hatch together someday. Her thoughts dwelled on their hypothetical whelps, too, but it was more than jealous anticipation that made her emotions so fragile.

How could she bring offspring into a world where their kind was corrupted, exiled from their own planet, and reviled by all? Sabellian may have accepted things the way they were, but she could not. He had brought up an important point, however. If their father was in his right mind, what would he want his children to do?

In her heart of hearts, she knew the answer. What had it always been about? What had Deathwing fought so hard for through the centuries?

Their family. The black dragonflight. His dream had always been to see their kind prosper unopposed. He wanted his children and their children to be strong and successful, feared and respected. He would never settle for the weakened remnants of his flight to be scattered across two worlds, being used as pawns by the Old Gods or living in fear of corruption.

If he wasn’t able to protect and guide the dragonflight anymore, someone had to.

Obsidia let herself enjoy the moment, with Rivendark’s arm snugly around her and her brother’s family celebrating new life. This was what she was fighting for. And fight she would, regardless of what anyone told her.

A week passed. Then two. Obsidia rested, gathering her strength and considering her options. Her family took her withdrawn silence as part of her own mourning process, and gave her space to grieve.
She began spending time with Inklia at Ruuan Weald, observing the Cenarion druids’ ongoing efforts to stamp out the last remnants of the wyrmcult. Her brother and his mate approved, believing it was a good distraction for her. What they failed to notice was how closely she watched the mail deliveries. She unobtrusively made sure she was nearby whenever the morning couriers arrived, but day after day passed without anything addressed to her.

Then, after a month of waiting, a letter arrived. The tauren sorting the mail looked up and glanced around, knowing Obsidia was nearby. She saw immediately and came right over before “Samia Inkling” noticed.

"For you," the tauren said in Common, handing her the envelope.

"Thank you," Obsidia said eagerly.

"Yeep," Ashy said, slurping the druid’s hand.

"Ashy, stop that!"

The druid shrugged and wiped his hand on his vest, unfortunately used to the whelp’s odd behavior by now.

She quickly ducked behind the inn where her sister-in-law would not spot her. As she tore open the envelope, she recognized the wax seal as Nefarian’s. At last! Trembling, she read:

"Dear sister,

"Thank you for your letter. I wish we could have discussed all this in person, but it helped to explain much of what’s been going on while I was, shall we say, out of the loop. (Death is a terrible inconvenience when it comes to staying up-to-date on current events.)"

Obsidia laughed softly. Oh, how she had missed his sense of humor.

Ashy perched on her shoulder as if reading along with her, although such a task was far beyond his mental ability.

"Seara is doing better. I don’t blame her for being hesitant about my less-than-alive state at first, but, bless her, she’s resilient. Undeath isn’t all bad, you know. I don’t have to worry about eating or sleeping, which means plenty of time in the lab. I’d love to report that Onyxia is back on her feet and doing as well as I am, but so far it’s been difficult. Reattaching her head was no problem, and I’ve zapped her with enough energy to give a blood elf a year-long high, but so far she hasn’t come to her senses. She’s moving, though, which is a start."

Obsidia grimaced, not sure if this was good news or bad.
"As for Father," Nefarian’s letter continued, "I haven’t seen him since that first day. He sent some Twilight cultists to ‘help’, but all they do is snoop around and distract me. I keep expecting him to return any day and brief me on whatever grand scheme he’s working on now, but from what I’m hearing there doesn’t seem to be a plan. The cult has operations all over the map, and a huge fortress in the Modan Highlands—bah, correction: the Twilight Highlands. That’s apparently everyone’s new favorite word. Anyway, if there is an actual goal behind all this posturing, I don’t know what it is. If the Old Gods are going to burst free and destroy everything, I don’t see the point in building up mortal armies. If they’re so all-powerful, do they really need our help? It makes no sense.”

Of course it doesn’t make sense; it’s the Old Gods, Obsidia thought with a scowl. Insane chaos is their hallmark.

"Regarding these miracle crystals you wrote about, I would say it’s too little, too late. I did some experiments on the ones Seara and our boys had, and they have intriguing properties but nothing amazing enough to make me think they could save anyone from a direct assault by the Old Gods. Not a bad find, though. I know you like shiny things, but they aren’t the answer to all of life’s problems. (That was a joke. I know it’s hard to tell in writing. Just laugh.)"

Laughter was the last thing on her mind, however. She had hoped to convince Nefarian about the Apexis crystals’ abilities and then enlist his help in exposing their father to as many as possible. If Deathwing stayed away from Blackrock and Nefarian thought the crystals were useless, that plan was dead in the water.

"Drop by if you’re in the neighborhood again. We still have a lot to catch up on, and I’m sure Seara would appreciate having someone else to talk to who actually has a pulse. Stay safe."

The letter was signed “Nefarian, Lord of Blackrock Mountain, Heir to Deathwing the Destroyer.”

Obsidia sighed and folded up the parchment to hide in the pocket of her robe.

"Yeep?" Ashy questioned.

"Time for Plan B," she muttered.

Sabellian would be angry. Rivendark would probably try to follow her. It didn’t matter. Obsidia knew what she had to do.

Aware that it might come to this, she had been smuggling a few handfuls of Apexis crystals in her pockets whenever Inklia took her to Ruuan Weald, and by the time
Nefarian’s letter arrived she had filled two saddlebags with them. Some gemstones in the right hands ensured that the stablehands would not ask any questions about the extra bags lying in the back of the rented stall where she kept her gryphon.

After months of referring to her mount as simply “the gryphon,” she realized she needed to find a name for him. It felt odd to do so, since in ages past she had eaten gryphons without a second thought, but practicality won out in the end. Taking inspiration from the creature’s white feathers, she began calling him “Snowfeather.”

Snowfeather shuffled irritably as she tried to balance the weight across both sides of the saddle. “I know it’s heavy,” she whispered. “Deal with it or I’ll feed you to my nieces and nephews.”

She could buy any other supplies she needed along the way. It was still early in the afternoon. If she left now she’d have time to get a good head start before anyone realized she had gone.

Keeping a calm front, she wandered over to where her sister-in-law was chatting with some of her druid allies. “Samia,” she said, using the name of her human disguise, “I think I’m going to take my gryphon out for awhile. I haven’t exercised him in a few days. And I might stop over and visit Riv on my way back, so don’t wait around for me.”

"All right," Inklia said with a nod, barely looking at her before continuing her conversation with the druids.

Obsidia forced herself to keep a casual pace as she strolled back to the stables. After making sure Ashy was safely tucked into her bag, she dug in her heels and snapped the reins. With one final squawk of protest over the weight of the saddlebags, Snowfeather took off into the orange sky.

How could an armored, lava-oozing dragon with a twelve hundred foot wingspan be so difficult to find?

It had been a long three weeks since Obsidia left Blade’s Edge. No doubt Rivendark had been searching for her, and she felt a pang of guilt every time she thought about him, but her personal feelings had to be put aside. Her mission was far too important to be distracted.

At first she had tried to reach out to Deathwing mentally, as she had in Ironforge, but the Old Gods drowned out any communication with increased babble about the end of the world. Sabellian was right: they were taking no chances this time.
Paying a visit to Blackrock Mountain was also fruitless. Nefarian was engrossed in his efforts to resurrect Onyxia, which disturbed Obsidia more than she dared to let on. He had not heard from Deathwing, anyway.

The only news he was able to share was a sad report from the Badlands: mortals working with the red dragonflight had captured Nyxondra and many of her children. In desperation she had reached out to her estranged brother for help. Nefarian sent Kalaran and some of Blackrock’s finest to defend her, but they were all slain, and Nyxondra was killed soon after.

Nefarian was matter-of-fact about the whole affair, but being undead dulled all emotions so this wasn’t unexpected. Obsidia was angry at herself for her own muted reaction, though. She was alive, after all. With her heart beating there was no reason not to be devastated by the news. She was surprisingly numb, however. Of course Nyxondra had died—everyone did, especially her family. What was one more tragedy, after all that had happened, and all that would inevitably happen in the near future?

Whether she was stone-faced or wailing, there was nothing Obsidia could do now. If Nyxondra was gone, so be it. She had to concentrate on the matters she still had a hope—however slim—of changing.

Obsidia decided to follow Nefarian’s suggestion and visit the cult’s stronghold in the Twilight Highlands. First, though, she could not resist a small detour to her old lair while she was in the area. She hoped to find it undisturbed, and was pleased to see her warding spells were still intact. Their protection had weakened considerably through the years and would not have stood up to a determined attempt to break through, but no one had trespassed.

Obsidia tied up Snowfeather near the entrance and lit a torch before proceeding into the darkened cavern on foot, feeling like a stranger in her own abode. She passed several dormant braziers on the walls that she would normally have reignited with a snort of flame, but she was now far too short to reach and didn’t feel like stopping to do it with magic. Sighing, she continued on with only the torch in her hand to light the way.

Ashy flapped along beside her, cheerful as ever. She smiled involuntarily at him, once again immensely grateful for his company.

At last they reached the main cavern, and now she did bother to cast shadowflame spells at the braziers. The long-dead coals blazed to life one by one, casting flickering shadows on the walls of the broad rock chamber. The light revealed her hoard of gems, gleaming even through several years of dust. She broke into a grin to see her beloved collection again.

Ashy fluttered around curiously, exploring every nook and cranny.
"That’s right, you’ve never been here before, have you?" she said. "Well, it’s nothing like your mama’s lair, but it’s home. Or it was, for a very long time."

The thought of her late sister dulled the joy she felt at her homecoming, but she said nothing. Ashy couldn’t really understand what had happened to his mother, and that was for the best.

"Here, help me unpack these bags," she said, dropping the knapsacks on the ground.

Ashy obligingly dived into the largest bag and rooted around for a moment, making the bag shake. He popped out a moment later with a chunk of carnelian between his front paws. “Yeep!”

"Good job," Obsidia praised with a fond smile. "Put it over on that pile, with the other red gems."

"Yeep!" He obeyed, then returned to the bag for another.

Obsidia rested while her nephew happily followed her instructions, distributing the new gems to their proper places.

"Very good!" she praised when the bag was empty. "You’re a big help, Ashy."

The whelp squeaked proudly and slurped her cheek.

"We’ll have to dust and polish all these later, but for now I suppose we should get moving again. Nefarian is right: shiny objects don’t solve everything."

Ashy nodded sagely and gave a serious-sounding “Yeep.”

She chuckled and patted him on the head. “Good advice.”

Snowfeather was pleased to have his burden reduced by a few gems, but still balked when Obsidia tried to steer him toward the Bastion of Twilight. Sinister purple energy had leeched all natural life from the mountains surrounding the enormous spire, leaving only cultists and turbulent elementals.

She frowned, studying the complex of tents, pavillions and buildings around the foot of the main fortress. “This didn’t spring up overnight,” she said to herself. “The Twilight cult has been busy.” She coaxed the gryphon to fly closer, giving her a better view of the stark, inhospitable landscape.

Suddenly, a dark shape emerged from the roiling clouds above, streaking toward her with a roar. Only a reflexive yank on the reins saved her from a direct collision, and she whirled around to see what was attacking. It was a dragon, but unlike any she had ever seen before. Its body was the same shape as a normal drake’s, but its scales were a strange purple color and a nimbus of dark energy
"Stop!" she cried in draconic, conjuring a warning flare of shadowflame in her hand. "I belong to the brood of Deathwing."

The peculiar drake broke off his attack and circled around to inspect her. Something about the creature reminded her of the Netherwing dragons she had seen in Outland, but this one was clearly more solid. Judging by his color and what she had heard about the breed, this was almost certainly one of the Twilight dragonflight.

"You do not look like a dragon," the drake said.

"Yeah, I know. Take it up with Deathwing," she said sourly.

"The Destroyer is not here," the drake said.

She cursed under her breath. Of course he wasn’t. That would be too easy. “Do you know where I might find him?”

"Lord Deathwing comes and goes as he pleases. He was here ten days ago. He may return tomorrow, or a month from tomorrow. He will return, though. He must make more Twilight dragons. The Masters must have more of us to serve them."

So this was where the Twilight dragonflight came from. She wondered exactly how they were created, but had more important matters to worry about at the moment. “I don’t suppose there’s a way to get a message to him?”

"Master Cho’gall could, if you were foolish enough to approach him."

"Cho’gall?"

"You don’t know who Cho’gall is?" the Twilight drake narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"My father has been too busy to fill me in on his latest plans. I assume we’re talking about one of his minions?"

The Twilight drake gasped in fear. “Do not speak of Master Cho’gall that way! He will drain your soul out and use your skull as a drinking cup!”

"Sounds like a pleasant guy. Let me guess...he serves the Old Gods directly?"

"Yes, yes! We all serve the world’s true masters!"

She studied the drake’s fervent expression carefully. The lavish praise of the Old Gods and their underlings sounded well rehearsed. No doubt such obedience had been driven into these Twilight dragons since before their hatching.
"Of course. I won’t trouble Master Cho’gall today," she said. "If you’re sure you don’t know where my father could be, I’ll just be on my way."

"The Great Twilight Mother might know. I can take you to her if you wish."

Obsidia froze. It couldn’t be Sintharia. Even if the reports of her death were false, she would never submit to Deathwing again. At least…not willingly. Obsidia’s mouth felt suddenly dry. “Yes,” she said, mind racing. “Take me to the Great Twilight Mother.”

The drake zoomed off toward the huge spire, and Obsidia urged her gryphon to fly faster in order to keep up with him.

The air inside the Bastion of Twilight was so saturated with the Old Gods’ magic that it made Obsidia’s skin crawl, but the Apexis crystals around her neck, wrists and ankles seemed to be working. The whispers were there, certainly, but she was able to ignore them by concentrating on other things—like, for instance, the sheer scale of the operations the cultists were running. Curious indeed that a cult devoted to the imminent end of the world would bother constructing such an elaborate fortress. Dozens of cultists, dragonspawn and bound elementals made it a hive of activity.

She tried to keep an air of authority and disdain as the Twilight drake paddled along in front of her, for they were drawing a fair amount of attention. She glared at one orc who was gawking at her, and he scrambled to return to the work he was supposed to be doing on a teleportation rune. Ashy, who was friendly to a fault, zig-zagged around, greeting everyone with happy noises and the occasional slurp. Obsidia sternly called him back to her side, and he landed on her shoulder.

"Stay with me," she whispered. "It may not be safe here."

"Yeep?"

"Ssh."

Glancing into some of the side chambers afforded Obsidia glimpses of more Twilight dragons, some only whelps but at least two who appeared to be fully-grown wyrms. There had to be magic involved, since these could be no more than a year or two old, and it took centuries for dragons to grow that large naturally. Perhaps, then, this “Great Twilight Mother” was simply the sorceress in charge of spawning these strange dragons, not their literal mother. That would make sense—certainly more sense than the thought of Sintharia coming back to Deathwing, in any case.
The Twilight drake led her down floor after floor until they emerged into a vast subterranean cavern, quite a contrast after the clearly artificial rooms of the citadel. The crystals against her skin cooled slightly, and Obsidia found it easier to breathe here among the natural stone, tainted though it was. Streams of molten rock cascaded from cracks near the roof of the cave, pouring into a lake of steaming magma. It would have been quite cozy if not for the sinister pall of the Old Gods that seeped down from above.

As they continued deeper into the cavern, Obsidia realized with a jolt that what she had at first assumed to be boulders were in fact eggs. There were dozens, if not a hundred, of them dotted around the chamber, carefully arranged in neat piles according to size. Some were the size of normal dragon eggs, others were quite a bit larger, but all were the same mottled purple color as the Twilight dragons themselves. There was no doubt what would hatch from them.

"Mother!" called the drake. "We have a visitor!"

A raspy voice came from nowhere, echoing through the rock chamber. "So soon? I have not laid the last clutch yet."

Obsidia’s heart leapt into her throat. She recognized that voice.

"No, Mother, not Lord Deathwing. Another of the old flight." There was a vaguely insulting edge to the drake’s voice when he said "old."

"Oh?" An enormous head slowly emerged from behind a ridge of stone that ran along the edge of the lava pool: first two sweeping horns, then a frilled crest, then glowing eyes the color of fire.

Obsidia staggered back a step, completely lost for words. Her mother was alive.

"Who is it?" she asked with annoyance, squinting into the shadows. "Face me as a dragon, if you are one of mine."

"Mother," Obsidia choked out. "I can’t. It’s me. Obsidia."

"Obsidia? Here?" Sinestra lumbered into view, stunning her daughter back into silence. The old scars were still there, barely noticeable underneath much fresher ones. Fiery claw marks scored her chest, shoulders and sides, and some areas of scales on her back seemed to have melted into shiny patches.

It took Obsidia a moment to notice what else was different, and when it dawned on her she felt sick. Sinestra’s plump belly was a clear sign that she carried eggs.

Eggs like those scattered around the cavern.

Twilight eggs.
Apparently blind to her daughter’s horror, Sinestra sat down in front of her. “You may leave us,” she told the drake, who bowed in perfect obedience and flew away. “So, my dear, what brings you here?” she asked calmly.

"I…" Obsidia cleared her throat, trying very hard to regain her composure. "I was looking for Father."

"Ah. I believe he’s in Kalimdor right now. He was just here recently," she said, patting her swollen abdomen with a contented smile, "so I don’t expect him back until next month."

Obsidia stared in disbelief. It was revolting for her to contemplate, but it should have also been literally impossible. After a few moments of stammering, she finally managed to say, “How…why…when… I didn’t think Father could, you know, make eggs anymore.”

"Look around you, my child. We have plenty of eggs now, thanks to our true Masters."

Her words only confirmed what Obsidia had guessed from the crazed gleam in her mother’s eyes. The Old Gods had her firmly in their grasp. After a moment, she said, “I thought you hated him.”

"Who, your father? No, no," Sinestra said with a dismissive wave of her paw. "We’ve had our differences, but it’s all behind us now."

"But you spent ten thousand years avoiding him and hating him for— For what he did." Her eyes traced the glowing scars. For what he apparently still can do, she thought with a shudder.

Sinestra smiled and leaned on a stalagmite. “It was my fault. I should have trusted the Masters’ will. Now that I’ve seen the light, they’ve brought us back together again. All is as it should be.”

There were so many things Obsidia wanted to scream at that moment that in the end she was rendered speechless. No! All is not how it should be! It wasn’t your fault! They’re not our Masters! Look at yourself! This is wrong! Snap out of it! What did they do to you?

Oblivious to her disgust, Sinestra continued on. “Will you be staying to see your new brothers and sisters?”

"No!" Obsidia burst out. "No. I need to go. I need to find Father. He…forgot to lift this shape-binding curse last time I saw him."

"Ah," Sinestra said, nodding sympathetically. "He’s had a lot on his mind, the poor dear. Send my love and tell him I should have a nice, big clutch this time."
"Sure," Obsidia said automatically. She would have agreed to anything at that point just to get away. "Good luck with, uh, the eggs and stuff."

"Thank you, dear."

Her guide was nowhere to be seen but she had no trouble getting directions from the cultists, who now regarded her with awe knowing that she had been granted an immediate audience with the Great Twilight Mother. She found Snowfeather where she had left him, jumped into the saddle and took off like an arrow from a crossbow.

It was not only the residual influence of the Old Gods permeating the Bastion of Twilight that caused rage to billow up in her chest. They had taken away both her parents, now. That fawning, subservient creature was not her mother any more than Deathwing was her father.

Sintharia—no, Sinestra, for that was her true mother’s name—would never meekly forgive her mate and sacrifice her well-being to bring Twilight monsters into the world. Neltharion would never willingly hurt her again, after what he had done to her and his other mates in his first fit of madness. Deathwing and Sinestra were not her parents. Neltharion and Sintharia were, and today’s sickening discovery only hardened her resolve to help them.

Obsidia sat by the campfire, exhausted from another day of searching. Ashy was already snoring atop a supply bag, one back paw moving slightly in response to whatever he was dreaming. She smiled at him, envying his innocent, untroubled rest. Snowfeather was also sleeping, curled up at the foot of one of Feralas’ massive, ancient trees.

She had lost count of how long she had been wandering Kalimdor, trying to cross paths with her father. She heard rumors constantly. He had been sighted flying over the Barrens. He had annihilated a trading post in the Stonetalon Mountains. He had rained fiery death down on Tanaris. He had set a swath of Ashenvale to the flame. He had buried a centaur village in ten feet of lava.

There was no pattern. No apparent strategy. No rhyme or reason to it at all. It was maddening.

Obsedia unrolled her well-worn map to study it yet again. Red dots marked places where she was reasonably certain Deathwing had been. She had tried drawing lines between them, counting them, looking for hidden pictures… Nothing.

Based on her father’s past schemes, there should be some fiendishly clever meaning behind his activity. Then again, as she had to keep reminding herself, this
was no longer her father. This was an instrument of the Old God’s wrath, and chaos was their trademark.

She sighed and rolled up the map again, feeling foolish. What did she hope to accomplish, really? She had been dragging these Apexis crystals all over Kalimdor for months without seeing so much as a puff of smoke. Even if Deathwing flew overhead right now, how did she expect to get his attention? Yell? Wave? Chuck crystals at him with a slingshot? It was absurd.

If the lead she was currently chasing, a report of Twilight cultist activity in Thousand Needles, didn’t pan out, she would probably have to swallow her pride and slink back to Outland with her sadly non-existent tail between her legs. Her only other option was to return to the Bastion of Twilight and hope to catch him when he came to visit Sinestra, a notion that made her wrinkle her nose in disgust.

She stood up, cast a protection spell around the campsite that would keep out any intruders overnight, then crawled into her sleeping bag. One more chance. Just one more.

The harsh, sinister architecture of the Twilight cult stood out quite well among the dusty hills above Thousand Needles.

The great canyon had once been among her favorite places to go mining, but Deathwing’s return from Deepholm had caused a tremendous landslide that allowed the sea to rush in, flooding it nearly to the brim. If only he had warned her beforehand, she would have politely asked him not to put one of her best ore-gathering places underwater. Obsidia smirked to herself at the thought. That would have gone over very well, no doubt.

She landed her gryphon near the largest of the Twilight camps and approached with confident strides. Holding her head high, she surveyed the tents and shadowy altars with vague disdain, as if it was all barely up to her standards. Attitude was everything. Sure enough, when a sentry spotted her he did not immediately attack.

"Who goes there?" the male human called, lifting his purple hood to get a better look at her.

"You must be new," she said with a sneer. "I am Lady Obsidia." Noting the lack of recognition on the man’s face, she elaborated slowly, as if speaking to someone of minimal intelligence. "Youngest daughter of Deathwing. I trust you do know who he is?"

Color drained from the man’s cheeks. “Of course! My Lady, I didn’t recognize you in this light.”
Obsidia made a point of looking up at the sun, which shone from high in a cloudless sky. “The light. Of course,” she said with patronizing smile.

"I suppose you’ll want to see Commander Fastfuse."

"At once."

"Right this way, My Lady," the cultist said, bowing until he nearly tripped on his robes.

Obsidia managed to keep her haughty attitude intact despite the urge to laugh. Her bluff was working perfectly so far.

Commander Fastfuse was an ugly goblin—was there any other kind? she wondered—with pretentious white sideburns. “Yeah? Whaddya want?” he snapped when the cultist knocked timidly on the frame of his tent.

"Lady Obsidia to see you, Commander," the human said quickly, then hurried away before anyone could punish him.

"Lady who?" the goblin said, squinting at the figure silhouetted in the doorway of his tent.

"Yeep!" Ashy greeted, flying once around the tent before settling on his aunt’s shoulder like a reptilian parrot.

"Obsidia," she said, sauntering in as if she owned the place. "I seem to be having difficulty locating my father. Perhaps you have more updated intelligence as to his current location?"

"Listen, lady, every week I get weepy family members trying to track down their daddy or their sister or whatever. If they joined the cult, it’s because they didn’t want to see you again. Now get lost."

Obsidia looked down her nose at him, her tone icy. “There seems to be a misunderstanding, Commander. As the name Lady Obsidia and the fact that I have a black whelp sitting on my shoulder were not enough clues for you, let me clarify. My father is Deathwing the Destroyer.”

The goblin’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head. He stammered in terror for a few seconds before regaining his composure. “Well, why didn’t you say so? Sit down, make yourself at home! Can I offer you a drink? Cuergo’s Gold, nothing but the best for a guest of your…breeding.”

She smirked as he groveled and fawned, noting the sweat beading on his green forehead.

"That won’t be necessary. I’m in a bit of a hurry, you see. Just kindly let me know
where my father is, and I’ll be going."

"Of course, of course! Certainly! Um, that is, I haven’t actually seen the Destroyer in a few weeks, personally…"

Obsidia narrowed her eyes in displeasure and folded her arms on her chest.

"But!" Fastfuse exclaimed, holding out his hands defensively as if he expected her to attack him at any second. "I know where he was supposed to be right about now!"

"Oh? Do tell."

The goblin began speaking even faster, babbling nervously. “Well, assuming nothing else came up in the meantime…I mean, I know he’s a very busy dragon, what with the shattering the world an’ all…”

Obsidia drummed her fingers impatiently on her arm.

"He was headed to Uldum!" Fastfuse blurted. "There were some other dragons down there that he was going to check on. Sounded like he’d be there awhile. Something to do with the Halls of Organ…Orange…Origific…Origami…Origimation!"

"Origination?"

"Yeah, that!"

Obsidia gave a thin smile. “Thank you.” She spun on her heel and marched out of the tent.

The misty swamps of Un’Goro Crater passed by far below, lush and green in the dimming light. Obsidia had hoped to make it across the crater by nightfall, but Snowfeather was tiring under the weight of the saddlebags full of Apexis crystals, and her stomach rumbled. A short rest wouldn’t hurt, she supposed. She kept her eyes peeled for the signal fires marking the location of the explorer’s camp that her map indicated was nearby. The sun was below the crater rim, sinking into Silithus, when she spotted a ramshackle wooden watch tower rising out of the jungle. She could feel Snowfeather slump in relief as she ordered him to land.

The exhausted gryphon flopped down by the camp’s central bonfire, and she could tell he wouldn’t budge for hours no matter how big a hurry she was in. Might as well get a bite to eat and then catch some sleep.

Lights emanated from several of the tents, but there weren’t many people around.
A goblin was welding something by the makeshift forge, sparks dancing in all directions. A female dwarf and a male human sat outside one tent, laughing over tankards of ale.

Conversation wasn’t high on her priority list, so Obsidia settled down on the other side of the camp where her only company was a gnome who was sprawled on his back in front of the bonfire. He had his hands clasped on his belly, and occasionally a soft, high-pitched snore came from beneath the wide-brimmed hat tipped over his face.

Obsidia unpacked her sleeping bag and was attempting to find something edible in her knapsack when a dwarf approached. He waved at her with a warm smile. “Greetin’s, lass! New around here?”

"Just passing through," she said with a polite smile.

"Ale?" he offered.

"I’ll pass. But…got any food? Preferably meat?"

"Well, there’s this, but I dinnae know if it’d be to yer likin’." The dwarf held up a cut of red meat. "Just chopped it off a diemetradon this mornin’.

She sniffed it, and her mouth watered. “Looks fine to me. How much?"

"Fer a pretty thing like you, twenty silver."

Unimpressed by the flattery but too hungry to argue, Obsidia dug into her coin purse and tossed him two shiny coins.

"Pleasure doin’ business with ye," the dwarf said, bowing.

"Yeep!" Lured by the smell of raw meat, Ashy zoomed over to investigate. The dwarf jumped in surprise. “Magni’s beard, that critter nearly scared the ale outta me!”

"Be glad he didn’t lick you. Come on, Ashy, let’s eat."

The whelp hardly needed an invitation, however. He was already gnawing at one corner of the slab of meat.

The dwarf gave a hearty laugh and slapped his knee. “Sure you dinnae want another steak, lass? Looks like your little friend there is going to finish that one all by himself!”

"We’ll be fine," she said with a sigh. "Ashy, stop that. I’ll cut you off a piece in a minute." Obsidia walked toward the bonfire with Nelashrion swinging back and
forth, his jaws locked onto the meat.

"If he keeps eatin’ like that, pretty soon ye can leave that gryphon at home and fly on him instead," the dwarf teased.

Obsidia gave a wry smile and tore off a generous hunk of meat for Ashy. “Only if he wants to. He may not be the brightest, but dragons are sentient creatures. It’s not right to use them as mounts without permission.”

The dwarf nodded in agreement. “Aye, that’s true. Gryphons are smarter than most non-dwarves realize, too, y’know.”

"Clever, but not sentient. There’s a difference."

"Before the Titans came, dragons were just the same as any other beast."

"Before the Titans came, dwarves were just rocks," she said with a smug smile.

The dwarf blinked at her for a moment, then roared with laughter. “I like you, lass!”

She grinned and began roasting a section of meat over the bonfire. The gnome must have been a sound sleeper, for he never stirred from under his hat through all the noise.

The dwarf grabbed his ale mug and sat down nearby. “The name’s Nergal, by the way."

"Call me Sidya," she said, inwardly amused that earlier that day she had been flaunting her family connections.

"So what brings you way down to this dinosaur-infested hole in the ground?"

Obsidia turned the meat over to make sure it was cooked evenly, pondering what cover story she wanted to use. On a whim, she told the truth, or at least a version of it, “I’m trying to find my father. He’s been missing for awhile now and I’m worried.”

"The wandering type, eh?"

"He didn’t use to be," she said sadly. "Then he accidentally got exposed to some really dark magic, and he…changed."

Nergal nodded knowingly. “Aye, that can happen. Shame.”

"Yeah. I really miss him. The way he used to be, I mean."

He made a sympathetic noise. “A friend o’ mine had a sister who married a Dark Iron. Scandal of the decade in our little town, long before Princess Moira tried it.
We all knew he was a warlock, but there’s no reasonin’ with young love, so off she went. Came back alone a few years later. Seemed her husband had gotten himself killed doin’ some kind o’ dark magic. She’d never talk about it, but ye could tell she’d seen things no dwarf should ever see. She was never the same after that. Ye hate to see that kind o’ thing.”

"What happened to her?"

"Died alone and miserable." He took a long swig of ale. "Sorry, Sidya, that really wasn’t a very good story to be tellin’ ye. Don’t know what I was thinkin’." She shrugged. “I keep thinking there has to be a way to reverse the corruption.”

"Use good magic to fix the bad magic, ye mean? The blood elves tried that, though how well it worked depends on who ye ask. I take it yer father isn’t a blood elf.” Obsidia gave a small laugh. “No. He’s not.”

"Well, that shoots that plan, then, doesn’t it?"

"Pretty much." Obsidia tested the sizzling meat, decided it was cooked enough, and began to eat.

The dwarf looked at her strangely. “Ye sure that’s done, lass?”

"I like it rare," she said through a full mouth.

Nergal chuckled and drained the rest of his mug. “I’ll leave ye to it, then. Good luck findin’ your father.”

Obsidia nodded. “Thanks. I’ll need it.”

Full on the best meal she’d had in weeks, Obsidia slept soundly until well past sunrise. There was no telling how long she might have slept, had her nephew not butted his head against her chin. “Yeep!”

"Mmmgh," she groaned, turning her head away.

"Yeep yeep!" he tried again, hopping up and down on her chest.

"You can’t possibly be hungry again after all we ate last night," she mumbled.

"Yeep! Sidya!"

Obsidia’s eyes snapped open. “Did you just…”

"Sidya Sidya Sidya! Yeep!"
"Are you saying my name?" she gasped in delight.

"Sidyeep yeep!"

"Well, sort of."

"Sidya!" Ashy slurped her on the nose.

"Oh, Ashy! I’m so proud of you!" She seized him in a hug, nuzzling him under her chin with an overjoyed laugh.

"Sidya Sidyayeep!" he chattered, squirming free of her arms to fly around in circles.

Obsidia rolled up her sleeping bag while she watched him frolic, shaking her head in amazement. She had given up hope of Ashy ever expanding his vocabulary, but somehow the abridged version of her name that she made up for the dwarf must have stuck in his hazy brain.

Could the Apexis crystals be affecting Nelashrion? He had been riding around on the back of her gryphon between two bags full of them, so perhaps the prolonged exposure had improved his mind, somehow.

As she pondered this, the whelp seemed to trip on something invisible in mid-air and went tumbling head-over-tail into the side of the gryphon. Snowfeather screeched in alarm, realized what had happened, and then proceeded to squawk angrily at him.

Ashy hopped up and down, delivering his own diatribe. “Yeep yeep yeepity yeep yeeeeeeep!” he chattered, stomping his hind paws and snapping his teeth.

"Enough!" Obsidia cried. "Quiet, both of you!"

Just as quickly as it had come, his tantrum passed, and Ashy popped up to lick her elbow. “Sidya!”

"Yeah, yeah, play innocent," she grumbled, waving him aside as he began to fly laps around her head. "Come on, we’ve got places to be."

The sun glared down from the cloudless sky like one of Deathwing’s fiery eyes, baking the endless dunes of Uldum. Even Obsidia, whose draconic metabolism relished high temperatures, found it uncomfortable. Snowfeather was sluggish, flying lower than she would have liked. The wild camels and scorpid wandering the desert below were not a threat, but there were bandits around who might see a low-flying creature as a viable target.
She followed the first river she came across, figuring it would lead to some kind of civilization. The overheated gryphon pulled on the reins, wanting to land for a drink, but she refused, even using a brief sting of magic to keep him on course. At last ornate buildings came into view, clustered around a deep, palm-lined lake. She finally allowed Snowfeather to plummet into the shallows and drink his fill, even letting Ashy out of the knapsack to do the same. He plunged into the water with a happy “yeep,” beating the surface with his wings like a scaly little swan.

When they had cooled off a bit, she tied the gryphon to a palm tree where he had shade and water, and headed toward the largest group of buildings.

"Hello," greeted...some kind of lion centaur...thing? "You are new to Ramkahen."

She had met stranger folks in her travels but was still taken aback by this unexpected face. “Um, yeah, I was wondering if there have been any sightings of dragons in the area. Like him, only much bigger,” she said, pointing at Ashy.

The lion-person immediately raised a shield and spear. “Dragon! Sound the alarm! Dragon!” he yelled.

"Wait! I mean you no harm!” she said, waving frantically.

"Stay back! We have told Deathwing before, we will never give in to his demands!" Several more of the odd cat people came running, and Obsidia found herself surrounded by a forest of spears.

"Hey, whoa, whoa, wait a minute," she said, holding up her hands in surrender. "I’m not with Deathwing! I’m looking to stop him!"

"And that creature?" snapped the guard, jabbing his spear in Ashy’s direction.

"He’s harmless, I swear."

Nelashrion seemed to prove the point by pouncing on a passing beetle and missing by at least nine inches.

"And why is he here?" the guard said, frowning.

It galled her to say it, but out of desperation she said, “He’s my pet.” It was a horrifying practice on par with slavery as far as she was concerned, but some mortals did keep captive whelps as pets—at least until the whelps grew old enough to realize they deserved better. Some fled, while others ended up as raw materials for artisans. Whelp scales were highly sought after by leatherworkers. The only reason Obsidia could get herself to say the lie was that she knew Ashy wouldn’t understand what it meant.

The guards relaxed only a fraction, still eyeing her suspiciously. “You seek
dragons? Look to the west. If you mean to join the Dark One, may the sands swallow you whole. If you plan to fight him, gods have mercy on you.”

She bowed her head gratefully. “I swear, I want nothing more than to see Deathwing’s rampage stop. Thank you.” She backed away, still dipping her head in respect, until she felt she was a safe distance away. Then she scooped up Ashy in her arms and walked quickly down the path to where Snowfeather was tied up, not daring to glance back toward where she knew they were still watching her.

"I’m sorry, Ashy," she said quietly, even knowing he was oblivious to what she had said. "You’re not a pet. And if I have anything to say about it, you never will be. I love you."

"Sidya!" he said happily, licking her chin. She supposed that was his way of saying that he loved her, too.

Snowfeather looked disappointed to see her, as if he had been hoping for a longer rest, but soon they were back in the skies, headed west. Unfortunately, none of Uldum was on her map, which ended at the southern edge of Un’Goro Crater. This land had been magically hidden from view since the days of the Titans and was only accessible after Deathwing’s return jarred loose the protective wards. Whatever was stashed in this desert, the Titans had not wanted it found by mortal hands. That meant it was probably a very bad idea to let it fall into the tentacles of the Old Gods.

With only the vaguest of directions, it was nearly suicidal to just fly into the desert at random, but the further she got into the wilds the more her instincts urged her on. It wasn’t quite the same as the homing instinct that allowed her to pinpoint her father’s location when he summoned her and her siblings—oh, how convenient that would be! Perhaps it was mere wishful thinking, but something told her that members of her dragonflight were nearby, so she decided to follow her hunch.

A high mountain peak slowly became visible on the horizon. Obsidia tried not to get her hopes up in case it was a mirage, but as she drew nearer she realized that it was real. A temple complex sprawled over the top of the mountain, similar in architectural style to the lakeside village where she had received such a hostile greeting earlier.

As she drew closer, she heard the unmistakable sound of giant wings flapping. She peered through the glaring sun and blowing sand, trying to see where the noise was coming from. Suddenly, a dark shadow fell over her, giving her a moment’s respite from the bright sunlight. Her first instinct was to be relieved, but then she remembered there were no clouds around to be causing such a shadow. And the flapping noise was getting louder.

She spun around in her saddle and looked up to see an enormous dragon flying
several hundred yards above her. It wasn’t Deathwing, but it was definitely a member of the black flight. “Hey!” she called, urging her gryphon to turn and climb to bring her closer. “Hello there! Can you hear me?” She spoke in draconic, hoping to avoid a case of mistaken identity that could leave her blasted to cinders. “Hey! I’m Obsidia, daughter of Deathwing! Wait up!”

At last the dragon heard her, and flipped his wings around to make a sudden stop. “Who?”

She soared nearer and finally recognized him. “Myzerian! It’s me, Obsidia! I’m in this stupid body at the moment for reasons I don’t want to get into because it’s a long story, but…hi!”

"Lady Obsidia, it’s an honor," he said, bowing his head. "Your father will be pleased to know that our operations here are going well, and we expect to have the Coffer within a day or two at most."

She tried to hide how little sense this made to her. “I’m actually looking for my father right now. When did you last see him?”

"Lord Deathwing was here three days ago to check on the status of the project."

"Damn, I just missed him." She slammed a hand down on her saddle in frustration. "Where was he headed next? Did he say?"

"He did not, my Lady."

"Of course not. He probably didn’t know, himself," she muttered.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. Thanks for the information. If you see my father, let him know I need to speak to him."

"Certainly, my Lady."

"And, um, what exactly does he have you doing here, anyway?"

"We seek the Coffer of Promise."

"The what of what? You’ll have to excuse me, I’ve been a bit out of the loop lately because…well, same long story I didn’t want to get into earlier."

"I would be happy to explain it to you. If we might land, first…?"

"Good idea."

Myzerian flew toward the nearest oasis, and although Obsidia tried to match his speed her poor gryphon could not quite keep up. She found him easily enough,
however, standing chest-deep in a pool of water. Several crocolisks fled in terror at the sight of him.

Obsidia let Snowfeather rest in the shade while she climbed up on a rock to be somewhat nearer to eye level with the other dragon. Myzerian was a fully-grown male about Onyxia’s age who was not a close relative but nevertheless had been a faithful servant to the Black Aspect for thousands of years. She felt she could rely on him to tell her the truth about Deathwing’s operations in Uldum, even if she did not dare trust him with details about her true mission.

"Your father seeks access to the Halls of Origination," Myzerian explained. "It was there that the Titans designed most of the species of Azeroth, including our own ancestors."

"The Titans didn’t make us from scratch," Obsidia corrected. "They took the proto-dragons that were already on Azeroth and altered them. Don’t give them more credit than they deserve."

"Well, yes, but it was in the Halls of Origination that the Titans granted us sentience, and gave the Aspects their powers."

She raised her eyebrows. “That I didn’t know,” she admitted.

"But it is not for nostalgia that we seek entry to the Halls. Our Masters seek a powerful device locked deep within."

Obsidia inwardly winced to hear him refer to the Old Gods as “our Masters,” but did not challenge him. “A device that does what, exactly?”

"Lord Deathwing did not feel I needed to know that information."

She pursed her lips in thought. “Interesting. And how would you contact him to let him know that you’ve gained entry to the Halls?”

"He said only that he would be back to investigate. He did not say when."

"And this Coffer you mentioned is the key to getting into the Halls of Origination?"

"Yes, my Lady."

"Hmm. I think I’ll stick around for awhile and see what all this is about."

"As you wish, my Lady."

As they often did, mortal adventurers made a royal mess of everything. Less than a week after arriving in Uldum, Obsidia was relaxing in the oasis, enjoying the
shade and some fresh fish. The idyllic scene was shattered when one of the goblins in Myzerian’s employ came galloping up on a camel. “Lady Obsidia!” he screeched. “Come quick! Someone just blew up our supplies, and they’re trying to steal the Coffer! Myzerian is fighting them now, but it’s bad! So bad!”

Obsidia threw the rest of her meal aside and ran to her gryphon. “Who dares attack us?” she snarled.

"I didn’t get a good look. Whoever it is, they make some pretty nice explosions, though!"

She shot him a murderous look until his smile faded, then flew off in the direction of the main encampment.

Smoke billowed from multiple places around the base of the mountain, making it hard to see at first, but eventually she spotted a huge, dark shape lying in the sand.

"Let me guess," she said to no one in particular, "another member of my flight is dead. Why am I not surprised?"

Sure enough, Myzerian lay lifeless along with a number of dead humanoids.

"Oh no," the goblin wailed, finally catching up to her on his slower camel. "This is a disaster!"

"Tell me something I don’t know, you green cretin."

"The Coffer is gone."

"Of course it is," she sighed. "Why should my luck change now?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind. I should have known better than to get my hopes up." She snapped the reins and Snowfeather took off into the air.

As she flew away, she heard the goblin yell, “But who’s going to pay me? Myzerian still owes me this week’s wages!”

She did not even glance back.

At least this time the guards at Ramkahen only glared suspiciously at her but did not draw their weapons when she approached. Obsidia held onto Snowfeather’s bridle and led him to the marketplace on foot. Farmers were unloading carts of vegetables and papyrus, but neither of these were on her shopping list.
There were a number of different races present besides the strange lion people that Myzerian had told her were called the tol’vir. She kept her eyes peeled for anyone who looked like a mage. At last she spotted a human sitting on the dock, dangling her feet in the lake while she fixed the line on her fishing pole. Her robes were not distinctly mage-like, but it was the seal of the Kirin Tor on her backpack that gave her away.

"Excuse me," Obsidia said. "Are you a mage?"

The woman turned around and smiled. “Yeah. Need something turned into a sheep?”

"Er…no. But I would pay handsomely for a portal to Dalaran."

"I’m kind of busy," the mage said slyly, fiddling with a fishing lure.

"Would three living rubies free up your busy schedule?" Obsidia asked, flashing a handful of gemstones.

"Is the gryphon going, too?"

"Yes."

"Five rubies and you’ve got a deal."

Obsidia was in no mood to haggle, so she dropped five red gems into the mage’s outstretched hand without quibbling. She could always dig up some more shinies later. Right now all she wanted was to get away from this hot, disappointing desert.

The mage set down her fishing tackle and stretched as if preparing for an arduous physical task. Obsidia watched, unimpressed, as she made a complicated gesture in the air, swirling her arms until a glimmering rift appeared before her. “One portal to Dalaran. Non-refundable, use at your own risk, have a nice day.” She sat back down on the dock and picked up her fishing pole again.

*It’s cocky mortals like you that drove Malygos off the deep end,* she thought. Still, it was by far the fastest mode of transportation around. Grasping the gryphon’s bridle tightly, she double-checked to make sure Ashy was snugly inside her knapsack and stepped into the swirling portal.

A rush of vertigo and five seconds later, she was standing in Dalaran, over half a world away from where she had been. She took a moment to find her balance before hopping back into the saddle and aiming a course for Wyrmrest Temple.
That line about “How could an armored, lava-oozing dragon with a twelve hundred foot wingspan be so difficult to find?” was directly inspired by my own extremely frustrating quest to get the “Stood in the Fire” achievement by crossing paths with Deathwing out in the world. Alas, despite leveling archaeology and scouring Azeroth for hours, he eluded me and I got the achievement in Dragon Soul LFR during a wipe on Spine. Not that I’m still bitter or anything.

Also, Nergal, the dwarf that Obsidia chats with in Un’Goro Crater, is a real NPC. He doesn’t have any quests or backstory, but he’s in game, if you want to go visit him. He does sell meat, just not usually diemetradon steaks. I guess Obsidia showed up at just the right time. ;)

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

It is always darkest before the dawn, and when Deathwing is annihilated by the other Aspects and their mortal allies, all seems lost. An unlikely ally has a bizarre idea to set things right again, but even if Obsidia can trust them, it seems too good to be true…

Chapter Notes

(The second half of this chapter is where we begin to seriously diverge from canon and into definite AU territory.)

Content warnings: Character deaths (Deathwing, and discussion of previous ones, especially Nefarian.) Dead dragon bodies in a mausoleum setting. Discussion of mental illness. One instance of a graphic threat of bodily harm. Brief mention of whelp scales being used by leatherworkers. Spoilers for the novels Thrall: Twilight of the Aspects and Day of the Dragon.

Notes: Remember that this fic goes by my headcanons for the way the Titans uplifted proto-dragons into modern dragons, as it was written prior to Dawn of the Aspects. Those headcanons will be explained in the fic, but just be aware that they are totally different from what the novella made canon.

Also, Wrathion will show up in the next chapter, for those of you who are awaiting the whelp’s appearance. If you haven’t read my fic ”The Beginning,” this would be a very good time to catch up. Chapters 1-9 of that fic happen the same way in this AU, but this time around Fahrad isn’t the last corrupted black dragon in the world after Deathwing’s fall…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wyrmrest Temple was visible from a great distance across the snow-covered plains of Dragonblight, rising out of the ground as a symbolic center for all dragonkind. Obsidia squinted in the bitingly cold wind, shivering even more than usual after coming from the desert heat. Something about the familiar building looked… wrong. She urged Snowfeather to fly faster, then pulled him into a sudden stop when she saw the state of the temple.

The foundation was cracked, several of the beautiful arches had fallen, and as she circled around to get a look at the lower levels where the sanctums were—

Where were the sanctums? A mossy crater stood where the Ruby Sanctum’s entryway had been, dotted with small flowers that indicated the red flight’s magic
at work. The masonry around the other sanctums was crumbled nearly to dust, with no signs of the swirling portals that once granted admittance to the pockets of space-time that had been each flight’s most sacred place.

What in the world had happened? What force was powerful enough to wipe out all five of the sanctums, and who would dare? Even during the most bitter times of war between the flights, the sanctums had been untouched. They were little corners of the universe uniquely reflective of each flight’s aesthetics and abilities, private and holy. Perhaps more importantly in these times, they were also open to any broodmothers who needed a safe place to lay their eggs.

An angry roar came from behind her, and Obsidia turned in the saddle to see a fully-grown red dragon charging in her direction. There was no time to question this breach of temple etiquette, and if her gryphon had not instinctively dived to avoid the red’s burst of flame she would have died on the spot.

What in the world…? Wyrmrest was neutral ground. No one was allowed to harm another dragon there. Malygos’ brood had broken that rule during the Nexus War, but for a red to initiate an attack was shocking.

Snowfeather flew as fast as his wings could carry them away from the temple, with the red dragon close behind.

"What are you doing?" Obsidia screamed back at her pursuer in draconic. "Are you crazy?"

The pure, seething hatred in the red’s eyes took her aback. “Tell the Twilight Father we will not be distracted again!” was all he said before breathing fire in her direction once more.

Confused and panicked, Obsidia yanked on the reins to turn the gryphon out of the path of the flame breath. When her quick maneuvers successfully evaded the third and fourth attacks, the red broke off the chase and flew back toward the temple.

Heart pounding as if to break out of her chest, she went to the only nearby place that she thought might be safe: the Obsidian Dragonshrine.

The small valley was covered in lava, both the old, hard variety and the steaming fresh kind, making it a welcome oasis of heat in the middle of the frozen tundra. The last time Obsidia had visited the shrine it had been overrun with Scourge, but now all was quiet. She flew directly into the cave entrance known as the Maw of Neltharion, briefly wondering if anyone had thought to add a large metal chin outside to keep the resemblance current.

If the sanctums below Wyrmrest Temple were where life began for dragons, metaphorically and sometimes literally, then the shrines were where their lives
ended. They served as mausoleums and memorials to the notable fallen from each flight. Not all were granted the honor of burial inside the sanctums, but as a daughter of the Aspect she could expect to be laid to rest here someday. Assuming there was anybody left to bear her remains here and perform the rites…

Obsidia tied up Snowfeather just inside the cave where he couldn’t be seen from outside, and let Ashy out of her knapsack. He hadn’t been able to see the cause of all the commotion, and tipped his head at her with a curious “Yeep?”

"Apparently we’re not welcome at Wyrmrest anymore," she explained, although he looked at her blankly. "Now stay close, I don’t want you accidentally desecrating our ancestors’ graves."

"Yeep!" Ashy said cheerfully, landing on her shoulder.

Normally, the Shrinekeeper would have come to greet a visitor by now, but there was no sign of Serinar. Obsidia investigated the outer chambers and found them abandoned save for enormous bones. The silence was more than a little unnerving, and she was even more glad than usual to have Ashy along for company.

She ascended a sloping incline to reach the second section of the shrine, stepping around a stray vertebra that was larger than her entire human body.

There was an eerie beauty to the caverns, lit by magic fire and decorated with natural stone formations. Viscous lava oozed in slow streams from vents near the roof, disappearing into pools along the sides of the corridor. Everywhere there were bones. Skulls, ribs, spines, femurs, teeth and claws lay alone or in piles, some belonging to adults as old as the Aspects and some clearly belonging to younger drakes. Most were old enough to be dry and brittle: a stark white against the dark brown stone. Yet here and there a more recent addition made her avert her eyes. She recognized a few: Saviana lay on a ledge as if sleeping, and in a far corner she spotted what she thought was Darkblaze, though she did not care to get a closer look. He had been the leader of the black dragonflight’s operations in the Redridge Mountains, where barbaric humans made a business of skinning whelps for their scales. She doubted there were many whelps left there anymore, and silently hoped that the human leatherworkers were all starving in poverty now.

Just when Obsidia had decided the shrine had been completely abandoned, a voice made her jump and cry out in fright, causing Ashy to fall off her shoulder.

"Whomever you are, leave now. This is your only warning." It was a female voice, hoarse from disuse but somehow familiar.

Recovering quickly from the scare, she said loudly, “I am Obsidia, daughter of Neltharion, and I have every right to be here in my flight’s shrine. Show yourself.”
Ashy wandered off, chasing a spider, and before Obsidia could remind him to stay close, a dragon emerged from a side chamber. Her charcoal-gray scales and head fins were instantly recognizable.

"Seara? What are you doing here?" Obsidia gasped.

"I have nowhere else. All I love is here," she said flatly.

"What do you mean? Don’t tell me Nefarian and the rest…?"

"See for yourself," she said, stepping aside.

Obsidia peeked into the chamber and froze in horror. “No… All of them? How?”

"How does it always happen? Mortals invaded Blackrock Mountain again." The bitter, harsh tone of her voice was in stark contrast to the optimistic, shy dragon Obsidia knew from before.

She wanted to look away but somehow could not tear her eyes from the macabre sight. Onyxia was off to the right side, by her beloved Sartharion. Poor, blind Atramedes was to the left. Nefarian lay in the center of the room, with the skeletons of three drakes to his left and the fresher bodies of three more to his right. She recognized Pyrecraw, Maimgor and Ivoroc, and no doubt the skeletons were Firemaw, Flamegor and Ebonroc.

Seara stood beside Obsidia, staring blankly at the corpses of her mate and six oldest children.

"Seara, I… I don’t know what to say. I’m so sorry."

"I have buried my love twice, now," she said quietly. "I intend to guard him until I must join him. No one will disturb his rest again."

"I had no idea any of this happened," Obsidia said, shaking her head. "I’ve been out of contact with everyone for months, trying to track down my father."

Seara snorted a puff of smoke. “Unless you were seeking to kill him, I don’t want to hear another word about that monster.”

"I was hoping to cure him, somehow, or at least help him shake off the Old Gods’ control."

Her sister-in-law looked at her as if Obsidia was the one whose sanity was shredded by the Old Gods. “You’re a fool if you think Deathwing deserves anything but annihilation,” she said vehemently.

"He wasn’t always—"
"I know!" Seara raised her spiked tail in an aggressive posture. "He used to be different, he wasn’t always so nasty and violent, he used to be all sorts of wonderful things. You’ve told me that; Nefarian told me that. I never saw it. All I saw was a deformed horror who interrupted my love’s rest by ripping him from his grave and turning him into an undead abomination! All I met was a crazy monster who ruined everything! Everything!"

"Seara, I—" Obsidia tried to say something comforting, but couldn’t get a word in edgewise.

"My beloved mate is dead twice over. I had to watch my Nefarian die twice! You can’t begin to imagine how painful that is! The children we managed to have after so much difficulty are dead. My home is ransacked and defiled, my life’s work lost forever. If your father had left us alone we would still have been together, happy and safe. But no!"

"Father didn’t kill Nefarian!" Obsidia blurted. "Mortal mercenaries did that!"

"And he didn’t care! He could have filled Orgrimmar’s canyons to the brim with lava in retribution, but he completely ignored us!"

"I know!" Obsidia snapped. "Don’t forget, Nefarian was my big brother. I loved him and Onyxia so much… I was just as horrified as you were to see what they were turned into. It wasn’t right. But if you have to blame someone, blame the Old Gods. They’re the ones pulling the strings. They’re the ones who drove my father insane and prompted him to cause all this chaos. I know you didn’t know him before, but Nefarian was right—our father used to be different. Better. The father I knew growing up would have stopped at nothing to protect and avenge his children."

"It doesn’t matter anymore. They’re all dead." Seara stepped into the chamber and flopped down in front of Nefarian’s mummified body with her back to Obsidia.

Obsidia paused to compose herself. "There’s still a chance to save what’s left of our flight," she said quietly.

"You’re talking to the wrong dragon if you’re looking for someone to help repopulate the flight," Seara said with heavy self-loathing.

"I meant trying to purify those who still survive. The Apexis crystals—"

"—were useless," Seara interrupted. "They didn’t stop any of this from happening," she said, gesturing at the array of dead dragons. "They didn’t stop the Twilight dragonflight from assaulting Wyrmrest."

"Is that what happened? I nearly got roasted by a red sentry when I tried to visit."
"Yes. The Twilights attacked, causing a diversion while other agents destroyed the sanctums."

"Father’s allies did that?" Obsidia was sickened at the thought, and then slightly surprised that she could still be shocked by the depths of Deathwing’s depravity.

"Yes, they did," Seara said sharply. "Do you still want to ‘save’ him?"

"But the Obsidian Sanctum was destroyed, too!"

"So? It has stood empty since…that happened,” she said, gesturing at Sartharion’s body. “Deathwing doesn’t care. The entire world will be a Twilight sanctum if he has his way.”

"What about Nalice and Serinar?"

"They both fled as soon as Deathwing erupted from Deepholm. Guess they figured they wouldn’t be welcome at Wyrmrest anymore, and they were right. And before you ask, no, I have no idea where they’ve gone. It doesn’t matter."

"I assume no one at Wyrmrest knows you’ve taken over as Shrinekeeper?"

"I have done no such thing. I’m not going to travel all over gathering the remains of the fallen and bringing them back here. The rest of the world can turn to ash for all I care. All that matters is in this room." She reached out and stroked one of the horns curving around Nefarian’s cheek, soon becoming lost in her own thoughts.

Obsidia stood for a minute or two, trying to wrap her mind around everything she had learned. It would have been easy to simply give up, sit down next to Seara and wallow in grief until the Hour of Twilight wiped all life from Azeroth.

She took a deep breath. That’s not what Neltharion the Earth Warder would want her to do.

"I’ll be going now. I’m so sorry about…all of this."

Seara said nothing.

"I’ll let you know if anything important happens."

Silence.

Obsidia sighed and turned to look for her nephew. “Come on, Ashy, we’re leaving.”

The whelp swooped over to her, covered in cobwebs and chewing happily. Apparently his spider hunt had been quite successful.

She managed a small smile and brushed webs off him as she walked away.
Dalaran was not nearly as crowded as it had been when the fight against the Lich King was in full swing, but the city was still host to a number of mages, merchants and explorers. Obsidia rewarded Snowfeather with a spot in one of the deluxe stables in gratitude for saving her from the red dragon’s surprise attack. Next she rented a room above the Legerdemain Lounge where she could rest and try to decide what to do next—and give Ashy a bath, since he still had bits of spider web stuck to his scales.

As she rummaged in her coin purse for gold to pay the innkeeper, the high elf noticed Ashy perched on her shoulder. “Oh!” he said. “You must be the one this letter is addressed to.”

"Huh?"

He handed her an envelope. Written on the front was “To the Lady in Purple With the Black Whelp Who Will Be Renting a Room Soon.”

"What the…?" She didn’t recognize the handwriting. "Who left this for me?"

"Some gnome, I think," the innkeeper said with a shrug. "I wasn’t here that day."

"How long has it been here?"

"Not long. Three days, maybe?"

"Um…thanks." Obsidia hurried upstairs to read in privacy.

She let Ashy explore the room while she ripped open the letter and began to read.

"Greetings, Lady Obsidia," it began, and she was startled to find it written in draconic rather than the Common that had been on the envelope. "We have been observing you and your efforts to neutralize the threat Deathwing poses to the world. We find your determination admirable and believe we can provide you with vital information that could mean the difference between extinction and salvation for not only your flight, but the rest of life on Azeroth as well. There will be someone waiting to meet you on the northern shore of the lake behind Stormwind Keep precisely twelve days after you receive this letter. We look forward to speaking with you."

There was no signature, only a postscript reading “Stay away from Dragonblight between now and then. It will soon become considerably more dangerous.”

Obsidia read the letter three times, trying to figure out who had sent it and what it meant. Someone had been watching her? And they wanted to help?
"Clear as mud," she said to herself as she ran a bath for her nephew. She went over the message in her mind while she washed dirt and cobwebs out of the whelp’s scales, trying to read between the lines. The letter was in draconic, which exceedingly few mortals could write. That meant it was probably written by another dragon, but who would want to help her?

"Ashy, stop wiggling all over. You’re slippery and I need to clean your ears."

"Yeep!" he complained.

"I know, I know," she soothed.

There was a slight chance some member of the blue dragonflight would be sympathetic to her cause. There had been a rumor at one point that Malygos’ son, Arygos, had allied with Deathwing in order to gain power in his quest to become the next blue Aspect. However, as far as she knew that had not been confirmed, and Arygos was dead now, in any case.

The greens? They would have no trouble watching her through her dreams, but the tone of the letter was too practical to belong to one from that ethereal group.

The reds would put the preservation of life above more petty concerns, but they had made no secret of their resolve to wipe out the black dragonflight for good. Since Deathwing’s return they had gone on the offensive, wiping out black dragons in the Badlands—she thought of poor Nyxondra—and the Twilight Highlands.

The bronzes? They had been reclusive for many years, but under such dire circumstances perhaps— Wait. The letter had been sitting here for at least three days, yet it told her to meet someone “precisely twelve days” after she received it. Only a bronze would know exactly when she would read it. But why would they help her?

Ashy flapped his wings, spraying water all over.

"Ashy!" she scolded.

"Yeep! Sidya!"

"Don’t try to butter me up by saying my name. I’m thrilled you can say it…sort of…but you still have to behave!"

"Yeep," he said cheerfully, kicking both back paws in the water.

Obsidia turned her head to keep the soap out of her eyes, but her hair and robes were still soaked by the time Ashy was clean. “I give you a bath, you give me one, is that it?”

"Yeep!" he agreed. He gave her a slurp across the cheek before zooming around
the room, dripping water on everything.

She sat down with her forehead against the edge of the bathtub and exhaled slowly. “I don’t know how you did it, sis,” she whispered to Onyxia’s memory. “You had so many whelps, and I can barely handle one.” She looked up just in time to see Ashy knock a lamp over. “Then again, you kept them in a cave like nature intended.”

The towering gates of Stormwind City became visible through the trees as a lone figure approached on the road. She wore a hooded black cloak over her purple robes, obscuring her face from view. Her mount seemed skittish, and she had to keep a firm grip on the reins to keep the charcoal-gray pony in line. Two heavy saddlebags hung on each side of the poor horse. Only a close observer would have noticed that one of the bags was moving slightly as if there was something alive within.

"Hush, Ashy," the rider whispered. "We’re almost to the city and I don’t want to have to explain you to the guards."

The bag fell still.

Obsidia had tried to avoid Stormwind after her sister’s fall, partly out of fear that someone would recognize her and remember her ties to “Katrana Prestor,” and partly because it was filled with too many painful memories. She still half expected to hear her sister’s laugh, or to see Highlord Bolvar stride by.

Her sister’s killer stood in the spot where those two had once spent their days, and Obsidia did not trust herself not to blow her cover should she find herself face to face with Varian Wrynn. Her blood boiled at the thought that he still lived, but trapped in a mortal form she was not powerful enough to assassinate him.

Assassinate? No, that was too neat a term, too human. She wanted to rend his pitiful body into shreds, to feel his bones crack, to taste his blood as it sprayed out with the last feeble spasms of his dying heart.

Obsidia pulled on the reins of her mount and stopped to compose herself. This was neither the time nor the place to dwell on such thoughts. She would have to be on her best, most human-like behavior today. At least her rage in this case stemmed from a perfectly natural desire for revenge for her fallen sibling, and not the irrational, all-encompassing hostility of the Old Gods. There was comfort to be had in that distinction.

She dug her heels into the pony’s sides to get it moving again, but the animal was reluctant. It knew what she was, and the scent of her and her nephew kept the beast
constantly on the verge of panic. She found herself missing Snowfeather, who was temperamental but at least had grown accustomed to her. Unfortunately winged mounts were ill suited for narrow city streets so she had found a stable for the gryphon in Goldshire and rented this cranky horse instead.

The city guards noted her approach, but, seeing her as a fellow human, they greeted her as they would any other citizen.

"Hail, my lady," said the older of the two guards flanking the gates.

She nodded haughtily to acknowledge him and continued into the city without pausing. Her regal bearing and fine clothes made most assume that she was a noblewoman of some sort—which was true, in a way—and allowed her to get away with things that a commoner could not.

Her eyes rose to take in the front of Stormwind as she rode across the bridge to the main city. Scorched gouges were still visible atop the city walls: her father’s calling card. Obsidia’s mouth curled into a smirk. He had left quite an impression on Stormwind, from the toppled statue by the front gates, to the damaged clock tower, the crumbled battlements, and the entire park district that was now rubble in the ocean.

*Good, Obsidia thought. Serves them right. I wish Father had flattened the whole damn city!* Her expression darkened again as she passed under the high stone arch where her beloved sister’s head had once been mounted as a trophy. She ground her teeth, anger once again bubbling up in her chest. Damn Varian Wrynn…

*No. Control yourself,* she thought. His reckoning would come someday. Just not today.

As she traversed the trade district she was struck by the diversity of the crowd. The first time she had stumbled through here, over six years ago, the streets were mostly filled with humans, with the occasional dwarf or gnome, and once in a while a night elf. Now draenei strolled across the square, their hooves loud on the cobblestones, and shaggy worgen did business alongside their curse-free human brethren. The racial composition of the Alliance was of little concern to her, but it was a visible reminder of how much had changed.

Obsidia sighed, the weight of grief once more constricting her chest. Onyxia. Nefarian. Sartharion. Nyxondra. Kalaran. Atramedes. Myzerian. So many lost. Too many. And that wasn’t even counting those who still drew breath but had been lost in other ways: Seara, Sintharia and Neltharion. As interested as she was to hear what the mysterious letter-writer had to say, it was impossible to imagine anything that could undo the damage the black dragonflight had suffered.

As she rode through Old Town she noticed quite a crowd of people milling in the
streets. They seemed animated about something, smiling and laughing, even
asting with mugs of ale. *Odd,* she thought, *I don’t remember any mortal festivals
going on right now. Pilgrim’s Bounty is over and it’s not time for Winter Veil yet.*

She thought no more about it until she was crossing the bridge across the canal to
the dwarven district, when a sudden *“pop pop bang pop”* startled her horse. The
terrified animal reared back on its hind legs and shrieked, nearly tossing her into
the canal. A passing human—a paladin, by the look of his armor—rushed over to
help. He grabbed the bridle and soothed the horse with the ease of someone with
years of experience.

"Thank you," she said, trying to compose herself while tucking her black hair back
into her hood. "What was that?"

"Fireworks," the man said, gesturing upward. Sure enough, streaks of orange,
yellow and purple lights stained the sky, leaving ghostly whips of smoke to slowly
disperse in their wake.

"Fireworks?" she repeated, frowning. "Why?"

"Oh, haven’t you heard? Deathwing is dead!"

Obsidia paled, gripping the pommel of her saddle tightly to keep from falling off.
“What?”

Mistaking her reaction for happiness, he nodded with a huge grin. “An emissary
from the bronze dragonflight just delivered the news along with a chunk of the
beast’s jaw the size of a small cottage!”

"Where?" she burst out.

"They’re setting it up across the lake," the paladin said, gesturing vaguely to the
northeast.

Without another word, she snapped the reins and galloped away.

It couldn’t be. Surely she would have felt something, would have known
somehow, had some signal, something, anything…

Her steed was already disagreeable and balked when she tried to urge greater speed
from it. By the time she reached the lakeshore the animal refused to go faster than
a canter, and in frustration she vaulted out of the saddle and took off running. The
evening light was beginning to fade and she had a difficult time seeing exactly
what was going on at the far shore, but there was definitely something being
constructed—some kind of arch or wall.

She ran faster, boots thumping on the damp grass. The north shore of the lake…
twelve days after receiving the letter... They had known. The damned bronzes had known, and planned to have her arrive at this moment.

Now she was able to make out the unmistakable silhouettes of drakonids, two of them, both at least fifteen feet tall, working on the construction.

She gulped down air, her chest burning, urging her pathetic mortal body to move faster—

Wait. If Deathwing was dead, then the shape-binding curse must have lifted! She did not dare to test that theory in Stormwind, but soon, when she learned the truth...

She stumbled to a halt several carriage-lengths away from the drakonids, gasping for breath. Was that...? It was. A huge chunk of Deathwing’s metal chin swayed from a massive chain as the drakonids hefted it into place. It hung from a carved stone archway, a grisly trophy to prove victory over the Destroyer.

Obsidia stared, her mind awhirl. Part of her wanted to scream, to weep, to mourn her father. But another part of her had already done so. That metal chin plate was not something her father had ever worn. That thing that emerged from Deepholm wearing his body and bearing his name had worn it. Not her father.

Her father had been clever, devious, patient, strong, proud, and determined. The creature wearing that chin plate was a raving, chaotic, aloof monster.

Her father had died after the battle of Grim Batol. Today he had finally been granted his rest.

Obsidia sank to her knees in the grass and stared at the monument until the tears in her eyes finally overflowed down her cheeks.

She had no idea when she gained company, but after her crying subsided a high-pitched female voice beside her said, “All the flights suffered a great loss today.”

Obsidia flinched in surprise and snapped her head around to see who had spoken.

What appeared to be a white-haired gnome in a black-and-white dress stood beside her. They were eye-to-eye thanks to Obsidia’s kneeling position, and as soon as their gaze met she knew this was no more a gnome than she was a human.

"Go away, bronze," she snarled and turned away, wiping her cheeks dry with the sleeve of her robe.

"I’m glad you received the letter. I am Chronormu. Mortals know me as Chromie. You may call me that if you wish."

"I know. I recognized the hairdo."
She self-consciously adjusted the two swirling buns on either side of her head. “Do you realize what transpired today?”

"Obviously, my father is dead."

"True. Do you know how?"

"I don’t want to know the gory details," Obsidia said angrily. "You’ve won. Can’t you just leave me alone?"

"My flight borrowed the Dragon Soul from the distant past and brought it to the present time to use as a weapon against its creator."

Obsidia boggled at the audacity of such a move but said nothing.

Chromie continued. “My lord Nozdormu and the other Aspects had to channel all of their Titan-given powers into the Dragon Soul to destroy Deathwing. The Aspects…are no more.”

"They died, too?"

"Not precisely. They will, eventually, though. They are no longer immortal."

Her own grief momentarily put aside in face of such extraordinary news, Obsidia gaped at the other dragon in disbelief. "You mean to tell me that none of the Aspects have their powers anymore?"

"They have the abilities that are expected from any member of their flights, but their Aspecthood has…expired."

She sat back on her heels and shook her head in astonishment. “I didn’t even know that could happen!”

"Most didn’t. But it can, and did."

"So now Azeroth is without Aspects to guide and guard it, with the Old God infestation still in full swing, and the Burning Legion on the loose."

"Yes." Chromie’s tone was infuriatingly calm and matter-of-fact about the entire situation.

"Well, isn’t that a fine state of affairs? Couldn’t the Titans have foreseen something like this happening?" Obsidia stood up and gestured randomly, as if somehow pointing to the Titans, wherever they might be. “‘Sure, we’ll leave you with these powerful guardians, but oh, oops, if they use up too much power you’re all doomed!’ What a bunch of incompetents!"

The bronze smiled patiently. “Contrary to some of the shorter-lived races’
misconceptions, the Titans are not gods, nor are they infallible.”

"Gee, I hadn’t noticed," Obsidia said, her tone oozing sarcasm. "It’s not like they chained the Old Gods right next to my father’s headquarters or anything. Nothing could possibly go wrong with that plan!"

"You speak ill of the Old Gods."

"Speak ill…? Damn right I speak ill of them! They ruined my family! Hell, they’ve practically ruined Azeroth!"

"Of course," Chromie agreed, "but I’ve never heard a black dragon admit it."

"When was the last time you sat down and had a chat with one?"

"In this timeway? I’d have to think."

"Never mind. Did you just call me here to gloat over my father’s death, or did you actually want to help somehow?"

Rather than answering, the bronze countered with another question. "Are you really fully cognizant of your flight’s corruption? You understand what the Old Gods have been doing?"

"I don’t think even the Old Gods understand what they’re doing. Chaos for chaos’ sake seems to be their standard operating procedure," Obsidia said bitterly. "But yes. I was just a whelpling when Father’s madness began, but I remember a little of what he was like…what we were all like." Her voice softened, her eyes unfocusing as memories took over.

“He was so huge and powerful, but also incredibly gentle with my siblings and me. We’d swarm all over him like gnats, but he never hurt us, even accidentally. He could even tell us all apart, and know which consort we belonged to. He truly loved my mother and his other mates. I remember once he was shaping some hills to provide a better sun angle for some project Alexstrasza was trying to grow, and he made it so the ridge line was a perfect silhouette of my mother. She told him it was silly but I know it meant a lot to her.”

Chromie said nothing but seemed to be listening intently, and Obsidia let the flow of memories continue.

"He was patient and wise, always weighing options and planning ahead. That makes him sound too serious, though. He was quick to smile, and he loved riddles. Some of the puns he’d come up with…ugh! Sometimes Malygos would get him laughing so hard that the ground shook around him, and we whelps would get bounced around. We’d make a game of it, to see who could stay on their feet the longest before we tipped over." She gave a wistful chuckle, remembering the
good times.

"He seemed happy. I didn’t realize…none of us did…what was happening. Some
days he was fine. Some days he was quiet and we figured he was just tired, or
preoccupied with his duties as Earth Warder. And some days he’d be grouchy and
impatient, but everyone has days like that. We had no inkling of the battle waging
in his mind. Now that I’m older, and I’ve felt how insidiously the whispers creep
into your head, I can imagine a little of what he faced. At least I could benefit
from the knowledge of those who fell before, but even though I was supposedly
prepared to defend against them, they still nearly had me.” She shuddered.

"And I think about how, after he broke free of their will, he had to live with what
they had made him do to those he loved the most. All those years the Old Gods
were still out there, waiting for him to let his guard down so they could finish what
they’d begun. He fought them so long, and was in so much pain the whole time…”
Unable to hold her emotion in check anymore, she began to cry again.

Chromie put a comforting hand on the highest part she could reach, which
happened to be her hip. “I am sorry for your loss.”

"No, you’re not. You can’t be sorry that Deathwing the Destroyer is gone."

"You are correct. However, Azeroth is, and has been, a much poorer place without
Neltharion the Earth Warder."

Obsidia stammered an incoherent thank-you, stunned to hear sympathy from a
member of an enemy flight.

"You are also correct in pointing out that perhaps the Titans’ original plans for the
Aspects were…less than satisfactory in the long term."

"Ha! You bronzes have a gift for understatement."

"What was that you were saying about him breaking free of the will of the Old
Gods? You mean during the War of the Ancients?"

Obsidia sat down on the grass again, looking out over the lake. Chromie joined
her. “I know our flight has been enemies with…well, everybody, since the
Sundering. And I readily admit that my father was never the same after that. But
there wasn’t any of this, ‘Azeroth will burn, all life must perish, the Masters will
unmake the world’ business until after he retreated to Deepholm. What he did, he
did for the good of the black dragonflight. You and the others may not agree with
his methods—”

Chromie snorted. “We bronzes aren’t the only ones with a knack for
understatement.”
"Point taken. I mean, he was kind of crazy, I guess, in a way, but it was his own kind of crazy. Anyway, Nefarian said he remembered the Sundering fairly well, being older than I. There were voices in the Well that day, urging Father to give up the Dragon Soul. The Old Gods wanted it to break free of their bondage. Father absolutely refused. He resisted their compulsion even in the face of such severe magical attacks that he would certainly have died had he not been an Aspect. The force of their spellwork eventually blasted him away from the Well, and the Soul was retrieved by mortals. Still, he had broken the control the Old Gods had over him. From that time until he recuperated in Deepholm, nothing he did benefited them. His mind was damaged, yes, but his will was his own."

Chromie considered this, nodding slowly.

Obsidia continued, glancing behind her at the monument being erected. “When he returned from Deepholm, he looked different, of course, with new armor and that huge chin plate…but he acted different, too.” She rested her chin on her knees, her voice subdued. “Whatever you may think of him, he was good to us, his flight. We were everything to him. He sought to remove any threat to us, especially from the mortal races, and when our numbers dwindled he went so far as to risk his life to find a safe place for black eggs on Draenor. It was all about the black dragonflight, his family. The Old Gods never factored into any of it until Deepholm. When he returned, he was like a different dragon, always going on about the Hour of Twilight and how all life had to be purged from Azeroth. He didn’t seem to care about the original black dragons anymore. The new Twilight dragonflight was his favorite, and nothing the rest of us did was good enough.”

"We had reports of the change in him, but not to that extent."

"It was…hard to miss.” A moment of silence passed, until Obsidia quipped, "Besides, if we were being controlled by the Old Gods all these millenia, do you really think we’d have escaped without growing tentacles, or a bunch of extra eyes, or something?"

"Deathwing did, actually, in the last moments," Chromie said quietly, crushing any attempt at levity. "As his armor plates came off in battle, lava tentacles sprouted from his broken body."

Obsidia covered her mouth. “I can’t say I’m surprised, but…I don’t want to think about it. What, um…happened to the rest of his body?” she asked, looking back again at the jaw fragment.

"There wasn’t anything else. The corruption was so severe that he basically dissolved into the Maelstrom."

Obsidia closed her eyes and shook her head. “Probably just as well, at that point,” she whispered, trying very hard not to start crying again.
Chromie turned her gaze back to the lake. “After trying and failing to kill him in more traditional ways, the Aspects determined that the only way to stop the Old Gods from regenerating his body was to unmake him. And the only way to do that was with the power of the Dragon Soul.”

"You said something about taking it from the past to use in the present? I didn’t think you bronzes approved of meddling like that."

Chromie gave her a sly, sidelong glance. “My Lord Nozdormu stretched the rules a tiny bit.”

"How tiny?" Obsidia asked, lowering an eyebrow.

"Tiny…ish. He borrowed the Dragon Soul from the time during the War of the Ancients when it was at its strongest. It did just what we wanted it to do by erasing Deathwing from existence so completely that the Old Gods had nothing left to work with. Then we immediately placed it back in its proper era, a fraction of a second after we took it, so the timelines are preserved. It all turned out fine, but Aman’Thul probably wouldn’t have approved."

Obsidia raised an eyebrow. “So the rumors about the Infinite Dragonflight are true? Funny that Nozdormu had…er, will have…better luck at creating a new dragonflight than my poor brother ever did.”

Chromie lowered her voice, although they were a safe distance from the drakonid workers and no one else was nearby. “He believes that at this point in the timeline, since he is no longer empowered as an Aspect, he no longer needs to abide by the rules that came along with that power. Following the Titans’ guidelines to the letter has had some unfortunate consequences.”

"That’s one way to put it. So why are you telling me all this?" Obsidia crossed her arms on her chest and frowned.

"I don’t mean to imply that we are allowing the timeways to unravel. We are not about to give up our stewardship of time. It’s simply that we now feel free to make certain, um, tweaks that we would not have dared before."

"Sounds like a slippery slope to Infinitehood to me."

"Perhaps. But the Infinite flight has already appeared in our timeline, so clearly they are formed at some point. In fact, they must be formed in order to maintain the integrity of our timeline.”

"Time stuff makes my head hurt."

Chromie smiled. “You get used to it after a century or two. Non-linear centuries, of course, but… Ahem.”
"Yeah, yeah, okay, so now that Nozdormu is a free agent he can mess around more. Got it. But what am I supposed to do? I’m no bronze; I can’t zip around the timeways. I’d probably step on a bug and erase the tauren civilization or something."

Chromie giggled. “It doesn’t work that way, silly! And it’s not the past we’re concerned with at this juncture. It’s the future. The only thing keeping the Old Gods from wreaking havoc all over Azeroth is the fact that they’re imprisoned in the core of the planet. And the thing keeping them imprisoned is the integrity of the earth.”

"Right," Obsidia said, following her so far.

"Well, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, the planet has seen better days. If all the mortal shaman worked around the clock for a few years they might be able to get the situation somewhat under control, but we don’t have that kind of time. The Old Gods aren’t going to sit by and twiddle their thumbs…er, tentacles…while the Earthen Ring works. They’re already enjoying more freedom than they’ve had since the Titans left. Take a look at Stonetalon Peak, the Twilight Highlands, or Dragonblight. They are breaking free even as we speak. We can’t afford to wait."

"And you think I can fix any of that? I’m not the Earth Warder. I can’t even move a pebble," Obsidia scoffed.

"No, no. The Old Gods are immensely powerful, and we need immense power to counter them: power like the Aspect of Earth once wielded. Before his corruption, Neltharion could have mended the rifts in mere days and seen to it that the Old Gods were buried deeper than ever before. They knew his abilities could free them; that’s why they targeted him in the first place. He could also contain them now, and stop them from spreading their evil any further than it already has."

"So you’re going to go back in time to ‘borrow’ my father like you did the Dragon Soul?" Obsidia said incredulously.

"Oh my, no! Borrowing an object, even a very powerful one, is much less disruptive to the timeline than displacing a living thing—not to mention easier to put back a nanosecond after taking it."

"So then what…?"

"As I said, it is the future that concerns us now. Please understand, Nozdormu is not acting out of any fondness for your flight. He simply believes that anything that happens as a direct result of the Old Gods’ interference cannot be good for Azeroth, and cannot part of the Titans’ plans."

"The Titans can take their grandiose plans and shove them, as far as I’m
concerned.” Obsidia sneered.

"You are not alone in that sentiment," Chromie said diplomatically, winking.

"All right, get to the point. What are you proposing?"

"How much do you know about the Halls of Origination?"

"I know the Old Gods very much wanted my father to get inside to find something for them. And I know it’s where the Titans tinkered with the different life forms of Azeroth, and gave the Aspects their powers."

Chromie nodded. “Yes. Thankfully the weapon the Old Gods wanted has been neutralized so it is no longer a concern. However, we believe that the laboratories there still have the mechanisms the Titans used to create the Aspects.”

Obsidia’s eyes widened. “You mean the Aspects could have their powers restored?”

"Sadly, no. It appears the Titans created the Hearts of Azeroth first, then built a mechanism to merge them with the bodies of dragons specially bred and engineered for that purpose. The Heart and dragon-parts go in, and an Aspect comes out. The Hearts contained within Nozdormu and the other three are now depleted of all their power, and cannot be recharged. However, the Heart of Earth still has plenty of untapped power in it."

"Wasn’t it destroyed when my father was…what did you call it? Unmade?"

"No. The Hearts are virtually indestructible."

Obsidia frowned. “Okay, let me get this straight. You want me to take the Heart of Earth to the Halls of Origination, plug it into some Titan machine, and hope it spits out a new copy of my father.”

"Essentially, yes."

"Do you have any idea how ludicrous that sounds?"

"Yes." Chromie smiled placidly.

Obsidia gawked at her. “Wait, you said a dragon also has to go into the mechanism.”

"Not an entire dragon. We believe a sufficiently pure sample would work. From what we can tell, the Titans used samples of genetic material from the strongest proto-drake they could find as their starting point."

"Galakrond."
Chromie nodded, looking pleased. “You know the legend.”

"The way I heard it was a lot more mystical than tissue samples in a machine."

"Legends do tend to be embellished. Does the black flight tell the version where Galakrond’s fingers each turned into one of the Aspects, or the one where he flies into a rainbow and explodes into all the different colors?"

Obsidia gave her an odd look. “No, ours says that he mated with a dragon made of pure light, who laid the five different colored eggs.”

"Ah, a romantic version. I like that one," Chromie said cheerfully. "Anyway, it seems the truth is far less poetic and far more scientific. Are you willing to test our theory, crazy though it may sound?"

"Why me? You know more about all this than I do. Why don’t you go to the Halls of Origination and try this?"

"There is one piece of the puzzle yet missing. If we are able to restore the Earth Warder to life in his original, uncorrupted state, there would be nothing stopping the Old Gods from starting over again. You know all too well how pervasive their influence is. We cannot risk history repeating itself. Trust me, it gets really messy when that happens."

"I can imagine," Obsidia said blandly.

"We believe you may hold the solution to that problem."

"Me?"

Chromie smiled enigmatically and pointed to her neck.


"Yes. We don’t know what they’re made of, either, but we’ve seen their power as we’ve observed you. If we shield the Earth Warder from the very beginning, perhaps we can prevent the Old Gods from ever gaining a foothold. Or a tentaclehold. Whatever."

For the first time, a hopeful smile crept onto Obsidia’s face. “Do you really think it could work?”

"There is a positive outcome in sixty-four percent of the timeways we explored."

"And the other thirty-six percent?"

"Thirty-three percent of the others resulted in the experiment’s failure. Two percent brought Neltharion back to life without the powers of an Aspect, and one
percent brought about the immediate destruction of the planet."

"Er…"

"Oh, don’t worry, Lord Nozdormu believes it’s a risk worth taking."

Obsidia fleetingly wondered if trusting the future leader of the Infinite dragonflight was wise, but the temptation was far too strong to resist. To have her father back again, in world-saving condition, seemed too good to be true. She gave the bronze dragon a critical look. “And what’s the catch?”

"What do you mean?"

"There’s got to be something you’re not telling me. Like, I have to kill myself to activate the mechanism, or it’ll only bring my father back for a week before he self-destructs, or something."

"Tsk, you black dragons are always so negative."

"That doesn’t answer my question."

"That one percent chance to destroy the planet isn’t enough of a catch for you?"

"Hmm. Whose genetic sample are you going to use? You’re not going to chop off my leg and throw it in the machine, are you?"

Chromie giggled. “Oh goodness, no! We actually have a fragment of your father’s scale that dates to before his defeat at Grim Batol.”

"How did you get something like that?"

"You may not like the answer."

"Nothing can make this day stranger or more upsetting. Shoot."

"It’s from the talisman that your father gave to the human mage Rhonin when he sent him into Grim Batol to help arrange Alexstrasza’s relocation."

"The piece of scale that fiery-haired know-it-all used to shatter the Dragon Soul?"

"That’s the one," Chromie said with a smile.

Obsidia covered her face with the palm of her hand. “Oh, why not?"

"It’s rather ironic, don’t you think?"

"Not the word I was thinking of, but we’ll go with that," Obsidia said, shaking her head.

"The scale and the Heart of Earth are being kept in the Caverns of Time. You
should head there at once. Soridormi will be expecting you. It’s only a day’s flight from there to the Halls of Origination."

Obsidium brightened. “Flight… I should be able to fly again! The shape-binding spell should have disappeared when my father died.”

"I wouldn’t recommend taking your true form here in Stormwind."

"I’m not that stupid," she snapped. "I’ve been stuck like this for over six years, now. Another few minutes won’t kill me." She glanced up at the turrets of Stormwind Keep, and for a fleeting moment she considered sneaking in as a human, returning to her real body, and tearing Varian Wrynn to shreds. Such a sneak attack would no doubt be successful, but getting out alive afterward would be a miracle. No, revenge for Onyxia would have to wait.

She went to her pony and climbed into the saddle. Chromie looked even shorter from this height, she noted with amusement.

"It feels odd to be saying this to a member of the black flight, but…good luck," Chromie said.

"If this crazy idea actually works, I’ll thank you."

"And if it doesn’t?"

"We’ll be too busy dodging Old God tentacles to worry about it, right?"

Chromie thought about this for a moment, then nodded.

Obsidium snapped the reins and held on as her pony raced toward the city gates.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: The first part of this fic that I actually wrote was the scene where Obsidium is riding into Stormwind on the day of Deathwing’s fall. I soon realized I needed to back up and explain more about how I see the characters and their situation, so now the original beginning shows up in this chapter!
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Obsidia finds the Titan laboratories where the Aspects were created. Can she really bring Neltharion back to life? And if she does, will he be willing to resume his duties as Earth Warder after all that’s happened?

Meanwhile, a certain whelp in Ravenholdt is shocked to sense yet another black dragon out in the world who needs to be disposed of before his mission is truly over…

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: Mentions of past character deaths (Onyxia, her whelps, Deathwing, [*insert names of nearly the entire black dragonflight here*].) Discussion of euthanasia/mercy killing. Themes of mental illness and mind control. Mentions of dragons killing and eating animals, naga, and centaur.

Important Note: This was written before the Dawn of the Aspects novella, so it follows my own ideas about how the Titans first uplifted protodragons into modern dragons and created the Aspects.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As soon as she was out of sight of the city, Obsidia left the road and followed the hills to the east until she was satisfied that no one would see her. She tied her pony to a tree and stepped back. Time to see if the spell binding her in a human body was indeed lifted.

Out of practice after years of not shapeshifting, she took it slowly at first, willing her wings to form, then her tail. When this seemed to go smoothly, she plunged all the way into the transformation. The pony reared back and screeched in alarm as it found itself facing a dragon ten times its size.

Her own body felt strangely unfamiliar after all that time, but it was also a wonderful sensation. She spread her wings, stretched her limbs, lashed her tail back and forth, and released a puff of shadowflame. Giddy with delight, she turned around in place, admiring herself from every angle. Her grief was momentarily pushed from her mind as she enjoyed the freedom of her natural form at last.

"Yeeeeeep!"

She turned back to her mount at Nelashrion’s distressed call, and she saw the pony bucking wildly, straining at its rope to escape from what it saw as a predator. On
its back, the knapsacks containing her supplies and nephew were askew and in danger of falling off.

Obsidia carefully used one claw to slice the straps holding the bags to the saddle, catching them before they could hit the ground. With Ashy and her belongings safe, she cut the rope holding the panicked horse. The terrified beast took off at a full gallop and disappeared into the forest. It would be found eventually, either by a mortal delighted to find a free mount or a wolf delighted to find a free meal. No matter. She had no more use for such transportation.

She opened the wiggling knapsack and freed Nelashrion, who rolled out onto the forest floor with an indignant “Yeep!” As soon as he saw her in her draconic form, however, he froze in place and stared in confusion. “Yeep?”

It took Obsidia a moment to realize what the matter was. “Oh, that’s right! You’ve never seen me in my real form before, have you? It’s me, Obsidia.”

"Sidya?" He tilted his head to regard her with deep concentration.

"Yes, Ashy."

"Yeep! Sidya!" He sprang into the air and flew in excited circles around her head, then slurped her cheek and landed on her forehead.

She laughed happily and easily scooped the supply bags into one paw. “Let’s head back to Kalimdor, shall we?” Instincts rekindled, she extended her wings as best she could without hitting any trees and launched herself upward. Cool night air rushed past as she climbed higher into the sky, until the dark canopy of Elwynn Forest appeared to be nothing more than a lumpy green quilt. This close to Stormwind she knew better than to attract too much attention to herself, but even so she could not suppress a roar of pure joy at being able to fly again.

For the first time in longer than she cared to remember, Obsidia felt truly optimistic. Her pride stung slightly at accepting help from the bronze dragonflight, but if it restored her father it was more than worth the bruise to her ego.

Setting a course toward Booty Bay, she swooped off into the night sky.

It had been a few days since the last news from Wyrmrest, and when Wrathion rushed into the Ravenholdt library Fahrad assumed a new report had arrived. However, it was immediately clear that the long-awaited confirmation of Deathwing’s fall was not, in fact, the cause of the Black Prince’s excitement.

"There’s another one!" the prince exclaimed. "I don’t know where she’s been hiding, but I sensed her just now! A full-grown black dragon, near Stormwind!"
Fahrad raised his eyebrows in surprise, setting aside the letters he had been working on. "You’re sure?"

"Of course I’m sure!" Wrathion huffed. "Our mission won’t be over when Deathwing falls, after all." He stepped closer to the rogue’s desk, giving a sheepish half-smile. Neither said anything aloud, of course, but they were both acutely aware that this meant a reprieve for Fahrad, himself.

The rogue sat back in his chair and briefly closed his eyes. Another few weeks of life, yes, but it was getting harder and harder to control himself against the Old Gods’ desperate commands. Finally he took a deep breath to center himself and dared to look the prince in the eye. Wrathion seemed disappointed that he wasn’t happier about the delay. "Write down the particulars, and I’ll ready a team of assassins. Your other ‘champion’ is a little busy at the moment."

Wrathion smirked. "Indeed. Speaking of which, have we heard anything from Wyrmrest?"

"Not yet," Fahrad said, shaking his head in worry.

"Is ‘no news good news’ in this case?" Wrathion was mostly successful in keeping the fear out of his voice, but Fahrad saw right through him.

"I honestly don’t know, my prince," he said as calmly as he could. "The world hasn’t ended yet, so…" He shrugged. "We’ll just have to be patient."

Wrathion nodded. "Of course." He lingered for a moment, as if hoping Fahrad would say something else about the discovery of another black dragon, but the rogue had returned his attention to paperwork. "Well, I’ll just…go triangulate exactly where I sensed that other dragon, then," he said awkwardly before slipping out the door.

When he was gone, Fahrad dropped his pen again and put his head down in his hands. *A little longer, Nyx,* he thought. *Help me hold it together just a little longer…*

The only answer was the maddening chatter of the Old Gods, ordering him to control Wrathion by any means necessary and kill everyone else in the manor.

Obsidia reluctantly shifted back into her human form to approach Booty Bay on foot. It would be considerably easier to secure passage to Kalimdor that way, even if she did cringe to leave her true body so soon. Only the thought of being able to shapeshift any time she chose made it bearable.

A pocketful of shiny objects later, she had booked passage on the next ship heading west, which happened to be leaving later that evening.

In her excitement to fly again, she had nearly forgotten poor Snowfeather, who was still stabled in Goldshire. She put enough money to cover the cost of additional boarding into an envelope along with a note instructing the stablemaster to set him free. Her statement that the animal was trained to return home on his own was a lie, of course, but would hopefully discourage the stablemaster from ignoring her
wishes and selling him, instead. The gryphon had served her well, and deserved to be able to soar the skies as he pleased. She knew all too well how awful it felt to be prevented from flying free.

Her business in town thus completed, Obsidia spent a lovely few hours swooping over the crystal blue waters of Stranglethorn, stretching her wings and gorging herself on fresh meat. After eating gorilla, panther and naga she was so full she could hardly fly, but being able to hunt the proper way again was thrilling. A loud belch that scorched the nearest palm tree made her feel better, and she headed back to town in plenty of time to board the ship.

Similarly stuffed, Ashy was sound asleep in her knapsack when she exchanged paperwork with the goblin at the docks and found the vessel that would be taking her to Ratchet. It was neither the largest nor the smallest ship at anchor in Booty Bay. It belonged to the Steamwheedle cartel and regularly ferried travelers from the Eastern Kingdoms to Kalimdor and vice versa.

It wasn’t impossible for a fully-grown dragon to make the journey alone, if one knew where islands were to rest and get fresh water, but it was a grueling route and Obsidia wanted more time to get used to her true body again before taxing it to that extent. Instead she spent the week strolling the decks in human form or relaxing in her tiny cabin. She kept to herself, ignoring the friendly overtures of the crew and other passengers, as she thought about all that happened and worried about what was to come.

Was she being used by the Infinite dragonflight for its own purposes? Was this all an elaborate prank, or a trap designed to wipe out the last remnants of the black flight? If so, they would find her a formidable opponent. But if the strange plan worked and Neltharion the Earth Warder could once again protect Azeroth, the implications were staggering.

The goblin port of Ratchet was a hive of activity, and Obsidia hiked quite a distance down the road before she was certain no one would see her transform back into a dragon. A quick snack of gazelle later, she was flying high above the arid landscape of the Barrens, heading south.

She had heard reports of the deep chasm that had opened up across the region during Deathwing’s cataclysmic return, but this was the first time she had seen it with her own eyes. She circled lower to get a good look, peering down into the lava-filled canyon. Stormwind Keep could have been dropped into its depths and only the highest towers would have been visible.

Ashy peeked over her shoulder, where he had been riding, and saw how far down the chasm went. He nearly fell off in surprise. “Yeep!”

"Yeep is right," she said, shaking her head. "The power of the Aspect of Earth is
"You all right back there, Ashy?" she asked.

"Yeep! Sidya!" he chirped happily from her back.

"Good. I think I’ll keep going for awhile yet before we find a place to spend the night."

"Yokee."

Obsidioa blinked. “Did you just say ‘okay’?”

"Yokeep!"

"That’s like a combination of ‘yeep’ and ‘okay,’ isn’t it?” She grinned in delight. "Good job!"

He made a proud trilling noise.

Tears stung the corners of Obsidioa’s eyes, and she said no more. She wasn’t even sure if they were happy tears over Ashy’s accomplishment or sad ones over the thoughts of Onyxia’s lost brood. Perhaps both.

For the moment she simply savored the feeling of flight, her nephew’s company, and the cautious sense of hope about her mission.

That night, Obsidioa found shelter under an overhang of rock on a mountainside
between Dustwallow and the sea that now covered the Shimmering Flats. Bright
and early the next morning she grabbed a quick breakfast in the form of a centaur
who chose the wrong time to take a stroll along the ridgeline, then continued south
toward Tanaris.

It was around noon when she spotted Gadgetzan far beneath her, hazy in the heat
of the desert sun. There was no point in stopping, so she simply used the goblin
city as a landmark to help her navigate, and adjusted her course slightly. The
Caverns of Time were farther out in the desert, near the coast—not that she had
ever been there, considering the animosity between the black and bronze
dragonflights.

The only problem was that the coast wasn’t where she remembered it—yet another
geological change she had her father to thank for. She wracked her brain, trying to
remember what the latest maps looked like, but soon suspected she was lost. One
troll ruin rising out of the sand looked much like another.

After hours of flying over the shifting dunes, Obsidia was getting worried, not to
mention thirsty. Ashy gave a miserable “yeep” from her back. No doubt he was
hot and thirsty, too. She circled down to land on a rocky hill that rose out of the
sands, seeing a patch of shade where she could rest her wings for a moment.

Ashy fluttered around, looking for water, but found only stone and sand. “Sidya!”
he said, butting against her front leg. “Sidya!”

"I know, Ashy, I’m thirsty, too. I’m sorry. I guess I should have gotten better
directions. I forgot how much the landscape has changed."

"Yeep," he whined, flopping down in her shadow.

"I’ll get going again in a minute. We can’t be that far." She closed her eyes and
sat back in the shade, trying not to let her nephew see how concerned she was. She
had flown over many enormous skeletons, bleached smooth and clean by the desert
wind, and some were almost certainly draconic in origin.

"Ah, there you are!" came a male voice from out of nowhere, making Obsidia bolt
to her feet. A pale elf in a brown robe stood in front of her, with no visible
footprints in the sand around him.

For one fleeting moment she thought it was Rivendark, but the golden eyes and hair
made her realize this was a bronze dragon.

"I’ve been checking every hour to see when you landed. So glad I got the right one
this time!"

"You’re one of Nozdormu’s brood, I take it?" she asked.
"Indeed. I am Erozion, and you, of course, are Lady Obsidia. We’ve been expecting you."

She looked around in confusion. “This isn’t the Caverns of Time, is it?”

"Oh, no, no, no," he scoffed. "You’re way off course, but we took that into account in this timeline."

"Er…thanks?"

"You’re welcome. We were most dismayed to find your dessicated corpse half-buried in sand, so it seemed prudent to backtrack to the moment you landed and guide you from there."

Obsidia’s eyes grew wide. “Um…wow. Okay.”

"It’s nothing. Not the first time we’ve tweaked the timeline to make sure you survive to do…what you’re going to do."

"What?"

"Oops, I probably shouldn’t have told you that."

"You’ve interfered with my fate before?" She wasn’t sure if she should feel flattered or violated.

"Just once. Wait, when is this?" He pondered for a moment, then smiled. "Right. Just once before this."

"What else have you done?" she demanded.

"Not me personally, but my flight did intervene to prevent you from dying prematurely."

A chill ran down Obsidia’s spine despite the desert heat. “When?”

"Well, you didn’t hear it from me," he said, lowering his voice despite their isolation. "But one of us slowed down time just enough to make you late for a meeting with your father. In his wrath, he bound you in mortal form."

She stiffened with rage, baring her dagger-sharp teeth. “What?”

The bronze held out his hands in defense but did not seem too frightened of her. He had probably already checked possible timelines and knew the odds were very small of her actually losing her temper and attacking. “If you had been in your true body when you traveled to Outland, you would have settled down there to start a brood of your own instead of bringing Apexis crystals back to Azeroth. When Deathwing returned, he would have summoned you to Azeroth to assist with his
plans, and you and many of your children would have died in the Twilight Highlands.”

Obsidía’s jaw hung open in shock. It sounded absurd at first, yet something about it rang true. She probably would have done exactly that, had she been free of the shape-binding curse. “So you’ve been using me all this time?” she asked, somehow feeling more disappointed than angry. All she had accomplished seemed…diminished. “I’m supposed to be dead?”

"No," Erozion said firmly. "True, in the first iteration of the timeline, you died before Deathwing. But that thread ended with the Old Gods running amok, which is exactly what the Titans created the Aspects to prevent. All you have done has been the product of your own will and determination. Lord Nozdormu only made sure you were alive to do it. He saw you were the key."

"And why should I trust the future leader of the Infinite dragonflight? How do I know you’re not lying about all of this?" she asked irritably.

The bronze shrugged. “It’s your decision.”

"But you already know what I’m going to do."

"Actually, no, because you haven’t decided yet. When you make your choice, all possible timelines will branch into the future, but until you make up your mind, anything can happen."

She frowned and considered this, then opted not to make her brain hurt with bronze logic. “Take me to the Caverns.”

"Of course." Erozion shifted from an elf to a bronze dragon even larger than Obsidia, and flew off to the north-east.

"Lady Obsidía," greeted Anachronos. "So glad you could make it." Contrary to his words, he regarded her with a look of distaste and distrust.

She walked across the cool sand toward the ethereal hourglass that towered in the middle of the main cavern. “Me, too. Good thing your friend wasn’t late, or apparently I’d be dying of thirst out there in the middle of nowhere.”

The massive bronze dragon gave a sly smile. “A bronze dragon is never late. Nor is he early. He arrives precisely when he means to.”

She cocked her head. “That sounds really familiar for some reason.”

"Deja vu is quite common here in the Caverns of Time. Now, I know why you have come, and despite my father’s conviction that you are crucial to the preservation of the world, I would prefer not to have a black dragon linger here.”
Obsidia narrowed her eyes. Although Anachronos was older than she—if age meant anything when dealing with the bronze flight—they were both children of an Aspect and as such were of equal rank. Only the fact that she was a guest in his lair kept her from insulting him in return. “Then kindly hand over what belongs to my flight and I will be on my way.”

"Of course. Mother should be here right…about…now."

As he said this, the ground shook with the weight of an enormous dragon approaching from a side passage. The ex-Aspect of Time’s prime consort was beautiful, lithe, and graceful, with bronze scales that shimmered like a desert mirage. Her horns spiraled up and back from her head in a shape reminiscent of the hourglass that loomed over the cavern. Gold bangles around her neck and ankles made delicate tinkling noises as she moved, and she carried herself with the elegance of a queen.

Obsidia bowed her head low in respect, even touching her chin to the sand. Soridormi was an intimidating figure who had quite capably led her flight while Nozdormu wandered the timeways. It had been she who brought the Timeless One’s essence to the Chamber of the Aspects so that it could be fused into the Dragon Soul along with all the rest. If she bore Obsidia any ill will over her father’s duplicity, she hid it well. Her expression was serene.

"Lady Soridormi," Obsidia said reverently. "I am here to retrieve the two items Chronormu said you were holding for me."

"Yes," the bronze matriarch said simply. "Guard them well." She reached out one great paw, bracelets jingling, and deposited a wooden chest in front of Obsidia. The box would have accommodated at least two fully-grown dwarves with room to spare, but was an insignificant thing next to dragons.

Obsidia picked up the chest and tucked it under her arm. It was quite light. “Thank you very much,” she said, dipping her head to both Soridormi and Anachronos. “I will take my leave, now.”

Anachronos nodded curtly. Soridormi gave a small, knowing smile. "Travel safely and swiftly, daughter of Neltharion. Much depends on your success."

"Thank you." Obsidia stretched her wings and flew up the long, winding passageway to the caverns’ entrance. The sudden increase in light made her squint and grimace when she emerged into the sun.

"Yeep," Ashy whimpered, covering his eyes with his paws.

Obsidia flew east a short distance and then began to follow the coast to the south. The Halls of Origination were near the ocean, and this way she was much less
likely to get lost in the desert and need a bronze to rescue her again. How embarrassing!

As she flew, she peeked inside the wooden box. A velvet pouch lay inside, no doubt containing the fragment of Deathwing’s scale he had used to communicate with that pathetic mage. Beside it lay what could only be the Heart of Earth. Obsidia was so transfixed by the sight of the stone that she nearly veered into the cliff, and had to stop for a moment to admire it.

The Heart was smaller than her fist, and was perfectly symmetrical despite being cut into more surfaces than she could count. Such beauty would never occur naturally, and her pulse quickened at the thought that she held the Titan’s handiwork. It did not glow as some objects of power did, but it seemed to catch every bit of light that hit it and make it even brighter. The stone was a vivid orange color with shades of crimson and gold swirled together, bringing to mind fresh lava and sunsets.

Well, Nefarian, she thought with a nervous smile, let’s hope this time a shiny object really does solve everything…

A small black whelp laid on his back among a row of cabbages in Ravenholdt’s garden, eyes closed and face contorted in concentration. Evening shadows had deepened to the point where mortal eyes would have had difficulty even seeing him there.

Fahrad found him right away. "My prince, the hour grows late. You should probably come inside now."

Wrathion’s eyes snapped open, flaring fiery red in the darkness. "Oh! I… I didn’t realize…” he said vaguely. "I was searching for that female again. It helps with a direct connection to the earth.” He sat up and snorted a puff of smoke in frustration. "I can not figure out where she disappeared to!"

Fahrad knelt beside him. "Are you sure you sensed her in the first place, my prince? Perhaps you were mistaken."

"No, I am one hundred percent certain I sensed a full-grown female black dragon out there!" he insisted.

Fahrad sighed and rubbed his forehead for a few seconds. "Wrathion. I know you want to delay… certain events. But you can’t send assassins after imaginary dragons."

The whelp looked insulted. "I am doing no such thing! I truly sensed her! I’m not lying or or or —” He shook his head and sputtered indignantly. "I’m positive! I would never…”

"All right. All right. I believe you," Fahrad said gently. "Just…” He sat down in the dirt facing the little prince. "You do understand, don’t you? How it must end? Promise me, when the time comes…”
Wrathion looked away. "I know. I understand. I don’t have to like it."

The rogue reached for him, then hesitated. He had been trying to keep his distance, partly to reduce the danger of the Old Gods forcing him to harm the whelp, and partly to hopefully dull the pain of their impending separation. Then distress chirps rose involuntarily from Wrathion’s throat, and paternal instincts were too strong to resist. Fahrad picked up the whelp and held him against his shoulder.

"I know it’s hard. If there was any other way…” He patted the prince’s back, voice dropping to a whisper. "But please understand, Wrathion. I’ve been fighting for so, so long. I’ve hurt people…dragons…I loved. It has to end. For me, for all of us. Ten thousand years of suffering…and you can end it. Only you. You’re so young, and it’s not fair to ask so much of you, but we can’t choose our destinies.” Emotion closed his throat, and he squeezed the whelp tighter.

Wrathion sniffled into his tunic and kept chirping miserably.

"Ssh,” the rogue murmured, rocking him slowly. "I know. I’m sorry. I’m here right now. It’s all right.” He managed to compose himself for the whelp’s sake, and eventually Wrathion’s tears subsided. Fahrad kept swaying and patting him, watching the stars appear high above them, until the whelp was snoring softly.

A large, winged shadow darkened the courtyard outside the massive pyramid. Beating wings stirred up a flurry of sand, sending a scorpion skittering away in fright. There was no one in sight to witness the black dragon land by the pyramid’s entrance and then shrink down into the form of a young, raven-haired human woman. As a dragon she had carried her cargo with no difficulty, but now she found herself staggering under the weight of a large sack and a wooden chest that reached as high as her waist.

"Well, this isn’t going to work," she said with annoyance.

"Yeep," agreed the whelp fluttering around her in circles.

She opened the wooden chest and removed a velvet pouch, looping its strings around her neck so the pouch lay against her breast. Then she opened the sack and put handful after handful of strange crystals into the chest, arranging them carefully around whatever was inside.

"There. That’ll have to do." She snapped the chest’s lid shut and dragged it down the stone staircase leading to the pyramid’s main entrance, making a loud thumping noise with each step. "I’ll be lucky if I don’t trigger every Titan security alarm in the place," she muttered.
The Halls of Origination had been ransacked months ago by treasure hunters seeking riches and explorers seeking knowledge. The most urgent task was to disarm the “reorigination” device meant to wipe the planet clean and start over from the beginning of the Titans’ plans. It was this device, Obsidia had learned during the ocean crossing from gossipy sailors deep in their ale, that the Old Gods had sent Deathwing to find and destroy. If it had been used, it would have eradicated the Old Gods completely, along with all life on Azeroth. Obviously, the good of the former would be negated by the latter, so even though mortal adventurers thwarted Deathwing’s plans, they still deactivated the device immediately.

The tol’vir of Ramkahen were now supposedly guarding the pyramid complex, but their numbers had been reduced by the recent battles and they were spread so thin that only infrequent patrols passed the Halls of Origination.

Obsidia’s footsteps and the grating sound of the wooden crate dragging on the floor were uncomfortably loud in the spacious stone halls, and as she lugged her burden up a set of stairs she realized she had no idea what she was looking for. She stopped to catch her breath and looked around, studying the carvings on the walls and intricate lamps. “I wonder which way we should try first,” she said. Ashy ignored her and flew figure eights around pillars. “Why can’t there just be a sign with an arrow saying ‘Aspect Creating Lab This Way’?”

"Yeep?"

"Of course there could be, for all I know. I can’t read Titan." She dimly remembered hearing that dragons were supposed to possess the innate ability to understand the Titans’ language, but apparently that was among the knowledge and abilities erased by the Old Gods’ corruption.

"Yeep! Yeep yeep! Sidya!"

Obsidia turned to see what her nephew was so excited about, and saw him pointing frantically to a round disc on the wall. It looked like it was made of blue glass, and appeared to be part of the surrounding mosaic. “Yes, it’s very nice and shiny,” she said with a patient smile.

"Yeep!" he insisted.

"What? I see it."

He bumped his head against the disc several times.

"Ashy, stop that. You’re going to hurt yourself."

"Yeep!" He zoomed down, grabbed the sleeve of her robe, and tried dragging her toward the mosaic.
"What’s gotten into you? I’m too short in this body to reach it. It’s just a decoration."

Ashy shook his head emphatically and flew up to smack himself against the glass disc. This time it blinked on with a bright blue glow. He flapped around making happy noises.

Obsidia gasped. “How in the world did you…?” She looked around the chamber and judged it big enough to accommodate her true form. She shifted back into a dragon and found the disc to be just below her eye level. There was the clear likeness of a proto-drake etched into the glass, unrecognizable from a human’s vantage point, but obvious from this height. It must have been this image that caught Ashy’s attention. The Titans were said to be much larger than other humanoids, so it made sense for their controls to be at a comfortable height for them.

But what did this disc do? Obsidia pressed it with the palm of her paw, but nothing happened. She tried twisting it, tapping it, pulling it, and everything else she could think of, but the glass just continued to glow with a pleasant blue light.

"Nice find, Ashy, but I think it’s just a lamp or something." Yet there were other, more obvious light fixtures elsewhere in the chamber. "Hmm…" She stepped back and looked at the rest of the mosaic. The carvings nearest to the glowing disc were an abstract arrangement of ovals. To the left was a vaguely humanoid figure, and to the right was a jagged sunburst pattern. Most of the design looked to be carved directly into the wall and then painted, but here and there bits of colored glass similar to the blue disc were embedded in the stone.

She furrowed her brow in concentration and tried to open her mind to all possible meanings. Five ovals around the blue disc. Five dragonflights. Ovals—or eggs? She squinted in the dim light and noticed characters of an unknown language scratched into the egg shapes. No…not letters. Pictographs! One showed a leafy flower, one a cloud around a crescent moon, one a shooting spark, one a sundial with a shadow, and one the cone of volcano. Life, Dreaming, Magic, Time, Earth… Could it be?

She reached out to touch the egg with the volcano symbol on it, and the blue disc began flashing. Out of nowhere, a stilted, tinny voice said, "Retrieving file. Project: Dragon Aspects. Status: complete. Subdivision: Black Dragonflight. Status: complete."

"Yeep!" Ashy cried out in surprise.

The artificial voice replied, “Unknown command.”

Obsidinia swallowed nervously and decided it couldn’t hurt to try. “Um, information
"Searching," said the voice. There was a five second pause, then, "File located: ‘Recreating a Dragon Aspect in the Event of His or Her Death.’ Process requires the Heart of the Aspect, a sample of draconic biological matter, and Discrete Pentagonal Draconic Synthesizer 968-B."

"Where is the, uh, Synthesizer?"

"Discrete Pentagonal Draconic Synthesizer 968-B is located in Laboratory Seven on Sub-level Two."

"Um…directions there, please?"

The bits of colored glass on the wall began blinking in a clear pattern, pointing down the corridor to the left.

"Thanks," she said, although she wasn’t sure if etiquette required her to thank an artificial voice. "Come on, Ashy, follow the lights."

Her nephew took off with an excited “yeep,” flying down the passageway in the direction of the coursing lights. Obsidita realized she couldn’t fit into the corridor in her true form and reluctantly turned back into a human. She moved considerably slower while dragging the crate, but adrenaline made it seem lighter than it had a short time ago.

The lights led them quite a distance down the otherwise dark corridor that seemed to be sloping downward. She tread warily, half expecting some horrible trap at any moment, but all was quiet. The streaks of light abruptly angled down, alerting her to a staircase. She carefully bumped the wooden chest down the steps, then followed the blinking trail down another corridor. A stunning array of mosaic tiles decorated the walls, and they passed through several ornate archways before coming to a chamber with a large, round indentation in the floor. The lights indicated she should step into the sunken area, but did not seem to continue elsewhere.

Swallowing back her nerves, Obsidita dragged the chest into the circle. There was a clunking, grinding sound, and before she could lunge for safety the floor seemed to drop out from under her. After a moment of panic she realized the entire platform was sinking, and judging by the sound of machinery controlling the descent this was supposed to happen. She leaned on the wooden chest and heaved a sigh of relief.

A short time later, the platform came to a gentle stop on the next level down, and the chasing lights once more appeared on the wall, leading her down yet another corridor. Ashy fearlessly plunged ahead while his aunt struggled to keep up.
Just when she was considering an attempt to shapeshift into an orc or something else with stronger arms, she heard the pleasant voice come from further down the corridor, where Ashy was licking the wall. “Laboratory Seven. Reptilian Genetics, Egg Incubation, and Discrete Pentagonal Draconic Synthesizer 968-B.”

Obsidio peeked around the arched marble doorway and was startled by the size of the chamber beyond. Far beneath the sands of Uldum, the Titans had built a laboratory large enough to fit an entire mortal village with room left over for a few goblin airships. She wandered inside, mouth hanging open, and gawked.

Massive columns supported the distant ceiling, shaped in the likenesses of the animal-headed guardians of the temple above. Strange mechanical devices that would have made any gnomish or goblin engineer wet themselves in excitement stretched out in all directions. They sat dark and silent until Obsidio stepped further into the room, at which point they all blinked to life. She jumped at the unexpected activity, and Ashy ducked behind her with a frightened “Yeep!”

She wandered deeper into the laboratory, trying to make some sense of all the baffling technology. “You know, Ashy, the Titans may not have been gods, but they were awfully smart.”

"Yokeep!” he said, which she now recognized as an affirmative.

"The only problem is, I’m not." Trying not to get discouraged, she took a closer look at the nearest machine. From the pictographs on the front and the round compartments inside, she surmised this was probably some kind of incubator for dragon eggs. She ran a hand over the indentations inside the lid of the machine, and felt a strange thrill shoot up her spine. This was where it all began. Here the Titans had taken eggs from the native proto-dragons and altered them into the first of the modern, sentient dragons such as herself. Her father’s egg had quite possibly sat in the very spot where her hand now rested.

Her father. The urgency of her mission came rushing back to her. This was all very interesting, but it wasn’t what she was looking for. She had no way of knowing if the artificial assistant could hear her, but she raised her voice and spoke clearly. “Where is the Draconic Synthesizer?”

A flash of light and the sound of whirring machinery led her to an enormous compartment built into the wall. It certainly looked large enough to hold one of the Aspects, and some of the symbols on the control panel showed draconic images.

There was no way she could reach the controls in human form, so she took the velvet pouch off her neck and shifted back into a dragon. She carefully opened the wooden chest and pulled out the Heart of Earth. It was just as beautiful and perfect as it had been when she left the Caverns of Time, despite having been bumped around in a box with the Apexis Crystals. She searched the front of the machine
for a receptacle to hold the magnificent stone. After opening several panels that only revealed more buttons and dials, she found a compartment that seemed the right size and shape. With excruciating care, she slid the Heart into the mechanism. When it reached a certain point it seemed to click into place, and a positive-sounding chime came from a speaker nearby.

"Okay, that’s encouraging," she said.

"Yokeep," said Ashy.

The computer spoke again, making them both jump. “Heart of Earth recognized.”

"Good," Obsidia said with a nervous laugh.

"Input biological material," instructed the voice as a drawer popped open. It was large enough for a whelp to fit inside, and if the tiny clawmarks on the bottom were any indication, that’s exactly what the Titans had done.

"Well, that’s helpful," she said, reaching for the velvet pouch. "Except my paws are too big to get in here. Ashy, would you do the honors?"

"Yeep!" he said happily. He had no trouble in reaching into the small bag and drawing out the chip of Deathwing’s scale. Obsidia watched as he dropped it into the drawer, which then drew back into the machine.


"Wait!" Obsidia blurted, sliding the sample drawer open. She quickly filled the drawer with Apexis crystals, then closed it again.


Obsidia looked at the control panel and saw a large button near the bottom that was lit up. She couldn’t read the label, but she made an educated guess that this was the aforementioned “create” button.

"Here goes nothin—er, well, everything." She took a deep breath and briefly closed her eyes before holding down the button.
A dazzling array of lights flickered across the control panel, drawing Ashy’s undivided attention. Obsidiana concentrated on the giant hatch in the wall. The cover was nearly opaque, but she could barely make out the silhouette of a small shape inside.

There was a series of bizarre noises: sloshing, crackling, banging, keening, bubbling, scraping, pouring, tapping, fizzing, and creaking. The silhouette grew larger with each passing moment, and before long it clearly had the shape of a dragon, with a long neck and tail, horns on the head, and a curved arch of a back. A bright flash momentarily blinded her, and the grinding noises in the machine grew louder.

When her vision cleared, there was a single white light blinking on the control panel and the only sound coming from the machine was a high-pitched hiss. The artificial voice spoke up again in the same bland, unexcited tone. “Reconstruction complete.”

The hatch cover slowly retracted into the wall with a whirring sound, giving her a clear view of what was inside.

Neltharion looked just as he did in her earliest memories, his ebon hide unblemished except for the gemstones sparkling in his scales. Seams of precious metals glinted here and there where lava had once oozed. The spread of horns on his head was again symmetrical and unbroken, and his strong chin was intact, adorned only by the natural tendrils and beard that Nefarian had inherited. The only difference from her memories was chips of Apexis crystals mixed in among the gems in his scales. He was magnificent.

The only problem was, he wasn’t moving.

Hardly daring to breathe, she stepped closer to investigate. “Father?” she said, reaching out a tentative paw to touch his shoulder.

The massive dragon suddenly took a huge, gasping breath and lifted his head. His eyes were unfocused at first, and as he looked around at his surroundings they took on a shine of panic. Legs shaking, he backed himself into the compartment in the wall and looked around frantically. “What? Where? How?” he stammered.

Obsidiana stepped in front of him, unable to keep a huge grin from her face. “Father, it’s all right. I know you’re disoriented, but it’s going to be okay.”

"Ob— Obsidiana?” he croaked, his wild eyes finally settling on her as a familiar sight. "What happened? How did we get here? Is this place what I think it is? It was so long ago, but… What’s going on?"

She beamed up at him, delighted to note that the alarm in his eyes was perfectly
normal, without a hint of the Old Gods’ madness. “It’s okay, Father, I’ll explain everything. What’s the last thing you remember?”

He frowned deeply. “I… I think I was in Deepholm. I was…dying.”

She nodded encouragingly.

"But then I dreamed…horrible things. They were dreams, weren’t they?”

She gave a sad smile and shook her head slightly.

His golden-orange eyes widened and his breathing quickened. “No, they had to be. It’s all mixed together, but I remember… They took me again, didn’t they?” There was no need to specify who “they” were.

She nodded and nuzzled against him comfortingly.

"No," he breathed. "No, no, no, they didn’t… I didn’t… No! It can’t be!"

"It’s going to be all right now," she soothed. "You’re free."

Another bit of memory clicked into place. “Your mother! Nefarian! Onyxia!”

Obsidia simply looked at him, her eyes welling up with tears.

Neltharion let out a roar of outrage and grief that seemed to shake the entire laboratory. “No! Damn those tentacled monstrosities! I held them back for so long! I tried so hard—” His deep voice cracked, and he slumped back with a shuddering sigh.

Even in her true body Obsidia was too small to get her arms around him, so she snuggled against his chest. “It’s not your fault, Father.”

"Of course it’s my fault! I let them use me like a puppet. Again!"

"They’re gods. Even the Titans struggled to subdue them. There was nothing you could do."

Neltharion dug his claws into the floor, making a metallic screeching noise. “I don’t care if I have to tear Azeroth in two. Those evil insects are going to pay for what they’ve done! What they’ve made me do! Bad enough they made me suffer in agony all these centuries. I was created to be the first line of defense against them—even if nobody told me that. But now they’ve taken my family…” He looked around at the laboratory with disdain. ”You could have warned me, Khaz’goroth!” he bellowed. “You could have prepared me for what I would face! You could have appointed more than one Earth Warder, so the burden could be shared! Instead you just dumped all this responsibility on me and left!”
Obsidia stood back as he exited the Synthesizer chamber and stretched his legs along the considerable length of the lab. She said nothing, sensing he had needed to let out this rant for a long time.

He smashed his tail into a machine with a loud crunch, sparks flying. “Here’s what I think of your duties, Khaz’goroth!” Another machine crumpled under the weight of his paw. “You want the Old Gods defeated? Come back and do it yourself!” He reared back and spewed a flood of lava onto a bank of monitors, also burying several adjacent machines in liquid rock. “Let them hurt you instead! Let them force you to hurt those you love! Let them rape your mind until you can’t tell your thoughts from theirs!” He kicked another machine, sent one flying across the lab with his tail, and tore another to shreds with his claws. “I can’t do it again! I won’t!”

He spat another shower of lava onto the mangled remains of the machines he’d already destroyed, then plopped down to sit in the middle of the wreckage. He hung his head, gasping for breath, eyes tightly shut.

"Father," Obsidia said gently, nuzzling her head against his shoulder. "You still have me and Sabellian."

He opened his eyes to look at her, tears spilling out as he did so. The moisture glistened against his gem-encrusted scales. “Obsidia. I’m so sorry,” he said hoarsely.

"I know."

They sank into an embrace and allowed the cleansing tears to fall.

When their emotions had stabilized somewhat, Obsidia told her father more of what had happened since he fell into the Old Gods’ clutches. Neltharion said little as she detailed the operations of the Twilight’s Hammer cult, the geological upheaval across Azeroth, and the physical manifestations of the Old Gods’ presence in places like Stonetalon, Dragonblight and the Twilight Highlands. Occasionally he would nod, as if he remembered at least part of what she was saying, but sometimes it seemed as if he was learning about things for the first time.

She explained what had happened to Nefarian and Onyxia, and he frowned in deep thought. “I do remember thinking that remaking a perfect world was pointless without them in it,” he said. “And I remember unleashing my wrath on Stormwind. It felt…gauche.”

She gave him an odd look.

"Burning mortal cities isn’t my style," he said with a shrug. "Any powerful dragon
can wreak physical destruction. It takes class and skill to defeat your enemies from within by manipulating them into bringing about their own downfall."

"That may be, but you burned a lot of real estate in the last year or so," she said with a smile.

He glanced around at the steaming piles of lava that used to be machinery with a slightly guilty expression. "Well, fiery destruction does have its place," he said quickly.

She laughed. "Oh, Father, I’ve missed you so much."

He grinned and patted her on the back. "You still haven’t explained how you found this place and restored me to my original state."

"I’ll get to that. First, do you remember anything about what happened at Wyrmrest Temple, or the Maelstrom?"

He tilted his head back with an almost pained expression, trying to make sense of his hazy memories. "I recall being at Wyrmrest recently. I think I confronted the other Aspects. But there were other dragons there, too…different from the rest."

"Twilight dragons," she said grimly. "They were fighting on your side."

"I remember something annoying on my back…like a rash, or an itch I couldn’t scratch. There was pain, even more than usual. But then…there’s nothing after that."

"You don’t remember crash-landing into the Maelstrom?"

He shook his head.

She exhaled slowly in relief. "Good."

"I take it something very bad happened there."

"You could say that. The Old Gods made you mutate into some kind of horrible, tentacled abomination, and the other Aspects pooled all their powers into an artifact to unmake you."

He gave a troubled frown. "I don’t remember any of that. What kind of artifact could be powerful enough to destroy an Aspect?"

"The bronzes ‘borrowed’ the Dragon Soul from a much earlier point in the timeline."

Neltharion’s jaw dropped open. "Nozdormu actually condoned that?"

Obsidia nodded. "Desperate times…"
"They meant business."

"The Old Gods were this close to destroying the world."

He hung his head in shame. “At least some of the Aspects were able to do what we were created to do.”

"The burden was never supposed to be yours alone."

"Nice of the Titans to explain that to us." He shot an annoyed look at the laboratory.

"You’re going to have fun talking to Sabellian. He’s been ranting about the Titans for months."

"Where is he?"

"Outland. The Dark Portal reopened several years ago. Do you remember that?"

"Vaguely. I think."

"Sabellian’s doing very well. He has a new mate and brood of his own now, and he’s been leading our flight in Outland.” She briefly explained about the lessened influence of the Old Gods there, and the effects of the Apexis crystals. "Along with the Heart of Earth and one of your scales, I included a bunch of the crystals in the materials the machine used to restore you."

Neltharion studied his arm with fascination, noting a chip of crystal embedded in his scales between an emerald and a diamond. “It’s been so long since I could bear to look at my own body, I didn’t even notice,” he said.

"You now have Apexis crystals as part of your very being. If simply wearing them can help to protect me from the Old Gods’ influence, being partly made of them has to have an even bigger impact on you. Can you hear or feel anything?"

He placed his paws flat on the ground and listened intently. Nearly a minute passed before he finally looked up with an astonished smile. “I can’t. There’s nothing. It’s as if the Old Gods have disappeared.”

"Oh, they’re still out there, believe me. But if you’re shielded from them, that is very, very good news." She beamed happily and stood on tip-toe to tap her nose against his chin.

"What are these crystals?"

"You’ll have to ask Sabellian. He’s been researching them, but last I heard he still hadn’t figured it out."
"Well, whatever they are, they’ve done something the Titans could not." He gave a giddy laugh. "I can’t hear them. I can’t believe it! Not a peep!"

"That’s great," she said, nearly bouncing in excitement. "It should be safe for you to do some damage control, then."

"What do you mean?"

"Azeroth is in dire need of its Earth Warder. Ten centuries of neglect were nothing compared to the damage done in the last year. The various chasms, sinkholes and landslides can wait, but as I said there are parts of the world where the Old Gods are dangerously close to breaking free. I had a little help getting here and reviving you, and the parties who assisted me did so because they believed your powers as Aspect were the only hope for saving the planet."

"Why should I risk myself again to save this tainted chunk of rock?" he asked bitterly.

"Because you’re the only one who can."

He sighed. “Damn those meddling Titans. I never asked for this duty.”

"I know. But Azeroth needs you."

He looked down into her pleading eyes and slouched in defeat. “I suppose it’s only right, since it was my powers that brought it to the brink in the first place. Even if I wasn’t the one using them at the time,” he grumbled.

She hugged him. “The sooner we get Azeroth patched up, the sooner we can go see Sabellian and the rest in Outland. Now, do you think you’re up to shapeshifting yet? You’ll never fit out the door of this place as you are.” She easily switched to her human form.

"I can try." He closed his eyes to concentrate and began to shrink. His wings melted into his back, his horns retracted, his scales turned to pale pink skin, his snout shortened, and after an awkward minute the transformation was complete. Immaculate black hair barely reached the collar of his gray and navy blue doublet, and the handsome face of a man once known as "Lord Daval Prestor" smiled back at his daughter. "How’s this?"

Obsidia giggled. “I’d lose the tail if I were you."

He looked over his shoulder and gave a cry of alarm. “Oops.” The spiked draconic tail faded away without a trace. “It’s been so long since my body worked right, I guess I’m a little rusty.”

She gave a twisted smile. “Oh, trust me, I know how you feel. Which reminds
me, I have a few words for you about a certain curse you may or may not remember putting on me…”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Anachronos quotes Gandalf from The Lord of the Rings. (“A wizard is never late…”) The line was just too perfect and I couldn’t resist. ;)


Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The Earth Warder is back on the job, but containing the Old Gods’ intrusions into the surface world is both difficult and dangerous. Obsidia does her best to help him come to terms with everything he did as a puppet of the Old Gods. The last thing they need is a mysterious ‘prince’ sending assassins after them…

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: Discussion of past character deaths (Sinestra and Nefarian, mostly). Draconic skeletal remains (whelp and adult). Mention of past rape/forced breeding via mind control (Sinestra/Deathwing). Dragons eating wildlife, particularly stags.

Anyone looking at the skies over southern Kalimdor in the next few days would have been terrified and confused to see an enormous black dragon soaring high overhead. Only Deathwing was so large, but all of Azeroth knew of his destruction, and this figure flew harmlessly past instead of raining fiery doom from above.

"Father, are you sure you don’t want to stop and rest?" Obsidia asked, gliding along beside him high over Razorfen.

"I remember shaping these canyons," he said quietly, and she had to strain to hear him over the sound of the wind and the flapping of their wings. "Alexstrasza worried there wasn’t enough shade in this region for some of the more delicate life forms. It took me a whole month to sculpt all these twisting passageways. There were no quillboar around then, of course. They came after Agamaggan fell here, back during the War of the Ancients."

Obsidia peered down through the evening shadows at the tangle of giant thorns now covering the canyons. “They’re kind of a mess now.”

"So I see." He sighed.

They flew in silence for awhile before Obsidia tried again. “There are some caves in the hills above Mulgore that we could take shelter in for the night.”

"I suppose we must," he said reluctantly.

"Is something wrong?"
"No, it’s just… When I’m on the ground I can feel the earth’s distress. It’s nearly as pervasive as the Old Gods’ whispers, but instead of urges for destruction it’s pleas for help. And I don’t know where to start. The elements are in such turmoil."

"This is basically triage, at this point. As I said, the Old Gods are physically manifesting their presence in a few key places around Azeroth. Once those weak spots are reinforced, we can worry about the other bits. Er, well, you can worry about them. I’m afraid I’m not much help."

He flashed a smile at her, displaying massive teeth. “You’ve done more than enough, daughter. I cannot begin to properly thank you.”

She smiled back. “Save the world first. Then we’ll talk.”

After an uneventful night, Obsidia led Neltharion further north, into the Stonetalon Mountains. “I haven’t seen it yet, firsthand, but I’ve heard numerous reports that Stonetalon Peak is overrun with the Old Gods’ forces: tentacles, faceless ones, all their trademarks,” she explained as they flew over the sparse pine forests.

Neltharion set his jaw grimly. “Not for long.” He banked sharply and descended toward the tallest peak. Obsidia couldn’t keep up with him but he was hard to miss. He hovered just over the treetops, peering down through the branches and ruined kaldorei columns. As she flew up beside him, a sudden surge of heat from the Apexis crystals around her neck and ankles made her gasp.

He immediately turned to her in concern. “What?”

"They’re here, all right. Can’t you feel it, in the crystals?"

"They feel…warm. I’m so accustomed to burning up from inside that I didn’t notice until you called attention to it." He looked vaguely amused.

The sound of snapping tree branches made them both look down just in time to see a huge purple tentacle surging toward Obsidia. Taken by surprise, she could not react quickly enough to fly free. The loathsome coil of dark energy tightened around one of her back legs, and she screeched in alarm. Ashy flew free of his perch on her back and darted around in panic.

Her father let out a mighty roar and rushed toward her. Almost as quickly as it had appeared, the tentacle recoiled with a hissing noise, and she glanced back to see why. The tentacle flailed in pain, snapping off tree limbs as it descended under a flood of lava. Neltharion continued dousing the area with molten rock until the tentacle stopped moving and the surrounding trees were ablaze.
Satisfied that the danger had passed for the moment, he wheeled around and flew back to her. “Obsidia! Are you all right?”

"I— I think so. The crystals on my ankle feel like they’re going to burn right through my scales, though." She reached down to remove the anklet and found the crystals had turned jet black, as if filled with smoke. Ashy made a disgusted noise and backed away.

Neltharion inspected them with alarm. “What does that mean?”

"It means that these are useless now. They can’t take direct contact with Old God substances."

"You might have mentioned that," he growled. "What happens if the crystals in my body get sapped that way?"

"I…don’t know," she said meekly. "I didn’t think about it. I’m sorry."

He took a deep breath. “All right, I’ll just have to be careful. Stay back while I work.”

Obsidia didn’t have to be told twice. She soared higher, well out of reach of any other tentacles that might be around, and simply watched.

It took Neltharion a few moments to remember how his abilities worked. It had been a very long time since he had exercised his power as Aspect of Earth, but as he probed the ground below with his senses it all started to seep back. Obsidia heard a deep earthquake rumbling across the mountainside and saw the pine trees swaying.

Neltharion held out his paws, palms down, and made a stamping motion. The sound of rock grinding against rock grew louder, and a concussive wave blasted outward from where he hovered. Pine needles rained out of the trees, a hawk shot out of its nest on a nearby mountain ledge, and minor landslides sent boulders bouncing down the slopes. When the shaking stopped, he appeared to be listening closely for something. He swooped over to a particular spot, puffed up his chest, and spewed a flood of lava onto the ground below. He darted around the peak, repeating the process in several more places, before flying over to the ledge the hawk had vacated. He made a rough landing, sliding on his stomach across the rocky ground before coming to a stop with his side against the cliff.

Obsidia hurried over immediately. “Father! Are you okay?”

Gasping for breath, smoke still drifting from his mouth, and visibly trembling, he nevertheless smiled at her. “I did it,” he wheezed. “I’m horribly out of practice, but I did it. This mountain was crawling with minions of the Old Gods underneath the surface. The one that almost got you was just the tip of a very nauseating
"What exactly did you do?"

"I shifted the rock layers beneath the mountain to cut off their reinforcements from deeper below, caved in the larger subterranean chambers, and then plugged up anything resembling an outlet to the surface. It’ll take them a few thousand years to eat away at the rock and see sunlight again."

"Sounds good to me," she said, bobbing her head in respect. They both rested another few minutes before she asked, "Where do you think we should go next? There’s an even worse area in the Twilight Highlands, but the worst is in the Dragonblight. Either one will take a lot of travel time."

Neltharion pushed himself up on his stomach and tried to regain his composure. "Perhaps not as long as you think."

"Oh?"

"I’m an Aspect. I can teleport myself to Wyrmrest whenever I need to."

"Bad idea. Bad, baaaaaad idea," she said, shaking her head vigorously. "You’re not the most popular dragon around, you know. The guards at Wyrmrest just about shredded me the last time I dared to approach."

"I’ll have to make my presence known to the others at some point."

"I didn’t go through all this to bring you back so you could throw yourself on the mercy of Alexstrasza and the others!"

"You cannot understand, daughter. The bond we Aspects have is stronger than blood."

"Do you realize what that sounds like, coming from you?" she boggled.

He ground his teeth before answering. "I suppose it is just a bit hypocritical—"

"A bit, yeah!"

"—but I have much to make amends for, and I cannot avoid the others forever."

"Must I remind you that Alexstrasza ordered you and Malygos both killed because you had turned against her? She doesn’t play around."

"I’m aware," he snapped, giving a stern look to reinforce just whom she was speaking to.

She withered under his gaze and backed down. "I’m sorry, Father. I’m afraid, that’s all."
His expression softened a fraction. “I know. You’d be foolish not to be, and as my daughter you are many things, but foolish is not one of them. I will wait until after I have dealt with the corruption in the Highlands to face my brothers and sisters at Wyrmrest. I only hope they can see past what Deathwing has done to recognize that Neltharion stands before them.”

Obsidia had nothing optimistic to say, so she held her tongue.

Obsidia convinced her father to take a boat to the Eastern Kingdoms to conserve his strength. He had wanted to fly across the ocean and bristled at being thought of as too weak to make the journey, but she insisted and eventually he saw the wisdom. The situation in the Twilight Highlands was much more extensive than the one at Stonetalon Peak, she warned.

So it was that a week after the cleansing of Stonetalon, a ship docked at Menethil Harbor in the Wetlands bearing a charismatic nobleman and his lovely daughter.

"Watch your step," a sailor warned as they made their way down the rickety gangplank to a crooked dock that was partly submerged in the sea.

"What happened here?" the nobleman asked, stepping gingerly onto the dock as if expecting it to collapse at any moment.

"Little thing called the Cataclysm." The sailor laughed. "Maybe you heard about it?"

The nobleman’s handsome face hardened with a frown as he surveyed the town, which was knee-deep in saltwater. Construction workers were laboring in several places to build dikes or even to raise some of the buildings on stilts.

"I really got around, didn’t I?" he asked his daughter out of the corner of his mouth.

"You could say that," she whispered back.

"Pity I don’t remember doing all this. I imagine it was spectacular."

"Father…” she chided.

He shrugged and gave a small, twisted smile.

They maintained their human disguises as they strolled over the bridge leading out of Menethil Harbor. They planned on flying away as soon as they were far enough out of town to avoid being seen. It was drizzling slightly, making an already damp
region even more miserable.

One of the dwarven guards gave them an odd look for taking a walk in such weather. With no mounts or supplies, they could hardly be adventurers setting out on a mission. Obsidia gave him her prettiest smile as they passed, hoping to dispel any suspicions. The dwarf smiled back and saluted, recognizing her and her father as some kind of nobility, and they continued on without incident.

"This will be fun to fly in," Neltharion said, squinting into the misty air.

"They call it the Wetlands for a reason, I guess," she said, wiping water out of her eyes. "And lucky us, this is the rainy reason."

Ashy poked his head out of her knapsack, looked around at the weather, and ducked back inside.

They were well out of sight of the harbor now, considering the limited visibility, and Obsidia was about to suggest they shift back to their true forms when there was the sound of footsteps running behind them. Before she could turn around to see who was coming, there was a strange, whizzing noise and something smacked into her ankles, sending her tumbling into the mud.

"What—?" her father said, turning to see what was the matter.

A weighted rope was tangled around her ankles, and as this fact registered in her brain she saw a lanky human sprinting toward her with a gleaming dagger in each hand. She barely had time to feel fear or think about conjuring a spell before the man stopped in his tracks as if suddenly turned to stone, the blades falling from his stiff hands to clatter on the cobblestones.

Neltharion stepped between them, trembling with barely-controlled rage. "You no longer wish us harm," he said, staring intently into the stranger’s eyes. "You’re going to explain why you attacked my daughter."

Obsidia struggled to untangle her feet, recognizing what her father was doing. This bandit was hardly the first mortal to suddenly find himself charmed into compliance. Although magic was Malygos’ realm, he had taught Neltharion well—as King Terenas and others had found out, to their peril, through the years.

The man looked mildly disoriented, but a passerby would not have noticed anything particularly noteworthy. He stood in a relaxed posture and began to speak as if doing so was completely his own idea. "I’m being paid very well to assassinate her."

"By whom?" Neltharion asked sharply.

"The Black Prince."
Neltharion looked to Obsidia for an explanation, but she shook her head and shrugged. “Who is the Black Prince?” he asked.

"Wrathion is the only pure black dragon in the world."

They again exchanged a look of confusion. “You were hired by a black dragon?”

"Yes," the man said calmly. "I have worked for him before. He rewards me well."

"And why does he want me dead?" Obsidia asked, still struggling with a knot in the rope around her feet.

"He wants to make sure all the corrupted dragons are wiped out."

"Who else has he hired you to kill?" she asked.

"You are the fourth. Creed was the first."

Neltharion gave her a questioning look, and she whispered, “Just a drakonid."

"Nalice was the second,” the assassin said matter-of-factly.

This made Obsidia put a hand over her mouth to stifle a gasp. The ambassador had fled Wyrmrest after the Cataclysm, only to be struck down by one of their own flight?

"I helped with Deathwing’s defeat for my third mission. The Prince thought that was all, but last month he sensed her," the man said, gesturing at Obsidia. "He didn’t know why he hadn’t noticed her before, but he wants her to die like the others."

"He probably couldn’t sense me when I was stuck in human form," she said. "And I spent a lot of time in Kalimdor in the last few months. Maybe that’s too far away."

Neltharion rubbed his chin, studying the assassin with a look he usually reserved for leftover meat of questionable freshness. “And this ‘prince’ believes he is the last black dragon?”

"Besides her, yes."

"The last in the Eastern Kingdoms, maybe," she muttered.

"What makes him think he’s uncorrupted?" Neltharion asked.

"His egg was purified by a Titan artifact. The red dragonflight sought to save the black flight by ridding them of the touch of the Old Gods. They were only able to cleanse one egg, however, and Wrathion didn’t want to be born their prisoner. He reached out to the rogues of Ravenholdt to free him."
"When was this?" Obsidia asked.

"Last spring."

"This ‘prince’ is barely a year old?" Her voice rose an octave in disbelief.

"Yes."

"A whelp hired you to kill all the other black dragons?"

"Yes."

"Where was his egg from originally?"

"The Badlands."

Obsidia’s eyes widened. "He could be Nyxondra’s son, then! She was killed around the same time, and Nefarian said the red flight was involved."

Neltharion’s expression grew solemn at the mention of his estranged daughter. Turning back to the mind-controlled human, Obsidia asked, “After you killed me, where were you supposed to meet the ‘prince’ to collect your reward?”

"I was to return to Ravenholdt manor."

"Is that where he lives?"

"Yes."

"Very interesting," Neltharion mused. "Obsidia, can you think of anything else we should ask him before he dies?"

She raised an eyebrow. “Not particularly.”

He nodded. “Very well then. You will now wander off into the swamp in that direction,” he instructed, pointing north. “Something will attack you. You will not fight back. You will die.”

"All right," the assassin said just as calmly as if he had been told to get a sandwich. Without hesitation, he sloshed off into the swamp in the direction Neltharion had pointed and was soon lost to sight.

"Why…?" Obsidia asked.

"Why not kill him right here? Because word would get back to this so-called prince that his hired blade had been murdered, and he would know something was afoot. This way it’s as if the idiot got lost in the swamp and was killed by a crocolisk or something."
"Ah. I see. And you’re sure he won’t come to his senses?"

He gave a thin smile. “My dear, if Terenas Menethil could spend years thinking I was a modest nobleman, that thug can spend an afternoon seeking out his demise. I have quite the knack for this sort of thing, you know.”

She surprised him by throwing her arms around him for a hug. “I’m so glad you’re back.”

He chuckled and patted her back. “I am, too, Obsidia. You’ve no idea.”

It seemed prudent to attend to the situation in the Twilight Highlands before investigating the mystery of the Black Prince, so Neltharion and Obsidia took to the skies and flew east. They skirted well to the north of the Vermillion Redoubt, having no desire to encounter any of the red dragonflight at the moment. As they flew over the ford separating the Highlands from Arathi, Neltharion eyed the landscape. “It doesn’t look that bad, but I feel something sinister close by.”

"I’m going to take a wild guess and say that might be why,” Obsidia said, leading him to an arid plateau known recently as the Maw of Madness.

Neltharion jolted to a stop and stared in horror at the scene below. Rotting tentacles lay strewn around an enormous hole in the ground, each larger than even he was. The hole could have easily swallowed a small village, and the pit was surrounded by row upon row of sharp teeth.

"What in the name of all things sacred…?"

"It was called Iso’rath," Obsidia said, hovering close to him. "The Earthen Ring killed it…if such a thing can even be killed."

"It certainly smells dead," he said, coughing.

"So…yeah. I don’t know how you even begin to clean up something like that, but…there you go."

"I need to think about this." He flew down to land on a mountain slope overlooking the Maw.

Obsidia patiently sat nearby, letting him take all the time he needed.

The massive black dragon stood at the edge of the cliff, surveying the topography with a look of deep concentration. He planted his front paws firmly on the ground and closed his eyes. A low rumbling rippled away from him, and he mumbled to himself what sounded like mathematical calculations. Obsidia watched, fascinated,
and did not dare make a sound.

Neltharion gritted his teeth and dug his claws into the rocky ground, straining against some unseen force. Suddenly, he spread his wings and sprang into the air with a thunderous roar. He swooped in a wide arc around the Maw, and wherever his shadow touched fissures of lava began to emerge from the ground. The molten rock seeped out slowly at first, but on his second pass around it began to erupt like uncorked champagne, spraying orange fire high into the air. Soon the Maw was completely surrounded by a spewing curtain of lava, but the Earth Warder was not done. He hovered above the central pit, gesturing broadly as he channeled a spell.

Obsidia peered down at the spectacle, awed by the sheer power displayed. Ashy sat on top of her head, chirping appreciatively at what, to him, were pretty orange fountains.

Neltharion gave a booming roar that seemed to shake the surrounding mountains, and the Maw imploded in a plume of steam and dust. Lava gushed into the center in ever-increasing amounts, filling the pit and burying the decaying tentacles. He flapped back and forth across the area, directing the flow of molten rock wherever it needed adjusting.

It took nearly an hour, but when he was finished there was no trace of Iso’rath or anything else besides smooth, fresh rock. The lava rapidly hardened, leaving a plain of pure black stone. Steam billowed up from a few hotspots, obscuring Obsidia’s view. Where had her father gone?

Even as she worried that something had happened to him, however, his great wings cleared the haze as he swooped up to land beside her.

"That…should do it," he wheezed.

"Father, that was amazing! I’ve never seen anything so—are you all right?" she interrupted herself.

He flopped down on his stomach and considered for a moment before answering, “I’ve been worse.”

"Knowing you, that’s not saying much."

He grinned. “True. But no, I’m fine. I just need to catch my breath.”

She spread her wings. “Let me go catch us some supper while you rest. I used to know this area well, and assuming things haven’t changed too much I know where there should be plenty of game.”

He nodded gratefully and rested his chin on his front paws.
Neltharion awoke with the appetizing smell of freshly-killed meat in his nostrils.

"Dinner is served," Obsidia said with exaggerated formality, laying a dead stag in front of him. He eagerly tore into the carcass, enormous teeth making quick work of it. Obsidia and Ashy shared a second stag.

It wasn’t enough food to last them all day, but it gave Neltharion the energy he needed. Crunching on the last scraps of bone and antler, he stretched his wings and legs in preparation for flight. “I remember something else about these highlands,” he said with a somber expression.

"Oh?"

"The Bastion of Twilight," he said, peering into the distance at the highest mountain peaks. "And your mother."

Obsidia swallowed the last of her meal and avoided eye contact. “I was sort of hoping you didn’t remember that part,” she admitted.

"It was bad enough the Old Gods took over my mind and body, but then they took your mother, too. I remember…” He squinted, still unable to make out the spire of the Twilight headquarters. "At first the eggs stolen from other flights and then corrupted were the only source of Twilight dragons. It wasn’t enough. The Old Gods brought your mother back so that together we could produce all the eggs they needed."

"I know," she said quietly.

"Forced to breed to provide them with soldiers in their war against the world…” Neltharion grimaced. "I owe Alexstrasza an apology."

"Just one?" she teased.

He snorted. “I never thought I’d understand how she felt as a prisoner of the orcs. At least the Dragonmaw didn’t control her every thought and action, every second. Still…” He hung his head. “I can’t believe they did it again. Forced me to hurt my beloved mate, I mean. At least poor Basaltia and Pyroclastia were out of their reach this time, having been dead for ten centuries. Odd, when that’s considered an advantage.”

Obsidia rubbed her nose against the side of his neck with a sympathetic noise. “I visited Mother once over there. I didn’t even know she was alive until I came looking for you and one of the Twilight drakes took me to see her. As strange as it is to say, she seemed…happy. I know it’s twisted, but I think she had convinced herself that it was like old times. She went on and on about how much she cared
about you, and how proud she was to be laying so many eggs. I honestly don’t think she was suffering.”

"I hope…” He cleared his throat in an attempt to downplay the emotion seeping into his voice. "I hope she is at peace, now. Of all the things the Old Gods forced me to do, hurting her was the one I regret the most."

"Do we know for sure that she’s…dead? I mean, I heard the Bastion of Twilight fell and Cho’Gall was slain, so I assumed she was, too, but I never heard for certain."

He bowed his head. “I did. And she was. At the time I heard of it, the Old Gods filled my head with so much babble about her failures that I could barely process the news. They wouldn’t let me regret her fate any more than they would let me refrain from hurting her.”

"Did you want to go visit the Bastion of Twilight while we’re this close?" she asked hesitantly.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, considering it. “No,” he said at last. “There’s no sense in wallowing in all that’s lost.”

"It’s not that, I just… Serinar fled the Obsidian Dragonshrine as soon as you returned from Deepholm, and no one has taken his place. So if Mother is dead, no one has come to bear her remains to be buried there. I thought maybe we should. Even a token scale or something?"

Neltharion gritted his teeth, fighting very hard to keep his composure. “She… deserves that,” he said softly.

Dark magic permeated every inch of the Bastion of Twilight, and the complete silence in the shadowy halls made it even more forboding than it had been when full of cultists. Obsidia and Neltharion walked through the abandoned chambers in human guise, staying close to each other and saying little. Here and there a robed skeleton was strewn on the floor, or the dried-up remains of a Twilight dragon rotted in a corner. The heroes of the Horde and Alliance had done a thorough job of slaughtering everything that moved.

The subterranean cavern was filled with broken eggshells and the skeletons of small dragons. Obsidia tried very hard not to look at them, concentrating instead on the lava pool at the far end of the chamber. Ashy was snug in her knapsack and she had no intention of letting him out.

Neltharion walked faster, and when there was enough distance between them he
shifted into his natural form. Flapping his wings to give himself added momentum, he rushed around the cavern, checking every nook and behind every boulder.

"She’s not here," he said with obvious distress. "What did they do to her?"

"I don’t know," Obsidia said, still not wanting to look around much because of all the whelp skeletons.

"Unless…" He went to the magma pool and stared at the bubbling surface. "It’s the only place left…” At his silent command, the molten rock surged back up into the holes near the ceiling, draining the pool.

Neltharion choked back a sob and climbed down into the pit. Obsidia held her breath until he emerged a moment later carrying the blackened skull of an adult dragon. “I’m taking you home, my love,” he murmured. “If only I could do more… I am so, so sorry.”

Obsidia shifted back into her draconic form and put a paw on his shoulder. “She knows. Somehow.”

Neltharion held onto the skull with one arm and his daughter with the other, closed his eyes, and whispered an incantation.

There was a disconcerting rush of motion similar to using a mage’s portal, and when the world stopped spinning Obsidia realized they were no longer in the Bastion of Twilight. The drop in temperature was her first clue, and the stout columns and shining light globes around the circular chamber confirmed her hunch. This was the lowest level of Wyrmrest Temple, where the entrance portals for each flight’s sanctums had once stood.

"Father! This really isn’t a safe place for us to be. We’ve got to get out of here before someone—”

"No need to worry," came a voice from where the portal to the Bronze Sanctum used to be. "I’ve ssstopped time for the sentriesss."

Obsidia gasped, instantly recognizing the curiously sibilant voice of the leader of the bronze dragonflight. “Nozdormu!”

"It’s been a long time, Neltharion,” the enormous golden dragon said, stepping into the middle of the chamber where the black dragons stood.

"Brother," Neltharion said, looking both contrite and a bit afraid. He carefully set down Sintharia’s skull and turned to face him with a submissive posture. "Forgive me. Forgive me for my weakness that allowed the Old Gods to control me. Forgive me for everything I have done against you and your flight."
"I will grant you that, if you do the same. Neither of us are perfect. Both of us have, or will, harmed the innocent in our misguided schemesss."

Obsidia nudged her father and whispered, “It was the bronzes who retrieved the Heart of Earth and helped me to revive you.”

Neltharion looked to his comrade with a shrewd glare. “You knew all along, didn’t you? Since we first took on our powers as Aspects, you knew what would become of me.”

"Yesss," Nozdormu said matter-of-factly. "Just one of many, many sssecrets I am bound to keep until the time isss right."

"How could you ever look me in the eye, knowing what I would do? How could you keep yourself from warning me, or the others?"

"Sssuch is my burden. You feel the weight of all the earth of Azeroth. I feel the weight of all that isss to come and cannot be avoided."

"Then why help restore me to life now? If my powers are the only thing capable of saving Azeroth, why not prevent me from falling to the Old Gods in the first place?" Neltharion asked heatedly.

"I was ssstill an Aspect then. I had to play by the rules. That isss no longer true."

The black dragon considered this, not entirely convinced but willing to let the matter drop for the moment. “I don’t suppose the others are here.”

"No. Ysera and Alexssstrasza are busy with their own flights, and Kalecgos has returned to the Nexussss."

"That reminds me," Obsidia chimed in. "Why didn’t we take the Heart of Magic to the Halls of Origination to restore Malygos? I mean, I guess it’s a moot point now, but…”

Nozdormu regarded her with a faintly patronizing expression. “Kalecgos was meant to lead the blue dragonflight. The Old Gods are not meant to tear Azeroth apart.”

Neltharion picked up his mate’s skull again and held it protectively against his chest. “I will do what I must to save Azeroth…after I have given my beloved the place of honor she deserves at the Obsidian Dragonshrine.”

Nozdormu nodded. “I will keep a frozen pocket of time around you to allow you ssssafe passage to the shrine. I mussst warn you, after your business there is concluded, I will offer you no more assistance. Your dessstiny is your own from this point, brother.”
"I understand." Neltharion bowed his head in respect, a gesture which the bronze returned. "Thank you."

"I wisssh you luck."

"I didn’t think your flight believed in luck."

"It can’t hurt. You’ll need it."

Neltharion spread his vast wings and launched himself into the gray sky, setting a course to the north and west. Obsidia followed close behind.

"I didn’t like the sound of that," she said.

"Me neither, but first things first. It should—" He cut himself off with a gasp when he looked down at the ravaged landscape of the Dragonblight. "Three of them? You didn’t tell me there were three of them!" The tundra was pockmarked with dead tentacles and piles of rubble, and to the north, east and west of Wyrmrest were three of the enormous, tooth-ringmaus like the one in the Twilight Highlands.

"I didn’t know there were three," she said in dismay. "I just knew things were bad up here."

"It’s coming back to me now," he said slowly. "The Old Gods sent some of their strongest generals to besiege the temple. Those…things were their command centers and source of reinforcements."

"They seem dormant now," she said.

"Never assume that when the Old Gods are at work. Nothing short of complete obliteration can actually stop them and their creations."

"I think that’s kind of what the other Aspects were thinking when they turned the Dragon Soul against you."

"Took them long enough to figure it out," he said with a snort. "Malygos and I were always the brains of the group."

Obsidia laughed.

As they neared the Obsidian Dragonshrine, she warned her father about Nefarian’s widow. "I don’t know if she’s still here, but I suspect she is. And you are definitely not her favorite dragon. She kind of blames you for what happened to Nef."

"I was culpable for a lot of atrocities as Deathwing, but Nefarian’s demise was not one of them. She should be blaming the mortal forces that invaded Blackrock."
"Well, there was that whole issue about him being undead."

Neltharion winced. "Ah, that’s right. Needless to say, that was the Old Gods’ idea."

"That she saw you carry out."

He made a frustrated noise. "This sort of situation is going to crop up a lot, isn’t it?"

"Afraid so."

"I’m already getting tired of apologizing for things I didn’t really do. I mean, I did them, but not voluntarily. It’s really hard to explain if you’ve never felt the Old Gods wrap their tentacles around your brain."

"I understand. Yogg-Saron and I got a little too cozy when I was in Icecrown fighting the Scourge. The Apexis crystals saved me, but it made me feel absolutely wretched."

He gave her a sympathetic look. "I’m sorry you had to experience that."

She smiled. "You just said you were tired of apologizing for things that weren’t your fault."

He chuckled. "True."

The mood darkened considerably as they arrived at the shrine. Neltharion soon realized he could not fit through the entrance in his draconic form. Obsidia barely could squeeze through, so he followed her in human guise.

"This isn’t a bad idea anyway," she whispered. "Seara probably won’t recognize you like that."

He nodded. Ashy landed on his shoulder, and he patted the whelp’s head.

Obsidia reverently carried her mother’s blackened skull through the silent, dusty passageways toward the deepest section of the shrine. She gave Neltharion a significant look and inclined her head toward the side chamber where her siblings’ graves were. He understood and stayed back while he approached.

"Seara? Are you there? It’s me, Obsidia."

"Go away," hissed a voice from inside the chamber.

"I’m just here to bring my mother’s skull to rest."

"Then leave it, and go." Seara appeared, blocking the doorway. Her ribs were starting to become visible through charcoal-gray scales that had lost their shine.
"I was hoping to put it with my brother and sister," Obsidia said.

Seara’s first instinct was clearly to refuse, but after a second she sighed and stepped aside to allow her entry. Obsidia bowed her head in gratitude and carried the skull into the chamber. Little had changed since her last visit. The extreme dryness of the caverns meant that bodies left there took many years to be reduced to bones. Her eyes wandered over Nefarian and his six children, Onyxia, Sartharion, and Atramedes.

As she was carefully arranging Sintharia’s skull on a rock ledge at the rear of the chamber, she heard Seara snarl, “And who are you?”

Uh oh. Please, Father, she thought. Lie. Tell her you’re someone, anyone else…

"I have been known by many names," she heard him say calmly. "The first, and the one I prefer now, is Neltharion."

Obsidia winced. Oh, Sargeras’ flaming nose hairs, she cursed. Why did you have to go and do that?

"What?" Seara roared. "You have the gall to show your face here, Destroyer? I will never let you disturb my love’s rest again!"

Obsidia rushed out of the chamber just in time to see her sister-in-law breathe a torrent of shadowflame at her father.

Neltharion raised one fist and a shield of rock sprang up from the floor to protect him. “I am sorry for what happened to Nefarian,” he said earnestly. “Had I been in my right mind I would never have defiled him or any of my children with undeath. Be assured, I have no intention of disturbing any of the remains here.”

"More lies!" Seara growled. "You monster!"

Obsidia tried to get between her and Neltharion. “Seara, please,” she said, holding out her paws. “He’s not Deathwing anymore. He’s been restored to his original state as the Earth Warder.”

"You expect me to believe that?"

"See for yourself," he said. Being careful to keep his head ducked low to avoid the stalactites, he shifted into his natural form. The cavern left little room to spare, but by sitting and slouching he barely fit.

Seara gasped, eyes growing wide as she looked upon the shining gemstones and streaks of precious metals in his healthy ebon scales. “It can’t be,” she breathed. “How is this possible?”

"There is a machine in the Halls of Origination in Uldum," Obsidia explained. "It’s
what the Titans originally used to turn proto-dragons into dragons like us. With the Heart of Earth and one of Father’s scales, it restored him to the way he was in the beginning."

Seara stammered incoherently, unable to tear her gaze away from the magnificent dragon patriarch.

Neltharion smoothed out the rock barrier he had erected and edged closer to her. “I know you loved my son very much,” he said gently. ”You made him happy, and for that I thank you. I am truly sorry for what happened to him and your boys. I know only too well the pain of losing one’s mate and children. But please realize that I am not Deathwing. I mean you no harm.”

Unreleased tears glistened in Seara’s eyes as she slowly shook her head in disbelief. “I…do not know you. I only know Deathwing, and I cannot stop hating him.”

He nodded. “You have every right to. I cannot ask you to forget what Deathwing did. I can only ask that you give me a chance to prove that I am no longer the dragon who earned your hate.”

Seara finally looked away from him, tears spilling down her face as she did so. “It matters not. All I love is dead. Go, be the Earth Warder. It will not bring back my Nefarian.”

"Seara," Obsidia began, but the other female turned her back and retreated into the side chamber. She looked to her father, who gave a resigned sigh and shifted back into a human.

"Let’s go. I have some serious landscaping to do."

Obsidia glanced back at her sister-in-law with a pitying noise, but followed him out of the shrine.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The restored Earth Warder faces his greatest challenge yet: containing the Old God corruption surrounding Wyrmrest Temple. It’s a monumental task, and there are no guarantees that he and Obsidia will emerge with their lives, powers, or sanity intact…

Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neltharion instructed Obsidia and Ashy to wait atop the steep rock formation that towered over the grave of Galakrond while he did some reconnaissance. Giving Wyrmrest Temple a wide berth, he circled around the area several times, studying the situation and probing the earth with his senses. When he returned to his daughter and grandson, his expression was grim but determined.

"This is going to be rather involved," he said with a frown. "Nozdormu was right; without the powers of the Earth Warder, I don’t see how this mess could ever be cleaned up. And I can sense the Old Gods deep below. They aren’t going to be happy about what I’ll be trying to do. I may need you to defend me while I work."

Obsidia nodded. “Of course.”

"But be careful. I couldn’t bear it if anything happened to my little girl." He nuzzled his cheek against her.

"I’m not so little anymore, Father," she said with a smile.

"No, you’re not. You’ve done so much already… I’m very proud of you."

Her heart swelled with joy at finally hearing those words from him. “Thank you,” she said with a wide grin.

"Now let’s go ruin N’zoth’s day."

"Yeah!" she cried.
"Yokeep!" said Ashy.

"Actually…" Obsidia hesitated, watching the whelp flap around in circles. "I think you should stay here, Ashy. This could get really dangerous and I don’t want you getting hurt."

"Yeep?"

"Nobody will find you way up here. Just sit tight until we get back."

Ashy hung his head with a dejected-sounding “Yeep.”

"I’m sorry, Ashy. It’s for your own safety." She patted her nephew on the head.

He popped up and gave her a messy slurp on the nose. “Sidya yeep!”

She smiled. “Thanks.”

He darted over to lick his grandfather, as well. The sight of such a small whelp slobbering merrily on one of the most fearsome dragons in history made Obsidia giggle.

"Uh, thanks," he said with a slightly confused expression.

"He’s wishing us luck," she said.

"So I gathered. Now then, let’s get started. This is going to take awhile." He spread his great wings and leapt off the peak, gliding in the direction of the nearest maw with his daughter close behind.

Obsidia stayed back and let her father work, ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice if the Old Gods attacked.

Neltharion hovered a safe distance above the enormous maw that lay just north of Wyrmrest. Countless concentric rows of teeth ringed the huge pit, and more horrors no doubt lurked in the shadowy core. This maw was not as flat as the others, but was tilted at an angle to better allow its denizens to climb to the surface. Neltharion used this to his advantage, pushing on the north side of the hill so it surged forward. Earth tumbled into the pit until the weight made that side buckle and collapse. He made a downward stamping motion, and the mangled maw sank deeper into the ground, the edges of the pit crumbling in a loud avalanche of debris.

Next he concentrated intently and called up several fountains of lava that soon inundated the area. Molten rock poured into the pit, burying the remains of the
maw until it overflowed and spilled down the surrounding slopes. Billowing clouds of steam from the melting snow obscured Obsidia’s vision and she circled around to try to find her father again.

She found him hovering over the center of what had been the maw. A seething lake of lava covered everything below, leaving no trace of the monstrosity that had marred the landscape. “That was amazing,” she praised.

"That was the easy one," he said grimly. "This was a conduit for smaller servants of the Old Gods to reach the surface and assist with the siege. The other two were the command centers for Zon’ozz and Yor’sahj."

"Well, one down, two to go," she said with forced optimism.

"Let’s go before someone from the temple comes to investigate." He flew off to the east.

"This one’s even bigger," she groaned, studying the hideous maw below.

"It’s called Shu’ma," Neltharion said, speaking the name with distaste. "Its blood has a wide variety of abilities that my former masters found…useful."

Obsidia shuddered.

Without further preamble, he flew toward the mountains that loomed to the east of Shu’ma. He broke large slabs of rock from the mountainside and sent them crashing down into the maw. The force of the landslide broke off a number of teeth and that side of the pit began to collapse. Neltharion flew back and forth, forcing more rubble down until the tundra around the maw was littered with boulders the size of cottages. Then he flew straight up into the cloudless sky, and Obsidia watched in astonishment as the huge chunks of rock also rose into the air. After they reached a certain height, he let them drop. It sounded like hundreds of goblin-made bombs exploding as they rained down on the maw, leaving deep gouges wherever they landed.

Obsidia was so enrapt at the display of power that she nearly forgot she was supposed to be on the alert for any kind of retaliation. She barely reacted in time to avoid a geyser of liquid that erupted from the center of the collapsing maw. “Father!” she cried. “Look out!”

Neltharion saw, and darted to the side to avoid the spray of multi-colored goo. Obsidia breathed a burst of shadowflame at it, and the strange liquid evaporated in a burst of steam wherever her magic touched. It kept coming, however, and she began to panic, realizing her endurance would run out long before the supply of slime.

Her father roared and dove closer to the ground, aiming so that the air currents
from his mighty wings sent the liquid splattering back onto the rubble. He made a shoving motion, and the ground all around the maw sank at least twenty feet. The teeth and tentacles were no longer visible under the layer of earthen rubble, but pockets of ooze welled up in many places, each pocket a different color of the rainbow.

Obsidia darted around nervously, narrowly avoiding several spurts of liquid that seemed to be aiming for her. She tried to combat these attacks with shadowflame, but for every spot she cauterized another bubbled up nearby. Neltharion was doing the same with jets of lava, with similar results.

"Obsidia, stay back!" she heard her father yell. "I’m going to try something else."

Without questioning, she backed off a safe distance.

Neltharion’s eyes glowed even brighter as he mustered his powers, swooping around the field of debris in a wide arc. Cracks snaked through the tundra, growing wider as he circled overhead, until the remains of Shu’ma were surrounded by a chasm as deep as the one that so impressed Obsidia and Ashy in the Barrens. Jets of slime shot skyward in the Earth Warder’s direction, but he was flying too fast to be caught. A deafening rumbling shook the area.

Obsidia watched her father with awe and worry as he took on an aura the color of fire, lightning crackling around his claws as he concentrated on a spell.

There was a tremendous boom, and the concussion sent Obsidia tumbling backward through the air. The noise was incredible, as if all the world’s thunder had gathered in one place. When she got her bearings and regained control of her wings, she turned to see what had happened. An enormous, smoking crater yawned across where the Maw of Shu’ma had been. How deep it extended, Obsidia could not venture to guess. The hole seemed to go on forever into the darkness, and yet…the darkness was growing.

Tendrils of shadow curled upward, and the sight turned her stomach. A palpable sense of evil and chaos radiated from the pit, making her Apexis crystal adornments grow warm even from her current distance. If that darkness reached the surface—

But the Earth Warder was not about to let that happen. With a roar almost as loud as the grinding rock, he caused rifts to appear all around the edge of the crater. Each one erupted with a torrent of lava, spraying into the void in all directions.

Neltharion levitated several masses of rock nearly as big as his own body, chucking them down the pit with incredible force. Obsidia thought she heard a keening cry of pain from somewhere deep below the surface.
He hovered high above the center of the chasm, radiating red and orange energy so brightly that Obsidia had to shade her eyes with one paw to keep watching. He made two fists and slammed them together, and as he did so the walls of the bottomless shaft mimicked the motion. A crashing, rumbling cacaphony seemed to shake the mountains themselves as the hole closed. When the chasm was completely cut off, lava surged in from around the edges of the crater, burying any trace of Shu’ma in a hundred feet of rapidly-hardening stone.

When the dust and steam began to clear, Obsidia looked for her father. She spotted a large, black shape perched on the mountainside where he had gathered ammunition to throw into the maw.

"Father!" she called, zooming toward him. "That was absolutely incredible! I didn’t know you were even capable of such feats! The Titans themselves couldn’t have done a more complete job of burying that monstrosity!" Only when she landed beside him did she see how exhausted he looked.

"Thank you," he said, slumping down onto his stomach as if his limbs would no longer hold him.

"Are you all right?"

He did not answer right away, making her even more alarmed.

"I feel…diminished," he said at last. "I’ve never had to tap into that much of my power at once before."

She brushed her nose against the side of his head. “You just need to rest, Father.”

"No," he said immediately. "They will be expecting me to assault Gor’ath next. The less time they have to prepare a defense, the better.” He forced himself to spread his wings again.

"But Father—"

"I do what I must. What I should have done long ago," he said, leaping into the air.

Obsidia watched him fly westward with an overwhelming sense of foreboding.

The Maw of Gor’ath was just as large as Shu’ma had been. The blight on the landscape to the west of Wyrmrest temple was silent as they approached, the surrounding tentacles motionless. The short northern day was already nearing its close, and Neltharion and Obsidia circled around to approach from the west to avoid having the setting sun in their eyes.
"This was Zon’ozz’s command center," Neltharion said. "Be alert."

"Be careful," Obsidia countered.

He gave a noncommittal shrug and swooped down over the maw, just out of reach of the giant tentacles if they should spring to life. He wasted no time in opening conduits of lava in a wide ring all around the pit, then hovered over the southern edge of the maw, straining as if pushing against a tremendous weight. The nearest edge of the maw began to cave in. Teeth snapped off and disappeared into the depths. Neltharion wheeled around to repeat the process from the north side. When both halves were crumpled inward, Obsidia realized he was crushing the creature like a mortal crunching an empty tin can.

She tried not to let herself be distracted by the spectacular work her father was doing, and kept a close eye on the maw itself for any signs of life. The instant she saw a flare of purple magic begin to coalesce inside the pit, she roared a warning.

Neltharion immediately put some distance between himself and Gor’ath. A bright purple orb that could have engulfed Obsidia’s entire body shot upward in his direction. With split-second timing, he whirled around and struck the orb with his tail, sending it careening away into the snowy canyons to the north of the maw.

Obsidia was slightly surprised that such a thing was possible, for the orb was semi-transparent, as if made of pure energy. Not questioning the logic, she flew closer to help as a swarm of smaller balls erupted from the pit. She imitated her father, taking aim with her tail to knock one away, but the instant the purple sphere touched her the Apexis crystals around her ankle flared with intense heat. She managed to deflect the orb before scrambling to remove the anklet. The crystals were so hot they burned her paws.

It occurred to her that between this one and the one she lost at Stonetalon, she was now protected by only the crystals around her neck and wrists, but there was nothing to be done about it now. She let the blackened crystals drop to the distant ground.

While she was distracted, several other orbs had floated close to her, and she darted in a series of evasive maneuvers in an attempt to escape. One ricocheted off her shoulder, and another grazed her thigh. In the split second they were in contact with her she heard a burst of familiar whispers.

_Hate kill die despair—_

_Death destruction hopelessness—_

"Oh, shut the hell up," she snarled. She tried a burst of shadowflame, but it seemed to have no effect on the purple orbs. In another moment they would have her
surrounded, so she made a tactical retreat upwards and toward her father.

The lava shooting from Neltharion’s mouth caused the energy spheres to drop from the sky, melting away by the time they hit the ground.

"Incoming!" Obsidia yelled as she flew toward him with a dozen balls chasing her.

He heard her, and she ducked out of the way as he turned his lava attack in her direction. The swarm of orbs plummeted with a popping, fizzling noise.

Soon the air was clear, and Neltharion paused to catch his breath. ”Are you all right?” he asked her.

"Yeah," she assured him, not mentioning her lost anklet. "What about you?"

"Never better." He swooped back toward the maw to continue his work.

Obsidia watched as he opened a fresh chasm around the perimeter. Lava poured in, melting the snow with explosive bursts of steam.

Neltharion’s eyes glowed brighter, the same color as the lava, as he drew upon his powers. The ground trembled in all directions, causing landslides in many of the surrounding canyons. He gritted his teeth and made a downward motion with one paw while raising the other above his head. At his command, the ground surrounding Gor’ath sank at least thirty feet, and the terrain just to the west of it rose higher. The top of this new peak cracked open, and lava erupted in a spectacular spray of orange. The flow from the newborn volcano poured down into the pit even as the lava-filled chasm around Gor’ath emptied itself inward.

The dormant tentacles smoked and sizzled as molten rock poured around them, and Obsidia shouted a warning as one of them twitched to life. It wriggled up in Neltharion’s direction, and he aimed a burst of lava breath at it. The tentacle fell back, convulsing, and was still again. Another snaked up from the opposite side of the pit, however, and Obsidia dived down to attack it. Her shadowflame attack caused it to lash out at her, and she darted out of the way just in time, still dousing it with purple magic. The tentacle recoiled, but a third erupted from the ground nearby and nearly struck her back. Only a reflexive dive saved her.

Meanwhile, Neltharion was occupied with a forest of tentacles coming at him from all directions. He spun in circles, spraying lava at his attackers, but for every one of the hideous coils he destroyed, two more sprang up. Obsidia hurried to join him, but before she could reach him one of the tentacles managed to grab her by the ankle. Unprotected by the Apexis crystals, the full force of the Old Gods’ malevolence surged through her body like electricity.

*Kill! Destroy! Trust no one. There is no hope. Just give in.*
"No!" she cried, slashing at the tentacle with her front claws. "Get off!"

*Give in to your rage. Surrender. You are alone.*

"I am not alone!" she screamed, digging her claws into the slimy flesh. "I have my father back, and Sabellian is beyond your reach!"

*All will fall to chaos. We are eternal.*

"Eternally annoying!" she snapped, blasting the tentacle with shadowflame. No matter how hard she flapped her wings, she could not pull free.

"Obsidia!" her father yelled, but whether he was calling for assistance or alarmed at her predicament, she wasn’t sure.

*Give up. You have no hope. Close your eyes. Sleep forever.*

"No!" she snarled. She raked at the tentacle with her claws and breathed torrents of shadowflame at it, but it only tightened its grip. She began to lose feeling in her leg, and her wings ached with fatigue. "Father! Help!"

Neltharion gave a tremendous roar that shook the ground, the tentacles, even the air.

Obsidia twisted around to catch a glimpse of him, and gasped in horror. The great black dragon was overwhelmed. Tentacles were wrapped around both his back limbs and his neck. From his height, it was clear he had tried to fly out of reach but the tentacles extended further than he had guessed.

*You are a failure,* crowed the voices in her head. *Although we thank you for returning our greatest weapon to us. The Hour of Twilight is coming. All will perish!*

"No! Father!"

If he heard her, he gave no sign. He thrashed, clawed and bit against his attackers, spewing lava and ordering boulders to fly up and strike the tentacles.

Obsidia grew dizzy with panic and pain, and dimly realized that she was closer to the ground now. The tentacle was dragging her down toward the bubbling sea of lava.

*You will die like your mother,* the whispers said gleefully. *When she allowed herself to be defeated by mere mortals and could no longer serve us, we drowned her in lava—her greatest fear. It was delicious.* Maniacal laughter echoed in her brain.

Obsidia screeched in horror and frantically tore chunks of the tentacle apart with
her claws and teeth, but still it maintained its vicelike grip around her leg.

A second female voice rose in unison with Obsidia’s roar, and at first she thought her mother’s spirit was crying out. Then there was a dark gray blur, and the tentacle shuddered with the impact of something large. She stared in surprise as a large, winged shape joined her in the attack. Within moments, the tentacle released its hold and tumbled backward in shreds, disappearing into the steaming lava.

"What?" Obsidia gasped.

"Hi," Seara said curtly before zooming off toward where the Earth Warder was entangled.

There was no time or energy to question her sister-in-law’s arrival. There was also no time to think about the throbbing, burning pain in her leg. All that mattered was freeing her father.

Neltharion had managed to repel the tentacles around his neck and one of his limbs, but was still snared. Fiery energy crackled around his body, searing the coils of flesh that trapped him. As Obsidia got closer, she saw the Apexis crystals embedded in his body were glowing red-hot.

Seara launched herself at the tentacle around Neltharion’s right leg, viciously attacking it with all four limbs and mouthfuls of shadowflame. The unexpected attack was soon successful, and with Obsidia’s help he was able to free himself from the other tentacles. He rocketed higher into a sky stained orange by a combination of the sunset and the erupting volcano.

"Father! Are you all right?" Obsidia asked frantically.

"Stay back, both of you," he said in a voice that invited no argument. They obeyed.

The red-orange aura around Neltharion grew brighter, and his eyes blazed with power. He almost seemed to grow larger as he mustered his abilities. He hovered above the peak of the newborn volcano, his massive wings casting a shadow over the entire maw as the evening sun sank behind him.

"No more!" he boomed, and the ground trembled from the volume of his deep voice. "You parasites have held sway for far too long. You have used me in your foul schemes, and the world I was sworn to protect has suffered immeasurably in the process. You disgusting creatures made me harm my fellow Aspects, my flight, my family, my mates and children!" He gave an inarticulate roar of pure fury, lava spraying from his mouth. “Never again! You will never, ever hurt my dragonflight again!” The nimbus of light around him grew so bright Obsidia had to look away. The air hummed with energy and even though she was aloft she could feel every
bit of earth beneath her vibrating.

Neltharion’s roar melted into the cacophony of rumbling, grinding, thundering rock. Suddenly, even that noise was lost in a tremendous blast that sent both Obsidiana and Seara flailing backward, heads over tails, to smash into the side of a nearby mountain slope. Snowdrifts cushioned the impact, and when they recovered enough to look toward the Maw of Go’rath the landscape was unrecognizable.

The new volcano was gone. The pit full of lava and tentacles was gone. The chasm around the maw was gone. An expanse of glistening, jet-black volcanic glass covered the entire area, rendering it flat and featureless.

As amazing as the transformation was, Obsidiana’s first concern was not the geology. “Father!” she cried, launching herself from the mountainside. A black dragon should have been difficult to spot with so little daylight left, but the gemstones and precious metals in his hide glittered like a beacon.

Neltharion lay on his side at the edge of the plain of ebon glass, enormous ribs heaving with gasping breaths. He gave no sign of awareness when his daughter landed beside him.

"Father! Say something! Are you okay?" She nudged her nose against his cheek. "Father?"

His eyes opened slowly, and he gave her a faint smile. “Daughter. I’m so glad you’re all right.”

Seara landed nearby but kept her distance, watching warily.

Obsidiana stared at his eyes, which were a ruddy gold color—beautiful in their own right, but lacking the fiery glow of power. “Father, your…”

"I know." He sat up slowly, as if even this bit of effort was exhausting. "The other Aspects expended all their Titan-given powers to stop me…to stop Deathwing,” he said, frowning to emphasize the difference. "It is only fair that I do the same."

"You don’t mean…?"

He nodded, looking more tired than distressed. “I used all the power of the Earth Warder to seal away the Old Gods again. They cannot be destroyed without unmaking the world, but they are now buried deeper than ever before. It will take many millenia before they’ll be able to make their presence felt on the surface again.”

Obsidiana slumped against him and embraced him tightly. “Thank you, Father.”

He closed his eyes and held her snugly under his chin. “Thank you, Obsidiana.”
After a few pleasant moments, he lifted his head to look at Seara, who was sitting awkwardly nearby. “And thank you, as well,” he told her. “Without your timely intervention, things would have ended much differently.”

She shifted her weight and studied the snow between her front paws. “I did what I thought was necessary,” she said quietly.

Obsidia went to her with a grateful smile and bowed her head. “You saved my life, and my father’s, as well. Thank you so much.”

Seara shrugged, clearly uncomfortable. “Nefarian would have wanted me to.”

"I thought you’d never leave the shrine," Obsidia said gently. "What changed your mind?"

There was a spark of excitement in her eyes when Seara finally looked up. “A number of things, but I was thinking about what you found in Uldum, and… We can talk later. Let’s just say my academic side was very intrigued. Right now you both need some attention from a healer, and I’m assuming we don’t want to be here when someone from Wyrmrest comes to see what happened.”

Obsidia glanced back at her leg, which was swollen, burned and missing several scales. Now that the adrenaline was wearing off, she realized just how badly it hurt. She turned to Neltharion, who was also wounded in several places. ”Father, are you able to fly?”

He stretched his wings experimentally and thought for a moment. “Not far, but I think I can make it to the shrine.” He stood, wincing, and prepared to take off. Seara led the way, and they hurried to the safety of the Obsidian Dragonshrine.

Seara’s encyclopedic knowledge of alchemy extended to healing ointments, and although Obsidia’s leg would be sore for weeks at least she was more comfortable after some poultices and potions.

Neltharion slept though that night, the next day, and into the following evening. While he snored in the middle of the main chamber of the second level of the shrine, Seara explained her ideas to Obsidia.

"The Aspects were not the only dragons the Titans evolved from our more primitive cousins," she said while mixing a fresh batch of soothing herbs for their burns. "Obviously, they needed to make sure there was a breeding population of each flight, so they provided the Aspects with mates as well as several other pairs to ensure genetic diversity."

Obsidia nodded, although such scientific matters were a bit over her head. Ashy
was perched on her back as she rested on her stomach with her sore leg cushioned by a pile of cloth scraps. The whelp had not left her side since she retrieved him from his hiding place. He may not have understood what had happened, but he knew she had faced something dangerous and gotten hurt, and on some level he realized how close he had come to losing his second mother.

"So even though the other original dragons didn’t have the magic Hearts that the Aspects did, they were still transformed in the Titans’ laboratories," Seara said.

"Right," Obsidia said, following her so far.

"Well, I was thinking…what’s to stop us from doing the same? The laboratories are still there, and as your father’s existence proves, they still work."

"You mean, capture proto-dragons from here in Northrend and take them all the way to Uldum?" Obsidia frowned.

"That’s an option, but we know it’s possible to regenerate a dragon from a single scale, as you did with your father."

"Scales would be a lot easier to transport across the world," Obsidia agreed.

"Yeep," Ashy said, rolling on his belly.

Seara stirred the basin of herb paste for a moment, a sly smile taking form on her face. “And I wasn’t exactly thinking of proto-dragons as subjects, either, although that has potential.”

Obsidia tilted her head as she tried to read between the lines to see what her sister-in-law was getting at. Seeing her confusion, Seara gave a significant look in the direction of the chamber where her family lay entombed.

Obsidia gasped. "You can’t mean them?"

"Why not? You put one of your father’s scales into a machine, and he came out as good as new—better than new! There’s no reason to think it wouldn’t work with others."

"But he was an Aspect."

"Yes, but that doesn’t change the fact that genetically he is just a dragon. That Titan lab produced Tyrannasrasz, Sordormi, Sindragosa, Eranikus, your mother and many others who were not Aspects."

Obsidia considered this. “It seems too good to be true,” she said warily.

"It’s about time something good happened to our flight," Seara said with a scowl. "Ever since I lost Nefarian…again…I’ve tried to figure out why I survive when
everyone I love has died. Perhaps this is my purpose, to use everything my beloved taught me to salvage the best of the black flight.”

Obsidia was silent while Seara slathered a fresh coat of herb paste onto the welts on her leg. The cool salve eased the pain of the burns left by the Apexis crystals and her own shadowflame, where in her desperation to get free of the tentacle she had cast her magic without precise aim. The muscles deep in her thigh throbbed in agony from being pulled and compressed in the deadly game of tug-o-war. It was a small miracle that no bones were broken.

"Thank you," she said when her sister-in-law was done applying the poultice. "That feels better already."

"Good." Seara began to clean up her supplies. "Where do you plan to go after you and Lord Neltharion are well enough to travel?"

"Outland, eventually," Obsidia said. "All our surviving family is there, after all. But there is one other matter we need to look into first." She told Seara about the mysterious "Black Prince" who had ordered the assassinations of Nalice, herself and others.

"That poor baby," Seara said. "All alone and scared, without his mother!"

"That ‘poor baby’ is trying to have the rest of the flight *killed!*" Obsidia objected.

"I’m sure he just needs a proper parent to guide and discipline him," Seara said, shaking her head in sympathy. "You should have seen the shenanigans my boys got up to when they were younger." Her eyes drifted toward the burial cave.

"Extermination of the black dragonflight is a little more than ‘shenanigans.’ Still, if he’s my nephew…" Obsidia glanced around. "Nyxondra’s not here, is she?"

"Serinar had already gone into hiding when she and Kalaran fell," Seara explained quietly. "No one was around to bring them here to rest."

"I wonder what happened to him," Obsidia said with a frown. "He wasn’t among the ones the so-called ‘prince’ had assassinated, at least according to the human we interrogated. Then again, this ‘Wrathion’ didn’t seem to detect anyone who wasn’t in the Eastern Kingdoms, so perhaps Serinar is still somewhere in Northrend."

"There was no sign of him when I arrived here." Seara shrugged. "Anyway, I want to come with you when you seek out this poor, orphaned whelp."

"We don’t know if he’s an orphan," Obsidia said purely to be contrary. For some reason everything about this murderous whelp irritated her.

"Is Nyxondra’s mate alive?" Seara asked.
"I don’t know. I never even learned his name. After Hemathion was lost in Outland I know she found another mate, but she refused to tell me anything about him. She just said he was from ‘up north’, which is about as vague as it gets. I imagine he’s dead, now, though. If this whelp has killed off everyone on the continent…” She shrugged.

"Well, regardless, he’s still without his mother," Seara said stubbornly. "And I would be glad to help look after him."

Obsidia’s expression softened. “We’d love to have you along.”

"After that, however…what would it take to convince you to show me to the Halls of Origination?"

Obsidia hesitated. They had journeyed so far and done so much that the thought of heading all the way back to Uldum made her want to keel over. On the other hand, the possibility of restoring her siblings to life was too tempting to ignore. ”I’ll have to talk to Father,” she said at last.

Seara did not look pleased. “Once again my plans must hinge on his decisions,” she said sourly.

"It’s not that; I just need to see what he thinks. If he doesn’t feel up to such a long trip yet, I suppose we could go without him."

Placated, Seara nodded. “Very well. One way or another, I am going to investigate that laboratory.”

Later that evening, Neltharion awoke from his deep slumber, finally feeling refreshed—and ravenous. Anticipating this, Seara had brought a mammoth back to the shrine for supper. As they devoured the fresh meat, he seemed to be in high spirits.

"I know I should feel worse about losing my powers as Earth Warder," he said sheepishly, "but to be honest…I just feel relieved. You can’t imagine the weight I felt, both literal and metaphorical. I was aware of every rock, every mountain and valley, all the volcanoes and erosion, plates drifting and colliding… Do you know how hard it is to get a good night’s sleep when you’re aware of an avalanche half a continent away, a sinkhole in the next mountain range over, and the pressure building up for an eruption on the other side of the planet? The Heart of Earth gave me the strength to endure it, but that doesn’t mean it was pleasant."

"I never thought about it," Obsidia said with a shrug.

"I tried not to burden you children with complaints. It was my sacred duty, and
a necessary one. Still, I cannot pretend that I will miss it. I suspect Alexstrasza and the others feel much the same, even if they won’t admit it. To know of every birth and death in the world, to feel the ebb and flow of every magical spell being cast, to see the dreams of every sleeping creature, not to mention the infinitely twisting timelines… It’s a wonder any of us retained our sanity."

Obsidia surveyed the chips of Apexis crystals embedded in his scales. Some were still shiny and semi-transparent, but many were clouded black. “Father, about the crystals you’ve got…do you feel any different with so many depleted?”

He scratched at one of the ruined crystals. “Not precisely, but…” He hesitated.

"What?"

"Even without the mantle of the Earth Warder, I still have powers over the domain of stone. I tried reaching out my senses earlier, and when I delved deep below the surface, I could faintly hear the whispers."

Obsidia’s eyes widened in horror. “No!”

"Yeep?" Ashy looked up from his meal, a shred of mammoth meat dangling from his mouth, to see what was upsetting. Seeing nothing, he returned to eating.

"Don’t worry," Neltharion said, "I recognized them for what they were and pulled back immediately. And it’s only when I probe near their prison that I can hear them. Right now everything is blessedly quiet. As long as I concentrate on the surface of the world, I feel safe."

"That’s still worrisome," she said.

"I agree," he said with a frown. "But once in Outland I can get more crystals and wear them like you do. That should do the trick."

Obsidia glanced at Seara, who said nothing but looked frustrated with the prospect of such a delay. “Father,” she said, “Seara and I were talking about the Halls of Origination, and wondering if maybe we could use the same machine that restored you on some of the others.”

He perked up with a sharp intake of breath. “Do you really think that would work?”

Seara grew flustered under his scrutiny. “We won’t know until we try,” she said quickly. “But the Titans made the Aspects’ mates and other dragons to start the flights, so if the machinery is still there…”

Obsidia expected her father to dismiss the idea as impossible or blasphemous, but he seemed cautiously excited. “I can’t believe I hadn’t thought of it,” he said.
Seara grinned, thrilled to have his endorsement. “It may be just wishful thinking to imagine I could have my Nefarian back, but if it worked on you…”

Obsidia put down the mammoth leg she was gnawing on. “What about the Black Prince? We were going to look for him next, weren’t we?”

"Ah, yes," Neltharion mused. "With everything else going on I had nearly forgotten that little upstart. I suppose that does bear looking into. As long as I’m with you, I can protect you from any mortal assassins, but if one catches you alone…” Neltharion sucked the marrow out of one last mammoth bone before standing up carefully to avoid hitting his head on the cavern ceiling. "We fly to Moa’ki Harbor tomorrow. Since neither one of us is up to flying across an ocean right now, we’ll take a ship. There must be one leaving for the Eastern Kingdoms sometime soon. We’ll go to Hillsbrad and look for the whelp, then go back to Uldum."

Obsidia said nothing.

"What’s the matter, daughter? Do you need longer to recover from your injuries? Your leg still looks quite swollen."

"No, I…” She gave a short, bitter laugh. "I’m just so used to everything going horribly wrong. I’ve forgotten how to be optimistic."

He patted her on the shoulder. “I sympathize. I think we’re all a bit rusty in that area.”

"Yeep!" Ashy stopped attacking a mammoth bone five times his size and gave her a reassuring slurp.

"Good advice," Neltharion said with a sage nod. "We should listen to him more often."

Obsidia gave a genuine chuckle.

A handsome human with perfectly-styled black hair spoke to the tuskarr dockmaster in Moa’ki Harbor and learned that a Kalu’ak turtle boat would be leaving later that afternoon, bound for the Howling Fjord. From there a more seaworthy vessel would take his party to Menethil Harbor. The nobleman thanked the tuskarr and returned to where his lovely daughter sat with her nurse atop a large crate.

The young lady had one foot elevated on a second crate with a thick bandage wound around her ankle, and a crutch leaned nearby. The nurse fussed over her
bandage. The man explained their itinerary, and both women seemed pleased.

Only the closest observer would have noticed that the lady’s knapsack was wiggling.

"Here we are again," Neltharion said as Menethil Harbor came into view on the horizon. This time, thankfully, it was a sunny day. Obsidia stood next to him, leaning on the railing but now without her crutch. A week of rest at sea and her sister-in-law’s healing ointments had done wonders. Although she wouldn’t have relished the idea of walking long distances yet, her leg was in good enough shape to handle normal activity.

Seara approached from behind, and to keep up appearances she made a formal curtsy and addressed them as her noble employers. “My lord and lady, your belongings are ready to go ashore as soon as we dock.”

"Excellent," he said with a smile. "I will make inquiries about a place to store our cargo while we conduct our business in Hillsbrad."

"Very good, m’ lord," Seara said with another curtsy.

The cargo in question was a large crate filled with samples of scales and bones from the Obsidian Dragonshrine. As a single scale from Deathwing had been sufficient for the Titan machine to restore him, they were counting on the same working for Nefarian and the others. However, there was no need to drag their macabre collection to Ravenholdt and back.

The docks at Menethil were still a mess, as reconstruction work was going slowly. "This place has seen better days," Seara muttered as their ship docked.

Neltharion shifted his weight with a guilty smirk.

Obsidia stifled a giggle.

The usual warehouses near the docks were a shambles, and most were not accepting new shipments for storage. After being turned down for the fourth time, Neltharion gave a frustrated sigh.

"You should have thought of that before you trashed the place," Obsidia teased.

"The Old Gods weren’t interested in commerce," he grumbled. "Come on, I have another idea."
It was the middle of the afternoon, but Fahrad was sprawled in bed, one forearm over his eyes. His head throbbed with a combination of pain and the insistent whispers of the Old Gods.

_You must control the boy_, they fumed. _He is dangerous._

Fahrad did not bother answering.

_Kill everyone else in the manor and keep him chained up until you can break his will!_

The sound of the door unlocking finally made him uncover his eyes, knowing that only Wrathion had a key.

"I found her again!" the prince announced without preamble. "And she’s got two others with her, now! I just sensed them in Menethil Harbor! That must mean they’ve been overseas!"

"Oh," was all Fahrad said.

Wrathion approached the bed hesitantly. "Are you ill?"

"Just a headache," he said quietly.

"Ah." The prince hesitated, then shifted into his true body and landed on the pillow beside the rogue’s head. "Would you like me to see if there’s a healer around?"

Fahrad managed a faint smile. "No, my prince. It’s nothing they could help with."

Wrathion nuzzled his head against Fahrad's temple.

Normally the rogue would have patted him or somehow returned the gesture, but now he tensed and did not make a move. "You should probably stay away from me."

Wrathion sat back, looking hurt.

"In case this is catchy. I don’t want you to get sick, too."

"You said it was just a headache."

"You never know."

The whelp flapped his wings, lifting off the bed until he hovered a short distance away. "Very well. I’ll see about dispatching a team of assassins after these mystery dragons, then." He turned back into his human form and put a hand on the doorknob, then paused and turned back to face Fahrad. "If I couldn’t sense this female when there was an ocean between us… That means there could be others out there. I know you’ve had your contacts in Northrend and Kalimdor look, but there could easily be more black dragons hiding on the other continents."

Fahrad said nothing at first, keeping his eyes closed. "True," he said finally.
"It could take months—years, even—to make sure they’re all gone."

Fahrad grimaced. "I may not have that long."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I… I can’t… control myself much longer. The corruption… It’s getting worse. I hear them constantly. For your own protection, it may be time. It may be past time."

"No," he said stubbornly.

"I’m sorry," Fahrad rasped, opening his eyes to look directly at him. "I won’t ask you to do it. I know a poison that’s fast and utterly painless. I’ll go away, into the mountains, and—"

"Absolutely not!" Wrathion interrupted, returning to stand at his bedside. "I forbid it!"

"Wrathion, I don’t want to hurt you, and if this keeps up, I will."

"I won’t let you," he said, crossing his arms on his chest. "I won’t!"

Unexpectedly, Fahrad gave a half-hearted chuckle. "Titans, you look like your mother when you pout like that."

"I’m not pouting!" he snapped, although he had been. "As the heir of the Aspect, I hereby order you not to harm yourself in any way, shape, or form. Is that understood?"

Fahrad sat up and scowled angrily. "I could snap and attack you at any moment. Is that understood?"

"Yes, but I have the talisman you gave me. I can freeze you in place before you can touch me."

"Once. That thing only has enough power to work once, and that’s assuming I don’t snap when you’re sleeping or distracted. Don’t trust me, Wrathion!"

"I don’t. But I do care.” His voice wavered, and he backed into the bureau. "You rescued me, hatched me, taught me, took care of me… You’re like a father to me, Fahrad."

The rogue stared at him, breathing heavily. "You deserve a better father than me,” he said after a moment.

"Well, you’re better than Deathwing,” he said cheekily.

Fahrad forced a half-smile onto his face for a moment. “That’s not saying much.”

Wrathion leaned over to put a hand on the rogue’s shoulder. “Promise me you’ll stick around at least until this trio in the Wetlands is out of the way.”

Fahrad took a deep, steadying breath and nodded. “I will try.”

"Swear on your honor."

"I’m a rogue. I don’t have much."
“Then swear on something else important,” he said impatiently.

Fahrad considered for a moment, then looked directly into the prince’s red eyes and said, “I swear on my brothers’ bones, I won’t harm myself before these other dragons are gone.”

Wrathion nodded slowly, deciding to believe him. “All right. I’ll hold you to that. Now rest, if you need to. I’ve got things under control.”

Fahrad slumped back into his pillow and closed his eyes.

Neltharion led Obsidia and Seara to Menethil’s largest inn, which was dry inside thanks to a ridge of sandbags around the building. He greeted the innkeeper with a dashing smile, the kind that had once enthralled the entire Lordaeron court. “Pardon me, my good dwarf, but I am looking to secure a room for my daughter and her nurse for a few days. I have business to attend to elsewhere, and I would feel much better knowing my precious girl was safe and sound in a fine establishment such as this.”

The dwarf blinked several times, his fifth mug of ale making it difficult to make sense of the flowery language. “Ye need a room?” he said at last.

"Yes." Neltharion laid a handful of gold coins on the bar along with a sapphire that was clearly worth at least as much as a horse. "And we do value our privacy."

"O’ course!” the dwarf said with a grin, scooping the riches into his apron pockets. "Let me show you and the ladies to our best room!"

"Thank you, sir."

Obsidia gave him a questioning look as they followed the dwarf up the stairs. “I thought we were all going—”

He silenced her with a devious smile, and she decided to wait and see.

The innkeeper gave them a key and led them inside a corner room on the second floor. “It’s a wee bit more humble than I suspect yer used to, m’ lord, but it’s the best we’ve got.”

"It will do nicely," Neltharion said graciously.

"If there’s nothin’ else, I’ll let ye get settled."

"There is just one more thing." Neltharion stooped to look the dwarf directly in the eyes, and Obsidia recognized his mind-controlling magic at work. "My daughter and her nurse will be coming and going regularly from this room, and taking their
meals at odd hours. If anyone comments that they have not seen the ladies, you will assure them that you just saw them a short time ago and everything is fine. They are not to be disturbed, and no one is to enter this room until I return.”

"Yep," the dwarf said dreamily. "Everything is fine. Just saw the ladies. Not to be disturbed."

"Good," Neltharion said with a smug grin. "You may go about your normal business now."

"A’right," the dwarf said, slowly wandering down the stairs.

"There," Neltharion said. "We can leave our cargo here while we’re gone. I’ll plant a few more…suggestions…while we get it delivered from the docks, and then we can be on our way."

Obsidia beamed at him. “I love it when you mess with mortal brains.”

He chuckled. “It just so happens that I do, too. You ladies rest while I attend to our other business. It shouldn’t take long.”

"Okay." Obsidia flopped down on one of the room’s two beds, grateful to be off her throbbing ankle for a little while. It was only after Neltharion left, latching the door behind him, that she noticed Seara was backed into a corner, looking upset. "What’s the matter?"

Seara gave a nervous laugh. “Nothing, I just… Dwarves. I can’t stand dwarves.”

"You’re afraid of dwarves?"

"I’m not afraid of them!" Seara said a little too quickly. "I just spent a lot of years at Blackrock fighting those damned Dark Irons on the lower levels, and even before that an army of them almost killed me."

"There aren’t any Dark Irons here."

"It doesn’t matter. Dwarves are dwarves. Annoying little things too rocky to eat."

Obsidia laughed.

As far as the citizens of Menethil were concerned, a youthful noblewoman and her nurse were staying at the inn. In truth, both were flying northward on black wings, trailing behind an even larger male dragon.

"Care to drop by your old realm, King Prestor?" Obsidia asked.
"That’s quite all right," Neltharion said with a smirk. "Our errand is further east, and I don’t think any of my former subjects would be happy to see me."

"Last I heard, Alterac was overrun with ogres, yetis and human bandits. A dragon might be a nice change of pace."

"Not that ogres aren’t very tasty, but I think we should defer that until a later date. This ‘king’ has an appointment with a ‘prince.’"

Chapter End Notes

If the scene with Wrathion and Fahrad didn’t make a lot of sense to you, read my fic “The Black Prince: The Beginning.” There will be much, much more with them in the next couple of chapters.
Remember that by this point in the canon timeline, Fahrad was already dead. With Deathwing’s demise, Wrathion believed Fahrad was the only other black dragon on Azeroth. In this AU, that obviously isn’t the case, which means the rogue has to hold it together even longer—or at least try to…
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Neltharion shows up at Ravenholdt to set the record straight for a certain whelp. There are staggering implications for Wrathion, but Fahrad doesn’t take too kindly to having his web of lies torn apart by the dragon who caused him and his beloved so much suffering… Can they call a truce long enough to save the black dragonflight?

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: References to past character deaths (Nyxondra and others) as well as themes of mental illness and mind control. Mentions of defecation. Threats of violence. More profanity than usual. Mentions of child death at the hands of both mortal adventurers and, in the case of berserk whelps who attack their clutchmates, their own mothers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The door to the Ravenholdt library slammed open. “Fahrad!”

The rogue jumped in his chair, smearing ink across the parchment. He had been trying to proceed with his normal routine after sequestering himself in his room the day before—with limited success. “What?!”

Wrathion was clearly distraught, to the point where his shapeshifting was slipping. His eyes had a distinctly reptillian shape, scales covered most of his face, and a tail swayed behind him. The instant he no longer needed humanoid hands to open the door, he shifted back into his true form. “They’re coming this way.”

“Who?”

The wide-eyed whelp landed on the desk in front of him. Distressed peeping noises came involuntarily from his throat, interrupting him like a human with the hiccups. “The three black dragons! Last time I—peep—sensed them they were near the—peep—Thandol Span, but just now I picked them up again—peep—and they’re in eastern Hillsbrad! They must be—peep—coming here! They know where I am! One of the—peep—assassins must have cracked under interrogation or something! Peep!”

Fahrad put a hand on the trembling prince’s back. “Calm down. It might be a coincidence, but even if they do come here, we’ll be ready. We repelled three dragons before, remember?”

“But we had—peep—cannons then! The reds destroyed them!”

“Zann’s got one of them in working order again, and we have some of the most skilled rogues in the world here. It’ll be all right.”
Wrathion was shivering now, trying to hold his breath to make the embarrassing chirping noises stop. It didn’t work.

“There, there,” Fahrad soothed. “I won’t let anyone hurt you. Don’t be scared.”

“I’m not scared, I just—*peep!*” He groaned. “Why do I do that?”

“It’s a distress signal,” Fahrad said quietly. "Under normal circumstances a parent or older sibling would come to see what the matter was."

“Oh.”

“They’d scoop you up,” he said, demonstrating. "And hold you close…” He cradled the whelp in his arms. "…until you felt warm and safe."

“I don’t need—*peep*—to be treated like a—*peep*—baby,” he groused.

Fahrad swayed gently, patting his back. “I’m not treating you like a baby. I’m treating you like a whelp. Which is what you are.”

Wrathion snorted in derision but nevertheless relaxed in his arms, curling against his warmth. The chirps grew further apart until they stopped completely.

"Better?" Fahrad asked after a few minutes.

"Mmm hmm," the prince mumbled sleepily.

"Good. Now why don’t you take a little nap while I go muster the defenses?"

He twitched, suddenly remembering why he’d been so upset in the first place. “Oh! No, no, I’ll come along.”

"As you wish." Fahrad set him down on the desk, and he glided to the floor before shifting back into his human form.

"Thank you," Wrathion muttered awkwardly before leaving the room.

Fahrad fought back a smile as he followed him.

Obsidia and the others found Ravenholdt Manor in the hills north of the ruins of Durnholde, and landed on a nearby mountain ledge to assess the situation. Snipers were perched on the roof, their eyes on the sky, and the grounds were peppered with armed sentries. A cannon large enough to cause serious damage even to a dragon was set up near the manor’s front entrance, manned by a grim-faced night elf.

"If I didn’t know better, I’d think they were expecting us," Obsidia said, squinting suspiciously at the defenses.

"Hmm." Netharion rubbed his chin in thought. "We can do this one of two ways: the subtle way, or the bloody way. *We could* swoop down there and burn and slaughter our way in. Or, we can try to sneak in peacefully. Given the so-called prince’s track record for killing dragons the former might be safer, but we’d have to fight our way through that gauntlet down there, and I don’t like the look of that artillery. Plus we would run the risk of killing him in the chaos."

"We can’t do that!" Seara said in alarm.
"Agreed," Neltharion said. "Therefore, allow me to, shall we say, ‘persuade’ the guards to allow us entry." He glided down to land a safe distance from the manor and shifted into his human form. Obsidia and Seara followed suit.

The guards sprang to readiness as they approached, keen daggers glinting in the sunlight. “Who trespasses on Ravenholdt territory?”

"A friend," Neltharion said with a warm smile, reaching out a black-gloved hand to shake.

One guard shook his hand warily while the other glowered at the intruders with clear distrust.

Neltharion’s gaze bored deep into the guard’s eyes. “You were expecting us, were you not? We are guests of the Black Prince.”

"Of course,” the guard said, surprising his companion. "I was expecting you."

"Who—" began the second guard, but Neltharion turned his powers on him, and he immediately relaxed. "Oh, yes, the prince’s guests."

Obsidia grinned wickedly. Not only had she missed her father in his absence, he was awfully useful to have around when mortals were concerned.

"Is the prince here?" he asked casually.

"Yes," both guards said in unison.

"Excellent. You never saw us." He brushed past the two charmed humans into the manor, with the ladies close behind.

For all the years he had spent living undercover as a human, Fahrad had tried very hard not to be associated with dragons of any kind. As far as anyone knew, he had no special knowledge of dragons, did not personally know any dragons, perhaps had never even seen one with his own eyes.

All that had gone out the window since Wrathion’s arrival, and now everyone at Ravenholdt thought of Fahrad as some kind of dragon expert. After all, he had known how to incubate a dragon egg, how to care for a newly-hatched whelpling, and how to effectively defeat the red dragons who attacked the manor.

So it was that no one questioned how he knew that three black dragons were approaching. The defensive plans they had used during the reds’ attack were fresh in their minds from less than a month prior. Soon the Ravenholdt grounds were lined with archers, and the single repaired cannon was loaded and ready. Two of the rogues with the best eyesight were perched on the roof, scanning the skies for any sign of dark wings approaching.

Despite his efforts to seem brave and unconcerned, Wrathion worried himself into a terrible stomachache and disappeared into his room. After going over the preparations one last time, Fahrad checked on him. The whelp was curled up in his usual bed, a box of blankets by the now-dormant fireplace.

"Feeling better?" the rogue asked, kneeling beside the box.

Wrathion rubbed his belly and frowned. “I think so. Why did my body decide the proper response
to stress was to incapacitate me with unsettled bowels? It makes no sense.” He pouted.

Fahrad smiled and shook his head fondly. “It’s not supposed to make sense. It’s just what happens. Be glad you made it to the chamber pot in time. Sometime I’ll have to tell you about a stakeout in Gilneas that went horribly wrong thanks to one of my team members filling his pants at the worst possible moment.”

"Is there ever a good time to do that?"

"No, I don’t suppose there is," he said with an amused snort. "Anyway, everyone’s in place, the cannon’s loaded, sentries are posted…all we can do now is wait."

Wrathion pondered this for a moment, stretching out among his pillows. “I don’t suppose sneaking away is an option. I mean, whomever these dragons are, they apparently know I’m here. If we escaped in secret, they might not be able to follow.”

"I already thought about that," Fahrad said. "They might still be able to track us, and then we’d be out there in the open without backup or shelter. No, best to stand our ground and face them on our own turf."

Wrathion stood and limbered up his wings. “I think I’m well enough to go downstairs now. It’s much easier to sense them when I’m touching earth. Of course, if they’re in the air there’s nothing I can do. Still, with any luck it’s a false alarm and they’re not actually coming here at all. They’ll just pass by without a glance and go cause trouble elsewhere.” He flew toward the door and shifted into his human guise. Before he could open it, however, there was a knock.

"Your Majesty?" It was Simone, the night elf gardener.

Wrathion pulled the door open, startling her with the swiftness of his response. “Yes?”

"There are some humans here to see you."

He frowned. “Not the best timing. Didn’t they notice the entire place on high alert?”

"Yes. They asked about the extra defenses, and when I told them we were concerned about a dragon attack they just laughed."

Fahrad stepped up next to the prince with a wary scowl. “Tell them to go away. The Black Prince isn’t receiving visitors today.”

"Yes, Grand Master," Simone said, nodding.

"I wonder what they want," Wrathion mused, rubbing his chin.

"Nothing important, I’m sure," Fahrad said. "Why don’t you rest for a little while longer, until they’re gone?"

"I’m feeling all right now," he said dismissively. "I’ll just fly out the window and commune with the earth around the back of the manor. I’m sure they won’t see me there."

Fahrad hesitated. “Why don’t you use the basement instead? There’s a strong connection with the earth there—or so I’d imagine,” he added quickly, as if still trying to hide his species.
"Of course," Wrathion said with a knowing smirk. "Very well, the basement it is." He headed down the hallway toward the stairs with Fahrad close behind him.

When they reached the ground floor, they noticed Simone standing there with a blank stare on her face, as if frozen.

"What…?" Wrathion began, then looked past her to the group of people standing by the front entrance of the manor. Two were the sentries, a troll and a gnome who were both motionless with the same unseeing stare as Simone. There were two human women further inside the room, one with pale pink skin and one with medium brown. They were fully alert, and regarded him with open curiosity.

The other figure was a handsome man in a fine doublet of black and gray trimmed with gold. Something about him drew the eye, and despite his ordinary appearance Wrathion instinctively knew he harbored great power.

The stranger stepped forward with a confident smile, acting as if he was in complete control of the situation. "Wrathion, I presume?"

"The Black Prince," Fahrad corrected sharply, stepping between them.

"Ah, yes," the stranger said, grinning in private amusement. "And how do you come by such a grand title, young one?"

Wrathion regarded him warily, trying to stand as tall as he could. There was something bizarrely familiar about the man’s sharp, penetrating gaze. "I am the son of Deathwing the Destroyer," he said grandly.

"And you are what…a year old? If that?"

"I fail to see how that is relevant," he said coldly.

"Oh, it’s quite relevant, I assure you," the stranger said, casually strolling closer.

Fahrad edged forward as if daring him to make a move toward the prince.

The man’s blithe tone took on a hint of bitterness. "You see, it’s unfortunately common knowledge that the Destroyer hadn’t been able to sire any offspring for over ten thousand years. His body was a broken inferno that left his mates either dead or in unending agony. So you see, it’s quite literally impossible for you to be Deathwing’s son."

Wrathion looked to Fahrad in confusion, but the rogue was stone-faced and did not take his eyes off the stranger.

"Why should we believe you?" Fahrad asked. "Who are you, to know so much about the black dragonflight?"

The raven-haired man quirked an eyebrow at him. "It’s rather hard to forget all that happening to yourself," he said in draconic.

Fahrad realized what he meant a split second before Wrathion did. Profanity burst from his lips as
he shoved Wrathion back and drew his daggers. “Not a step closer,” he growled.

The man—who wasn’t really human after all, it seemed—looked unconcerned. “Now, now, there’s no need for that. I mean you no harm, provided you give up this nonsense about eradicating the rest of the black dragonflight.”

Wrathion peeked around Fahrad’s shoulder armor, staring with huge, panicked eyes. “B-but Deathwing is dead! Gone! Unmade! My champion saw it happen!”

"Deathwing is dead," he said with a nod. "I am Neltharion the Earth Warder."

"Impossible!"

"I was told a Titan artifact purified your egg."

"Y-yes. So?"

"That was not the only device the Titans left behind. A much larger one restored me to life in my original state."

"You m-mean to tell me you’re free of the Old Gods’ taint?" Wrathion scoffed.

"Exactly. Which is why there’s no need for you to go around exterminating our extended family. We must gather them, instead, to be cleansed as I was."

"B-but but how…? You were… It’s not…" Wrathion stammered. He edged to one side to get a better look at him, but Fahrad moved too, stubbornly blocking his path.

"I have my daughter, Obsidia, to thank for discovering this possibility," Neltharion said, turning to the women by the door. They had been silently watching events unfold, but now the younger of the two stepped forward with a proud grin.

"So, wait, let me get this straight," Wrathion snapped, making a show of irritation to downplay his confusion and fear. "There’s a Titan device that can take a black dragon, purge the corruption, and leave them alive and well?"

"Yes," Neltharion said.

"The artifact that made me had to disassemble three different whelps to get enough uncorrupted material to splice my body together," Wrathion said with a haunted expression.

"This device restored me from one fragment of my scale."

Wrathion immediately lifted his left hand to study one of his rings: a heavy gold band with what appeared to be a black stone embedded in it. "Fahrad…this ring you gave me at Winter Veil…does it really contain a chip of my mother’s scale?"

Fahrad glanced back at him, still not trusting the others enough to get out of the way. “It does,” he whispered.

"Then… Oh my. If this is true…"
"Your mother was Nyxondra, correct?" Neltharion asked.

"Yes. I…never knew her. But yes."

"That makes you my grandson," he said with a reassuring smile.

Wrathion’s jaw moved but no words emerged.

"And my nephew," Obsidia added.

"I…” was all Wrathion could say before his tongue failed him again.

"Hold on, here," Fahrad said gruffly. "This is all pretty hard to swallow. You expect us to believe you got zapped by some Titan machine and now you’re back to normal, uncorrupted and completely sane? After all you’ve done?"

Neltharion gave an understanding nod. “I know it seems incredible. I don’t expect you to trust me immediately, but allow me the chance to prove everything.”

"Who are you, anyway?" Obsidia asked, squinting at the rogue. "You talk as if you’re a dragon, but you don’t feel like one…”

Fahrad said nothing at first. The daggers in his hands trembled, and he began shaking his head. “I can’t…” he breathed.

Wrathion put a hand on his arm. “It’s all right, Fahrad,” he said quietly. “You don’t have to hide it any longer. And if what they say is true, you can be cured! You don’t have to die.”

The rogue turned to look at him at last, still shaking his head in mute disbelief. Wrathion expected him to be happy, but he seemed numb with shock.

"Wait, what did you say his name is?" They both looked in surprise as the second woman strode forward. She had not spoken before, and they had almost forgotten she was there.

Fahrad seemed unable to answer for himself, so Wrathion repeated his name.

"I know that name from somewhere…”

"And you are…?" Wrathion prompted.

"Oh, sorry. I’m Seara, widow of Nefarian."

"My, my," Wrathion said. The realization of how many black dragons he had missed both embarrassed and terrified him, and he scowled.

"As the leader of the black flight in most of the Eastern Kingdoms, he kept tabs on everything going on south of the Thandol Span."

"I’ve always lived up north, here," Fahrad said quickly.

"I’m sure I saw your name in the reports somewhere, though."
"I… I am Fahradion, son of Searinox," he said reluctantly. "I swear I have never been to Blackrock Mountain. You must be mistaken."

Neltharion looked to Seara with a shrug, then moved toward the table in the middle of the common room. It was covered with maps, and a globe sat in the middle, but there were enough chairs to accommodate all the dragons present. "Now that we’re all acquainted, let’s sit down and discuss things further. I will gladly answer any questions you might have."

Wrathion glanced at Fahrad, who was glaring at the intruders with undisguised hatred and distrust. "Should we…?"

A low growl vibrated from the rogue’s chest, and his knuckles turned white as he gripped his daggers more tightly. His eyes darted around the room, looking for backup, but every rogue in sight was frozen by the Earth Warder’s spell.

"We should at least hear what they have to say," Wrathion whispered to him, leaving the implied "before we try to escape or attack" unspoken.

At last Fahrad sheathed his daggers and followed Wrathion closely as the prince went to the table. Wrathion chose the chair at the opposite end from Neltharion. Fahrad remaining standing just behind and to the side of his chair, fixing his stare of utter loathing on Neltharion.

Obsidia sat to her father’s right and Seara to his left. He folded his arms on the table in front of him and gave what was probably intended to be a friendly smile.

A shiver ran down Wrathion’s spine at the sight, however. This is Deathwing sitting in front of me, he kept thinking. Yet he is not my father after all. Then who is? Is he still out there somewhere? What happened to him?

"I’m very curious how you ended up so far from the Badlands," the patriarch began. "I’m sure it’s quite a tale."

"Well, I… You know, it…” Wrathion cleared his throat and tried to calm his nerves. "The red dragonflight took my egg to the Vermillion Redoubt, where they planned to keep me against my will so they could monitor me for signs of corruption. They believed me to be purified, but they didn’t trust me not to fall into the Old Gods’ grasp once I was hatched."

"You haven’t, have you?" Obsidia asked suspiciously.

"No, no," he said firmly. "I’ve never heard a peep out of them."

"Lucky," she grumbled.

"Anyway, I didn’t want to be born a prisoner with the threat of execution hanging over my head, so I called out into the earth, asking for help. Fahrad, here, heard me and sent a rescue party."

"Wait," Seara said, sitting up straighter in her chair. "You could communicate with each other through the earth at that distance?"

"His powers are very strong," Fahrad said quickly. "Go on, my prince, tell them about how the red dragonflight tried to steal you back."

"No, hold on," Seara insisted. "You hadn’t even hatched yet, and you were talking to a dragon
hundreds of miles away?"

Obsidia gasped, and Neltharion nodded slowly as a knowing smile took shape on his face.

"Yes," Wrathion said slowly, looking at each of them in confusion. "Is that…significant?"

"Unless you’re an Aspect, that kind of communication only happens between close kin," Obsidia explained.

Fahrad refused to make eye contact with anyone, staring at the table halfway between himself and the others.

"Of course! I just remembered where I saw your name!" Seara said, slapping a hand down on the table. "Nefarian respected his sister’s wish to have no contact with the rest of the family, but he had his agents secretly check on her once in awhile to make sure she was all right. Nyxondra lost her first mate when the Dark Portal closed, and it took years before Nefarian’s spies managed to learn the name of her second one."

"Don’t—" Fahrad barked.

"You were Nyxona’s mate!" Seara said, pointing at him with a triumphant expression.

"No, that’s not—" he tried.

"It all makes sense now! You could hear him crying for help because you’re his father!"

"You’re got it wrong," he said breathlessly, shaking his head over and over in desperation. "I knew her, yes, but I’m not—" He froze as Wrathion turned to look up at him with wide eyes.

"Fahrad… Is that true? Are you…?" he asked in a hushed voice.

The rogue refused to look at him. "No, of course not, that’s…” He paced silently for a moment, then shoved one of the empty chairs over onto its side, making everyone jump. "This wasn’t supposed to happen!" he roared. "You don’t understand! None of you!" He jabbed a finger in Neltharion’s direction. "It’s all your fault! You doomed our flight to madness! You left Nyx with such horrible memories that she still woke up screaming ten centuries later! It all started with you!"

Neltharion bowed his head, looking pained but not denying any of it.

"You have no idea what I’ve been through! You think I wanted to hide in the shadows for hundreds of years, pretending to be something I’m not? You think I wanted to leave the dragon I loved behind because I couldn’t trust myself not to snap and hurt her? You think I wanted my children to grow up barely knowing me? You think I wanted to kill my clutchbrothers? You think I’ve wanted to hear these damned voices in my head every single fucking day of my entire life?" Fahrad’s scratchy voice cracked as he yelled.

None of the others dared move a muscle.

"You think you can just waltz in here and upset everything I’ve worked for? Blab all the secrets I’ve been keeping for decades? You think you know what’s best for Wrathion? You don’t. You don’t know anything! Whatever miracle machine you’ve uncovered isn’t going to change what’s
happened! It’s not going to erase all the suffering, the pain, the horror! It’s not going to give me back all the years I could have spent with my family! It’s not going to take away the memory of Nyxondra’s death cry ringing in my head while I sat, helpless, a thousand miles away like the worthless sack of shit I am!”

Fahrad stalked toward Neltharion, daggers drawn and a maddened gleam in his eyes. “And it all started with you,” he growled through clenched teeth. “Without you, none of it would have happened.”

The others stood, ready to defend against an attack.

Wrathion got to his feet, too. “Fahrad, don’t—”

The rogue’s voice took on a strange resonance as his sanity visibly unraveled. “You failed us. You were supposed to be our greatest champion! Sk’yahf qi’plah ph’magg!”

Wrathion’s heart dropped into his stomach as he realized what was happening. “Fahrad, stop! Fight it! You don’t have to—”

Fahrad lunged at Neltharion, still spouting epithets in the language of the Old Gods.

Wrathion tripped on the fallen chair trying to stop him.

Neltharion deftly hopped aside, and simultaneously Obsidia and Seara threw themselves on top of the berserk rogue, pinning him to the floor.

Fahrad thrashed violently, flecks of spittle flying from his mouth as he raged, “Ilith qi’uothk shn’ma yeh’glu Shath’Yar! H’iwn ilith!”

"Fahrad!" Wrathion cried, kneeling beside him. "No! Come back! Snap out of it!"

"The crystals!" Obsidia said. Although this made no sense to Wrathion, the other two seemed to understand.

Neltharion helped hold Fahrad down while Obsidia removed one of her bracelets.

"Uull bwhuk h’iwn!” Fahrad snarled.

Obsidia draped her bracelet across his forehead and pressed it against his skin.

The rogue shuddered, gasped, and seemed to pass out of consciousness.

Seara and Obsidia carefully let go and stepped back.

Wrathion shifted into his true body to better squeeze past the others, afraid to touch him but even more afraid to lose him. “Fahrad?” he said timidly.

His eyelids fluttered briefly but remained closed.

"Keep the crystals touching him," Obsidia instructed.

Wrathion reached out to press the bracelet against Fahrad’s forehead. “Are you all right? Say something. Preferably in draconic or common. Please, Fahrad!” Peeps of distress rose from his throat, but he was too worried to be embarrassed.

The sound finally cut through the haze that enshrouded Fahrad’s mind. He opened his eyes fully
and raised a hand to pat Wrathion’s back. “It’s okay, my boy,” he mumbled.

Wrathion gave a sob of relief and flopped onto the rogue’s chest, trying to hug as much of him as his small paws could reach. “Fahrad! You’re back!”

He sat up slowly, making sure to hold the whelp against his chest so he didn’t fall—although tiny claws were firmly embedded in his armor. The bracelet fell off his forehead, and Obsidia quickly grabbed it and handed it to him.

"Hang onto this. It’s what keeping the voices at bay."

"The voices…" His eyes grew wide as he listened to the unexpected silence. "What happened to them?"

Seara took his arm and helped pull him to his feet. “These are special crystals from Outland that protect us from the Old Gods’ influence.”

Fahrad held up the bracelet and studied it with a mixture of skepticism and wonder. “You don’t say,” was the only comment he could think of. He sank into a chair, not trusting his shaking legs to hold him.

Wrathion finally detached himself from the rogue’s armor and slid down to sit in his lap. “Are you all right now?”

"I…guess so. I mean, I can’t hear them anymore. How is that possible?"

Obsidia shrugged. “We’re not exactly sure. We just know they work.”

"Amazing."

Wrathion flapped his wings and flew off to the side before shifting back into his human form.

Neltharion strode up and regarded Fahrad with a solemn expression. “I’m sorry.”

"You’re sorry? He’s the one who attacked you,” Obsidia said with a frown.

"A perfectly natural impulse, even without the Old Gods inflaming your temper," Neltharion said. "You have every reason to hate me. You’re right: it did start with me. It is my fault.”

"Father," Obsidia began, shaking her head. "They’re gods, and they were so subtle about it at first —"

"All true, my dear, but that doesn’t change the fact that I failed to withstand them. Had I been stronger…” He sighed. "But that is in the past. I cannot change what happened." He sat down in the chair closest to Fahrad and met his hostile gaze with unflinching dignity. "Words cannot express how sorry I am for what Nyxondra went through. She wished never to see me again, and I respected that. Surely you realize that I was aware of her location at all times, just as I am with all my children."

Fahrad nodded.

"I knew nothing I could say or do would make things better for her, so I stayed away and tried to let her find what happiness she could. If you were part of that, then I thank you."

Fahrad snorted. “A small part. Not as much as I should have been.”
Wrathion put a hand on his shoulder. “Is it true, then?” He swallowed nervously as Fahrad turned in his chair to face him. “You… You’re my father?”

Fahrad took a slow, deep breath and let it out before answering. “Yes, Wrathion. I am. I’m sorry. You deserve better. You deserve a father who isn’t a lying, murdering, weak coward. You deserve to be a prince.”

Wrathion frowned and leaned down to be at eye level with him. “I deserve a father who cares for me, who rescues me from kidnappers, who teaches me the ways of the world, who comforts me when I have a nightmare, who sits with me when I’m sick, who worries about me, who loves me!” He grasped Fahrad’s shoulders. “Don’t you see? You already are my father in every way that matters!”

Fahrad shook his head and rubbed his temple. “I tried, Wrathion. Oh Titans, you have no idea how I’ve tried to do right by you, without… Without letting on… I’m sorry. I never wanted to hurt you.”

"And you never have." Wrathion threw himself into the rogue’s arms with such fervor that his turban fell off, and they clung to each other as if their lives depended on it.

"Aww!" Seara squealed, clasping her hands to her breast. "I think I’m going to cry!"

Obsidia rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, very touching. So can we trust you not to attack us again?”

Fahrad cleared his throat before he trusted himself to speak without his voice shaking. Without loosening his embrace of his son, he held up the crystal bracelet. “As long as I can keep this thing… Yeah. Truce.”

"Good, good," Neltharion said, clapping his hands together as if completing a great task. "I think we’ve all learned some valuable information here." He pushed back his chair and stood. "Assuming you two want to accompany us to the Titan facility in Uldum, we should probably let all this sink in overnight and then head out in the morning."

Fahrad narrowed his eyes. “Is that an order from the Aspect?”

"No. That is an invitation from your father-in-law. If you’d rather stay here, I won’t force you to come. But if you want to be purified, and reunited with Wrathion’s mother…”

"You…you really think the bit of her scale in his ring is enough to bring her back?” Fahrad asked quietly.

"I can’t think of any reason why it wouldn’t be. The piece of mine Obsidia used wasn’t much larger.”

"I can’t believe this," he muttered, resting his chin on Wrathion’s head as the boy quietly wept into the front of his tunic.

"Make whatever preparations you like, and we’ll return tomorrow as soon as the sun is up. Then it’s on to Menethil and a ship to Kalimdor."

Wrathion lifted his tear-stained face off Fahrad’s chest long enough to nod at them. “Yes. We’ll be ready.”
"I’ll release everyone from their trance as we leave," Neltharion said with an apologetic smile on his way to the front door. "We didn’t want to hurt anyone, but they weren’t exactly friendly."

Neither Fahrad nor Wrathion moved for a full minute after the others had gone. The rogue slowly stroked the back of his head, and Wrathion kept his face buried under his bearded chin.

"Fahrad?" he said at last.

"Yeah?"

"How much of what you’ve told me was true? About me, about my mother, about yourself?"

Fahrad sat back with a sigh, his gaze on the floor. "I have been as honest with you as I could without revealing myself. I may not have told you the full truth, but I’ve only lied twice. Once, when telling you Deathwing was your father. And I pretended not to know what had happened to your mother until after you had hatched. You asked me while still in your egg if she was out there, searching for you. I just…couldn’t tell you that she was dead. I wanted you to hold onto that hope for a while longer. I waited until you were a couple days old to break the news."

"Oh," was all Wrathion could think of to say. He wiped moisture off his cheeks with the back of his hand. "But the rest…how you met her while tracking a fugitive goblin, and what happened to your brothers…that was all true?"

"Every word. Wrathion, I loved your mother very much. I tried to have a normal life with her, but it wasn’t meant to be. I’m weak. When the voices get too strong, I…" He swallowed and shook his head, gripping the crystal bracelet tightly in one hand. "I didn’t want her to end up like my brothers. She should have told me never to come back after the first time I left, but she loved me too, and…we made it work. I visited at least three times a year, for as long as I felt I could safely handle. Sometimes it was weeks. Sometimes it was days. Even then it was more happiness than I deserved, and less than she deserved. If only I had been strong enough to stay with her always, I could have protected her. I could have saved her. Instead I was here, completely helpless, when she was killed."

Wrathion made a sympathetic noise and pulled up a chair for himself so he didn’t have to crouch anymore.

The rogue stared at his clasped hands and hung his head. “All the light went out of my life. Nothing mattered. I had failed as a mate and a father. I sat for days, just staring out the window, reliving the last conversation we’d had… Then I heard you.” He looked up at Wrathion with a sad smile. “And suddenly I had a purpose again.”

Wrathion smiled back, almost shyly.

"I’ve made a big deal about how you’re uncorrupted, the only hope for the future of the dragonflight, and…that’s all true, but that’s not why I rescued you. Even if you’d been as tainted as I am, I still would have done everything in my power to keep you safe. You are my son, Wrathion."

"I’m glad."

Fahrad gave a skeptical, self-loathing grimace, but Wrathion hugged him again.

"You’re not weak," he said. "If you were, neither of us would be here right now. Thank you…for
everything."

Too choked up to speak, Fahrad merely held his son in a fierce embrace.

By the very nature of the rogue lifestyle, any time someone left Ravenholdt there was a chance they might not return. Even if they survived their exploits, they might find opportunities that would keep them away for months or years. Fahrad himself had disappeared for extended periods, but was always welcomed back.

Dawn was barely staining the eastern horizon when he descended the stairs to the main common room. Simone was drinking her morning coffee at one table, and Lord Jorach Ravenholdt himself sat across from her with a cup of tea. Whatever conversation they were having died out as Fahrad approached.

"You’re up and about early," Simone said, raising a long, elven eyebrow at him.

"Yeah, well…the prince and I are heading out soon, and I have a few things to take care of." He approached the table, scratching the back of his neck awkwardly. "I just wanted you to know, if all goes the way it’s supposed to…" He took a deep breath. "We may not be back."

The others looked startled, so he hastened to explain.

"Not that anything bad’s going to happen! The opposite, actually. I might finally be reunited with someone very dear to me. And if that happens, I’m never letting her go again."

"I never pegged you for the romantic sort!" Lord Ravenholdt said with a smirk.

Fahrad made an embarrassed grimace. “There’s a lot of things you don’t know about me, sir,” he said flippantly.

"True," the graying rogue said, stirring his tea. "But I know the darkness that has always hung about you has deepened since the Cataclysm. If whatever quest you’re on now brings you happiness, I wish you all the luck in the world."

Fahrad shifted his weight, touched by the sentiment. The leader of the rogue’s league had hinted years ago that he suspected Fahrad was not entirely human—the only mortal to ever do so—but had obliquely let him know that it was his skills, not his species, that mattered here. Although he would never have guessed the Grand Master was a dragon, he accepted him along with whatever secrets he held.

"Thank you, sir," Fahrad said at last. "Things haven’t been easy, lately, but…that’s going to change."

"We’ll miss you!" Simone said, getting to her feet to give him a hug.

Fahrad tolerated it for only a few seconds before stepping aside. “Same,” he muttered on his way to the kitchen.

A half hour later, he had the few possessions he cared about in a knapsack along with a supply of traveling rations for himself and a certain growing whelp. He avoided sentimentality in general, so the only items he was carrying away from Ravenholdt were his poison kit, his best daggers, a few books and sheafs of parchment, and some changes of clothing.

The sun was peeking over the eastern tree line when Fahrad let himself into the Black Prince’s
room. The whelp was curled up beneath a double layer of blankets, still fast asleep. The rogue knelt and gently put a hand on his back through the quilt. “Time to wake up, Wrathion.”

The whelp twitched in alarm, opening Nyxondra’s red eyes to look up at him. “Oh. Right. Good morning, F—” He blinked and rubbed his eyes. “What should I call you, anyway? It doesn’t seem right to call you just ‘Fahrad,’ but ‘Father’ makes me think of Deathwing.”

He looked away shyly and picked imaginary lint off his arm. “Well, my other children called me Papa.”

"Papa," Wrathion said slowly, testing out the sound. "Hmm. I’ll think on it. You won’t be offended if I still use your name, will you?"

The rogue smiled fondly at him. “Not if you don’t mind me forgetting and calling you ‘my prince.’ Now come on, we have to go meet the others.”

Wrathion’s expression immediately brightened. “Ah, yes! I can hardly wait to see more of the world! This is so exciting!” He sprang up and flew to the basin on the bureau to splash water on his face.

Fahrad folded up one of his blankets and added it to his knapsack. “It goes without saying, but… don’t trust them too much. I know he seems sane and everything, but that’s still Deathwing.”

Wrathion landed on his shoulder, dripping water onto the leather. “He said he was Neltharion again.”

"He can call himself anything he wants to, but that doesn’t erase the horrendous things he’s done.”

"True, but…” Wrathion pondered for a moment. "What you did to your brothers was pretty horrendous, too. No offense."

"No argument there," he said with a guilty sigh.

"So… We don’t have to trust him, but… a second chance isn’t that unreasonable, is it?"

He briefly stroked the whelp’s chin. “I guess not,” he said with a faint smile.

"Now let’s go!"

Fahrad took one last look around before picking up his bag and walking out of the room.

Neltharion, Obsidia and Seara met them near the mountain tunnel that led onto the Ravenholdt grounds, still in human form.

"Good morning," Neltharion said, raising a hand in greeting as the rogue and the whelp approached.

"Good morning," Wrathion said from his perch on Fahrad’s shoulder.

"Ready to go?"

"Absolutely!"

Seara came over and grinned at him. “Look at you, well-fed and bright-eyed! I was afraid that without another dragon to take care of you properly, we’d find a scrawny, sickly whelp. I feel so much better knowing you’ve had a parent to raise you!”
Fahrad stubbornly avoided eye contact, but Wrathion puffed himself up proudly. “I am quite well, I assure you.”

"There’ll be time for talk while we fly," Neltharion hinted, shifting into his true body.

Wrathion gasped at the sight of the restored Earth Warder, whose ebon hide was unblemished by anything other than precious gems, crystals and streaks of gleaming metal. If he had harbored any doubts about Neltharion truly being uncorrupted, they were banished immediately.

Obsidia and Seara turned into lovely but normal-looking dragons, then looked expectantly at Fahrad.

The rogue took a deep breath, steeling his courage.

"It’s all right," Wrathion whispered to him. "You don’t have to hide what you are anymore."

"I know," he muttered. "But old habits die hard." He motioned for Wrathion to give him room, and the whelp fluttered off his shoulder.

Before his eyes, the familiar human stretched, darkened, sprouted scales and wings, and grew into a wyrm as large as Seara. Curved horns framed his face, and a tall fin the same color as his human hair unfolded from the crown of his head. The jagged scar across his throat was even more noticeable than it had been in his mortal form. He shivered and flexed his wings before glancing at the others.

Wrathion stared in open-mouthed awe, craning his neck back to take in the true form of his father. “Oh my,” he breathed. “You’re…magnificent!”

Fahrad snorted modestly. “Let’s go.”

Neltharion took off first, followed by the ladies, with Fahrad bringing up the rear. Wrathion could never hope to keep up with full-grown dragons in flight, so he landed on Fahrad’s back between his neck and the base of his wings. “Look at that!” he gasped, peering down at the verdant Hillsbrad landscape. “I’ve never been this high up before! Everything looks so small!”

He was so busy enjoying the view that it was at least twenty minutes later when he noticed that he was not the only whelp present. There was a second youngster, nearly three times his size but definitely still a whelp, sitting on Obsidia’s back.

"Fahrad, who’s that?" he asked quietly.

"Who?"

"That whelp on my aunt’s back."

"I was wondering that myself."

Seara must have heard them, because she looked over her shoulder and smiled. “That’s Nelashrion, but you can call him Ashy. He’s one of Onyxia’s brood.”

"My cousin, then! I should go introduce myself."

"You certainly may, but be aware, he’s egg-touched."

"What?"
She slowed down momentarily until she and Fahrad were flying side-by-side. “Bless you, child, you haven’t had to learn about that yet. The Old Gods’ influence impacts all of us in different ways. In some cases, the struggle to break free from their whispers shatters minds, and in others… it keeps them from developing properly in the first place. Ashy can only say a few words, cannot shapeshift, and has intellect on par with our protodragon ancestors.”

"That’s terrible!"

"Some would say so. But really, he’s the sweetest, friendliest whelp you’ll ever meet. The Old Gods leave him alone. He’s just…different."

Wrathion watched the other whelp in silence for awhile. Ashy was looking around at the clouds that passed by just above them, a look of delight on his face. There was nothing unusual about him at first glance, but Wrathion found himself reluctant to approach for an introduction. Instead he crawled a bit closer to Fahrad’s head and whispered, “There’s an awful lot I still need to learn, isn’t there?”

His father chuckled quietly. “A few things.”

The whelp pondered for a moment, then nuzzled against him. “I’m glad you’ll be around to teach me.”

Fahrad inhaled and exhaled slowly before replying. “Me too, Wrathion. Me too.”

They made it to the Thandol Span by nightfall, and decided to spend the night in the mountains above Dun Modr before pressing on to Menethil Harbor the next morning.

Neltharion flew off to hunt for their supper while Obsidia rested and Seara cleared stray rocks and brush away from their campsite. Fahrad lay on his stomach some distance away from the others with Wrathion still perched on his back.

Ashy bumped into Obsidia’s head several times, looking from her to the strange whelp and then back again. “Yeep yeep?”

"Ah, I suppose you two haven’t been introduced,” she said with a smile. "Ashy, that’s your cousin, Wrathion."

"Yeep!" Ashy said happily, zooming over to where the smaller whelp was sitting.

"Um, hi, I’m—" Wrathion began before Ashy gave him a sloppy greeting lick across his entire face. "Ugh! What the—?"

As always, Ashy was oblivious to his faux pas, flapping merrily around Fahrad’s head. The adult dragon eyed him suspiciously but said nothing.

"That’s how he says hello," Obsidia called over.

Wrathion pawed at his face with a grimace. “I assume that’s not how normal whelps greet each other,” he grumbled.

Fahrad shook his head slightly.

"Hey, it’s not a matter of ‘normal’ or not," Obsidia said sternly. "Ashy’s just different. He can’t help it. Besides, you’re not exactly a standard-issue whelp yourself."
"Well, I… I…” Wrathion sputtered awkwardly. "You have a point. My apologies."

Ashy cocked his head at him and made a curious noise. He didn’t quite understand what Wrathion had said, but he sensed it was about him.

Wrathion smiled awkwardly at him. “No hard feelings if I don’t, er, lick you back, all right?”

"Yeep!” Ashy flew back to Obsidia, already bored with him.

Wrathion turned to Fahrad with a troubled frown. “Were any of my, um, older siblings…like him?”

A distant, sad look crossed his father’s face. “Yeah. A few. It happened to pretty much every brood eventually.”

"But only within the black dragonflight."

"Right. It was the direct result of the Old Gods meddling with the minds of the unhatched."

Wrathion shivered and edged closer to him.

Fahrad continued. “At least the egg-touched are harmless. The berserkers are worse.”

"Do I want to know?"

"Sometimes instead of turning a hatchling’s mind to mush, the Old Gods would drive them over the edge so that the moment they got out of their eggs they’d try to kill their clutchmates."

Wrathion’s mouth dropped open in horror. “That’s…unspeakable! What did you do?”

"I usually did nothing, because I was rarely around when our eggs hatched. Nyxondra did what had to be done to protect the rest.”

"You mean…?"

"She was the exception, though. Most broodmothers let them fight it out until only the strongest survived."

Wrathion blanched. “That’s barbaric!”

"That’s the Old Gods."

"I can’t believe… Ugh!"

"I know.” Fahrad carefully turned his head to nuzzle against the whelp, who was barely larger than one of his teeth.

A breeze stirred up by two gigantic wings announced Neltharion’s return, and he landed on the ledge with two dead raptors in each paw. “Dinner time,” he announced, bloody teeth shining in the firelight.

"I’m not hungry," Wrathion said quietly.

"That’s because you’ve never had raptor before,” Fahrad said, clearly trying to lighten the mood. "Come on, you don’t know what you’ve been missing."

Wrathion reluctantly followed him over toward the fire.
Chapter End Notes

Everything Fahrad says while under the control of the Old Gods is real dialogue from the game. If you want to look up the translations, see the page for the Faceless language on Wowpedia. ;)

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

If Obsidia and company have anything to say about it, the death of most of the black dragonflight will have only been a setback! (Sorry, couldn’t resist.) In other words, leftover Titan technology to the rescue!

Chapter Notes

Please note that the content warnings are a little more spoilery than usual this time. Read at your own risk.

Content warnings: References to past character deaths as well as themes of mental illness and mind control. Mentions of dragons eating wildlife, including dolphins and camels. The aftermath of long-ago domestic abuse and the possibility of reconciliation. Suicide via poison. Mentions of genetic engineering/eugenics.

Also, if you've read my other fic “Into the Mists” you might remember when Wrathion got seasick on the way to Pandaria. Different voyage this time, but the same emetophobia warning. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Neptulon’s beard, that whelp must be worth a fortune! The black ones are especially hard to get these days. You got a buyer lined up?"

The raven-haired nobleman smiled at the ship’s captain as hired porters carried his cargo on board. One item was an unremarkable wooden crate, though judging by the strain on the porters’ muscles it was quite heavy. The other was a sturdy steel cage containing a large black whelp who was flapping around in wobbly circles, occasionally stopping to lick the bars.

"Yes, there’s a goblin trade prince who will be meeting us in Gadgetzan personally," the nobleman said with a haughty smirk.

The captain nodded. “Aye, that’s about the only person who could afford such a prize. You’re going to be a rich man, my friend.”

"Richer.” The nobleman buffed his spotless fingernails on his cravat.

The captain laughed and went back to supervising the boarding process.

"I don’t like this," the younger of the two ladies with the nobleman grumbled.

"We’ll let him out in our cabin, my dear. Don’t worry," he whispered. "This way we don’t have to answer a lot of questions about him, or try to hide him."

"Where did the others wander off to?" the second woman asked, peering across the crowded
The nobleman smirked. “I convinced my grandson to find less eye-catching garb,” he said with an exaggerated high-class air. “They should be back from the tailor’s shop soon.”

"And thank goodness," the younger lady said with a giggle. "That kid’s got the fashion sense of a colorblind kobold."

"This outfit is so dull!" Wrathion protested with just a hint of a whine.

Beside him, Fahrad snickered and put a hand on his back to lead him through the throng toward the docks. “I know it’s a far cry from what you’re used to, but trust me, blending in can be very important.”

Indeed, no one gave a second glance to what appeared to be a dark-skinned human teenager wearing utterly plain black pants, practical boots, and a coarse linen vest the color of sand over a shirt of faded raspberry silk.

Wrathion’s demeanor improved as they neared their ship. “Oh, this is so exciting! It’s just like the epic tales I read about! Do you think we’ll see a kraken?”

"We’d better not," Fahrad said with a snort. "That rarely ends well."

"Have you ever been to Tanaris?"

"Once, years and years ago, even before I met your mother. It’s bronze territory, so it’s a place I generally avoid."

"Auntie Obsidia said the bronzes actually helped her."

"They have their own agenda, and do what suits them. Don’t trust them."

"You never want to trust anybody," Wrathion complained.

"That’s why I’m still alive," the rogue said with a wink.

"There you are!" Neltharion said loudly, waving them over. "Ah, much better," he said as he nodded at Wrathion.

The boy tugged at the slightly-too-long sleeve of his shirt with a self-conscious scowl. “It will do, I suppose,” he said under his breath.

"I trust you’re ready to depart?"

"Yes," Wrathion said before realizing that Neltharion had addressed the question to Fahrad, instead. Used to deferring to his "prince," Fahrad hadn’t even thought to answer at first.

Neltharion raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Embarrassed, Wrathion dragged his feet as they ascended the gankplank onto the ship.

Two days later and many leagues beyond sight of land, Seara and Obsidia were chatting in their cabin when there was a knock at the door. Expecting a servant, Seara went to answer it.

It was Fahrad, looking uncomfortable. They had not seen him or Wrathion since boarding the ship.
“Hi,” he said.

"Hello," Seara said, and Obsidia echoed her from her place at the table.

"You, um, know about medicinal potions and such, right?" the rogue said hesitantly.

"Yes. What do you need?"

"It’s not for me. It’s my boy, he… He’s seasick. I kept hoping it would get better when he got used to it, but he hasn’t been able to keep anything solid down since the first night."

Seara made a sympathetic noise and clasped her hands to her breast. “Poor thing! Let me get what I need from my cabin and I’ll be right there!”

Fahrad muttered an awkward thanks and disappeared down the corridor.

"The books never mentioned this," Wrathion moaned. He was curled up on his bunk in human form, clutching his stomach.

Fahrad sat on the edge of the mattress, holding a bucket. “Tales of high adventure just wouldn’t be the same if the heroes spent all their time throwing up,” he said mildly.

Wrathion covered his mouth and groaned pitifully.

Fahrad rose to answer the knock at the door, and stepped aside to let Seara into the cramped cabin.

"I hear someone has an upset tummy," she said in a high-pitched maternal tone, leaning over the bed to get a better look at him.

"Spare me the baby talk," he snapped.

Seara gently felt of his forehead and neck. “No fever. I’m guessing it’s just seasickness, then.” She opened her bag and took out a vial of pale yellow liquid. “This oil of earthroot should settle your stomach. Only take a sip to start with, and if that stays down keep swallowing a bit at the time until it’s gone.”

Fahrad nodded and took the vial from her. “Will do. Thanks.”

"Let me know how it goes." She put a friendly hand on his shoulder as she squeezed by him and out the door again.

"Thanks," he said quietly. It felt immensely strange to be interacting with members of his flight after being isolated for so long. Shaking off the strange feeling, he sat down on the bunk again. “Do you think you’re up to shapeshifting? This will probably work better on your real body.”

Wrathion took a couple deep breaths, closing his eyes to concentrate. Slowly, almost hesitantly, he shrank and grew scales, turning back into a small whelp. As soon as he was back in his true form, he sat up with both paws over his mouth and a panicked expression.

Fahrad quickly picked him up and held him over the bucket until his draconic stomach was as empty as his human one had been.

"There, there," Fahrad murmured, wiping off his face with his handkerchief when it was over. "I know, it’s no fun."
"You can say that again."

Fahrad wrapped him in a blanket and cradled him against his chest, leaning back against the wall. “Just rest. When you’re feeling a little better we can try that medicine.”

The whelp sank into his body heat with a whimper. “I’m sorry,” he murmured.

"For what?"

"For making you deal with…all this."

He gave a small laugh. “You’re hardly the first sick whelp I’ve taken care of. And this is a picnic compared to the times the entire brood would catch something. One urping whelp is nothing after you’ve dealt with a whole lair full of them at once.”

"I…imagine." Wrathion soon fell asleep in Fahrad’s arms.

The rogue let him sleep for a half hour, then opened the vial of medicine and brought it to his mouth. “Wrathion, here…drink this.” He dripped a few drops onto the whelp’s tongue, and he instinctively swallowed. “Good. Now go back to sleep.”

They repeated the process until the vial was empty, and the last time Fahrad nudged him awake Wrathion seemed more alert. “I think I feel better,” he said hesitantly, as if afraid of jinxing it.

"Good, good," Fahrad said, nodding.

"I’m thirsty, though."

"I’ll get you some water." He carefully set the blanket-wrapped whelp down on the bunk and soon returned with a cup of water. "Not too much until we know you can handle it," he said, pulling the cup back before Wrathion had more than a gulp.

"I hate feeling so…helpless," he said with a sigh.

"No need to be dramatic," Fahrad said with a smirk. "You’ll be right as rain as soon as we get back on dry land."

"I know, but…" He batted a fold of blanket out of his face. "I hate depending on others. I want to be in control of my own destiny."

"You are," he said. "Just not in control of your stomach at the moment."

He pouted.

Fahrad offered him one more drink before tucking him into the bunk with another blanket. “Your destiny is your own, my boy. I—and hopefully soon your mother as well—will be there to take care of you when you need it. Like now. And we’ll support you in whatever you do. Don’t worry.”

Wrathion mustered a smile of gratitude before closing his eyes again.

Fahrad sat at his bedside for quite some time, simply watching him sleep and thinking about all the children who had come before him. For the first time, he dared to hope that someday there might be more. If only what the others said about the Titan laboratory was true…
The next day Obsidia stood at the starboard railing, enjoying the fresh air and watching dolphins cavort in the ship’s wake. She sensed someone approaching, and turned to see Fahrad strolling in her direction.

"Hi," she said with a nod. "How’s the kid?"

"Better today," he said. "Still lying low, but not so sick anymore. Seara knows her medicines."

"She sure does."

Fahrad stopped and leaned against the railing to join her in watching the dolphins. She noticed that he left quite a bit of space between them. Her instinct was to edge closer to make it easier to talk, but she sensed that the rogue preferred a lot of personal space—at least with other black dragons.

"How’s the bracelet working?" she asked.

A smile that bordered on serene crossed his face before he regained a more neutral expression. "It’s a miracle."

"Can’t hear them anymore?"

"If I really listen hard I can barely hear them in the distance, but they’re easy to ignore now. It’s… amazing. If only I’d had something like this years ago…” His voice trailed off as he gazed out at the horizon.

A moment of silence passed, and both their thoughts turned to Nyxondra. “It’s funny, you know,” Obsidia began, wandering a little closer. “You probably knew my sister better than I did. She rarely let me visit, and after she met you she refused to even speak to me anymore. I mean, I didn’t know it was you at the time, but she said she had a new mate, and she didn’t want to risk her past coming back to haunt her again.”

"It did anyway," he said quietly, picking at his fingernails. "Pasts have a way of doing that."

"Yeah, they do," she agreed with a nod. They watched the dolphins for another minute or two. "So, um," Obsidia tried again without turning to look at him. "You didn’t really live in the Badlands, then, did you? You just came to visit sometimes?"

Fahrad’s face remained calm, but his scratchy voice carried hints of shame and regret. “As often as I could. Which wasn’t nearly often enough. I just…couldn’t trust myself. You saw what happened to me when the voices took over. If you hadn’t been there with those crystals…” He shivered. “I couldn’t risk it.”

Obsidia nodded and brushed a strand of hair out of her face as a gust buffeted them. “I know it’s not the same thing, but… I’ve never had a mate. I didn’t want to face what might happen, especially to my children. So I kind of understand what you were afraid of.” She instantly regretted her word choice and expected him to berate her for suggesting that he was afraid. Instead he nodded slowly. “I never planned to get involved in all that, either. But our fates are rarely what we choose, it seems.”

Obsidia thought of Rivendark and felt a warm smile take over. “Sometimes that ends up being a good thing, though.”
Fahrad neither agreed nor disagreed, merely watching the dolphins leap through the waves. “Ever eaten one of those?” he asked after a moment.

"What, dolphin? Can’t say that I have."

"Me neither. I bet they’re hard to catch."

"Probably. They’re awfully fast. And slippery."

They stood in silence for another few minutes. Obsidia noticed that the rogue’s body language was less defensive and more relaxed now, which pleased her. If they were all to start over together in Outland, it would be best to be on good terms with her brother-in-law.

She wondered how Nyxondra would react to everything that had happened. Would she accept Neltharion as he was now? Would she disown the rest of the family all over again?

Fahrad stepped back from the railing. “I should go. Wrathion’s probably awake again.”

"All right. Say hi to the little monster."

He raised an eyebrow.

"He did send an assassin after me, you know."

Fahrad shrugged. “Eh. Kids. What can you do?"

"You can tell them not to send people to kill their relatives, for one thing!"

He chuckled and walked away.

There were not yet definitive charts to guide ships from the old coast to where the sea now ended near Gadgetzan. They proceeded slowly, taking depth readings every few minutes, as the ship glided through the shallow waters.

"The goblins should pay me royalties for their lovely new port," Neltharion said, his human form’s dark eyes twinkling as he looked out the porthole of their cabin. "I imagine property values around Gadgetzan went through the roof after the Cataclysm."

"Yeah," Obsidia said dryly, "but the lawsuits from Steamwheedle Port would balance it out."

"Ugh, true. And goblin lawyers are almost as bad as the Old Gods. Never mind, then."

Obsidia giggled and hugged him from the side, and he put an arm around her shoulders with a smile.

It was just after sunset when the ship docked at Gadgetzan, which suited Obsidia and her companions well. Using the cover of darkness, they easily slipped away unnoticed to begin the flight southward. Neltharion carried the crate containing sample scales and bones from their dearly departed family members. In his true form, the crate that had taken four men to carry was a minor encumbrance in one of his paws.

As usual during long flights, Ashy rode on his aunt’s back, although occasionally he would flap over to sit with Wrathion on Fahrad’s back. Wrathion started out still feeling a bit uncomfortable with his cousin’s strange mannerisms, but the other whelp’s relentless friendliness soon won him
over. They even spent some time pointing out shapes in the clouds together, though Ashy couldn’t articulate what he was imagining.

"That one looks like an elekk," Wrathion said, pointing.

"Yeep yeep!" Ashy agreed.

"Not that I’ve ever seen one with my own eyes, but it looks like the pictures I’ve seen in books."

"Yeep." Ashy pointed to another cloud. "Yeep yeep yeep!"

"Hmm. I think it’s more like a murloc. See the spines on its back?"

"Yeep?"

"Well, it is missing the legs."

"Yeep."

Miles and miles of barren desert blurred by far below as they took advantage of the cool night air to make as much progress as possible. They kept the rocky ridge that marked the edge of Un’goro Crater in sight to the west as they traveled to avoid getting lost. Neltharion had explained that he could sense where they were with great accuracy, but Obsidia insisted he avoid using his powers until they restocked on Apexis crystals. The route was much the same either way, so Neltharion had relented.

By sunrise they had crossed over into Uldum, and stopped to rest and have a breakfast of camel. The whelps were wide awake, having slept much of the night on the others’ backs, but the adults were weary from the journey. After eating they shifted back into their human forms to be less conspicuous and laid down for a nap in the shade of an enormous tol’vir statue built into a mountainside.

"You kids don’t have to sleep if you don’t want to, but don’t wander too far," Seara said.

Wrathion was watching Ashy merrily chase beetles. “Does he, um…understand that?”

Obsidia smiled. “Oh yes. He’s seen a lot more of the world than you have. He knows what to do.”

Wrathion frowned in offense before sighing as he realized this was true. Pouting a little, he curled up in Fahrad’s arms.

After a short but refreshing nap, they continued on to the southeast. Morning sunlight baked the front of the pyramid housing the Halls of Origination, casting long shadows of the pillars on the sand. There was no sign of Ramkahen patrols or anyone else in the area. They landed by the entrance, and Fahrad, Seara and Obsidia shifted into humans in order to fit inside.

"How are we going to lug this heavy box inside?" Obsidia asked. She had been so anxious to get here, this detail had slipped her mind.

"Leave that to me," Neltharion said. Remaining in his natural form, he planted his paws firmly in the sand and bowed his head. He mumbled an incantation that Obsidia could not make out, and a small tremor shook the ground beneath her feet. Rocks began to rise out of the sand like wood floating to the surface of a lake.

Obsidia gasped as the stones began to congregate together and take on the shape of earth
elementals. They were not much larger than Ashy, the sort that a novice shaman might be able to summon, but there were at least a dozen of them. They swarmed around her father’s front paws, clattering in excitement. At his signal, they burrowed into the sand under the heavy crate, and lifted it above their rocky heads.

Neltharion beamed in pride. “They listen to me again. They know who I am. I hadn’t tried before for fear that they would shun me, but these little ones greeted me like a long-lost friend. Even without the powers of the Earth Warder, my connection to that element remains.”

"Great!” Obsidia grinned as the flock of small elementals effortlessly carried the crate into the pyramid. Partly to make sure she didn’t get lost and partly to show off the Titan technology she had discovered, she asked the artificial assistant to direct them to the laboratory. Blinking lights on the walls helpfully guided them, and soon they reached Laboratory Seven.

Seara eagerly walked inside, eyes alight like a child’s at Winter Veil. “Look at all this!” she breathed in awe, inspecting the complicated machinery. “If only Nefarian and I had known this place existed, it would have saved us so much research! We could have designed the Chromatic flight using the Titans’ original setup!”

"We’re not here for the Chromatic flight," Obsidia reminded her.

"Of course, of course," she said. "I just never dreamed that such a place still survived! After all this time— Oh dear, what happened over there?” Seara’s inspection had reached the area where Neltharion had had his tantrum. Broken machinery and lumpy hills of stone were scattered around where he had lashed out in frustration. The lava had long since hardened, leaving an irregular slag heap.

"Um, don’t ask," Neltharion said with an embarassed cough.

"He was a little upset at first," Obsidia explained, patting him on the back.

Seara lowered an eyebrow. “I hope none of that equipment was something we need!”

"No, this is what I used." Obsidia shifted back into a dragon, and Seara did the same. She led the way to Discrete Pentagonal Draconic Synthesizer 968-B and began to explain to her sister-in-law how it worked.

Fahrad and Wrathion stood awkwardly near the doorway, unsure what their place was in all of this. The technological aspect was over Fahrad’s head, but Wrathion’s insatiable curiosity soon lured him into exploring a bit, and his father had no choice but to follow.

"Don’t touch anything," Fahrad growled nervously.

"I won’t,” Wrathion said absently, greedily studying the strange machines.

Neltharion instructed the miniature army of elementals to deposit the heavy crate near the machine, thanked them, and let them return to the earth. He resumed his true form and easily cracked open the crate with one claw. As they peered inside at the jumble of scales and bones, the true purpose of their visit came crashing back, and they took a moment to collect their thoughts.

The samples were labeled, but Seara needed no help in picking out her mate’s scale from the pile. “Nefarian is first,” she said in a tone that invited no argument.

Obsidia opened the hatch on the Synthesizer, and Seara reverently placed the brownish-black scale inside. She was trembling, and Obsidia nuzzled her cheek to reassure her.

Seara’s expression went from happy anticipation to utter despair. “No! This has to work!”

"Don’t panic yet," Obsidia said, opening the sample drawer again. "It told me to discard Father’s scale at first, too." She took off one of her anklets and put it in the drawer.


"Yes!" Seara squealed. "Yes, yes, reconstruct! Create! Where’s the button?"

Obsidia giggled. “I’ve got it.” She hit the button that was lit up on the control panel, and the machine began to make a series of strange noises. It whirred, beeped, rasped, gurgled, clanked, popped and churned, and they watched as a draconic shape slowly grew inside the enormous hatch in the wall.

Only a dim silhouette was visible through the cover, and Seara pressed her nose against it, desperate to get a better look. “It’s working! I recognize that head fin!”

Obsidia stood back with her father and smiled, letting Seara have her moment. Wrathion and Fahrad had wandered back over and watched silently.

The racket from the machine stopped, and the calm voice said, “Reconstruction complete.”

Seara made an excited “yeep” noise that reminded Obsidia very much of Ashy, and the whelp beside her looked around in confusion.

There was a hissing sound as the hatch cover slid upward and retracted into the wall, giving them all a clear view of what was inside. The Earth Warder’s eldest son was no longer an undead husk. His scales shone with healthy, vibrant hues of brown, black and orange.

"Nefarian!" Seara cried, launching herself toward him. The compartment was not designed for more than one dragon at a time so there was hardly room for her, but she managed to squeeze in to put her arms around him protectively. "Nefarian! Nefarian!"

He twitched, opened his eyes and took a deep, gasping breath. “What…? Seara?”

"Yes, my love!"

"What’s going on? Where am I?"

"You’re safe. Oh, Nefarian, I’ve missed you!" Seara began to sob, clinging to him with all her might.

He awkwardly slid out of the compartment, practically dragging his weeping mate.

Obsidia stepped forward, grinning so widely her face hurt. “Welcome back, big brother.”
"Obsidia! What’s going on here? I have no idea how I got here, wherever ‘here’ is, and—Father!"
Nefarian jolted in shock at the sight of Neltharion in his restored form, glinting with gemstones and without a drop of lava visible. "How…?"

"Hello, son," Neltharion said, voice hushed with emotion.

Obsidia began what she intended to be a brief explanation, but Nefarian’s scientific mind was in fine form and he asked so many questions that it turned into the full tale of everything that had happened since his demise. Through it all, Seara was glued to his side, alternatively weeping for joy and merely gazing at him with a huge smile. He wiped the tears from her cheeks and kept one wing wrapped around her, quite content to be lavished with such attention.

When his curiosity was finally satisfied, he stood up and turned to the box of scales and bones. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s get to work!"

Seara laughed giddily. "It’s so good to hear you say that again, my beloved!"

He smiled and bumped his nose against hers. "It’s good to say it again, too, my sweet."

Obsidia snickered. “And you used to tease Onyxia and Sartharion for being too mushy and lovey-dovey.”

"They were sickening. This is completely different. Right, my darling flower?"

Seara laughed and hugged him tighter.

"Fine, fine, get it out of your systems," Obsidia said with mock severity. She carefully sorted through the crate until she found the distinctive purple-tinged scale that belonged to her eldest sister. Neltharion noted her choice and nodded in approval.

Nefarian watched in fascination as she placed the scale into the sample drawer along with her last remaining bracelet of Apexis crystals.

"Scanning sample," the machine said.

"I wish I had one of these at Blackrock!"

"Oh, I know! Can you imagine?" Seara said eagerly.


Obsidia turned to her father. “You want to do the honors?”

Neltharion pressed the glowing button, and they all stepped back to watch as the Synthesizer began its orchestra of bizarre sounds. When the hatch slid open a few minutes later, a purple-and-black female dragon lay on her stomach.

"Onyxia," Neltharion said, gently placing a paw on her back. "Wake up, my dear."

She bolted into a sitting position, filling her lungs with a tremendous gasp. “What? Where? Huh?”

"It’s all right, daughter." Neltharion lifted her out of the chamber with ease, and she found herself the center of a group hug.
"What in the world…?" she sputtered. "The last thing I remember I was in my lair. There were mortals everywhere, killing my babies, and…and…"

"Mama!" A dark streak rocketed toward her, and Ashy plastered himself onto the top of her snout, chirping joyfully.

"Nelashrion?" she said in surprise, nearly going cross-eyed as she tried to look at the whelp hugging her nose.

"Mama mama mama!"

"My, you’ve grown!"

Obsidia laughed through happy tears. “Welcome back, sis.”

"Thanks, but, uh…what the hell is going on?"

"I’ll explain while you and Father start on the next one," Nefarian told Obsidia, ushering Onyxia off to the side.

Obsidia turned back to the crate and found her father gazing intently at something in his paw. She came closer and saw a blackened tooth that she recognized as having come from Sintharia’s skull. “Mother next?” she asked quietly.

Neltharion nodded, but his expression was troubled.

"What’s the matter?"

"I’m not sure she would want to come back."

"What? Of course she would. She’ll be good as new, just like you and Nef and Onyxia."

"I… I don’t want to see her hurt again."

Obsidia put a paw on his arm. “Then don’t hurt her,” she said simply.

"I didn’t mean to, before. But it still happened."

"It’ll be different now. You’re not Deathwing anymore. You’re healed. You’re in control of yourself. It’ll be like old times, before the whispers took you."

"No," Neltharion said firmly. "It will never be like old times. Too much has happened."

"Then we’ll make the future even better. But I want both my parents there to enjoy it." She looked up at him with pleading eyes, and he exhaled slowly.

"Do what you must," he said quietly.

She hugged him and took the large, dangerously sharp tooth from his paw. Her siblings were still busy talking a short distance away, so she went ahead without them. The only Apexis crystals she had left were in her right anklet and the collar around her neck, the latter of which she now removed.

"Be careful," Neltharion warned. "Don’t leave yourself unprotected."

"I won’t," she assured him. She carefully sliced the collar in half, fashioning a bracelet out of half
of it, and placed the other half in the sample drawer with her mother’s tooth. "Seara and Ashy have some on them, too, if we need more."


Obsidia pressed the button, and they waited for the Synthesizer to do its work. Nefarian and the others came rushing over as the hatch opened to reveal a gigantic black dragon. Her scales carried the purple tint that Onyxia had inherited, and regal fins framed her face. She was perfect, without the slightest scratch or burn anywhere on her body.

"Mother!" Obsidia called happily, leaning into the chamber to grasp her paw.

Eyes the color of topaz slowly opened, and she gulped in air as if emerging from a long swim. “Hmm?” She lifted her head but soon found her horns bumping the ceiling. “The pain. It’s gone! How is this possible?” She slid out the Synthesizer chamber to give herself more room to inspect her body. “The scars, the burns, the pain, all gone!” she cried in delight. “What happened to me? I don’t remember…”

"Mother!" Nefarian, Onyxia and Obsidia all crowded around to greet her, bumping into her and each other in their excitement.

"Children," Sintharia said, beaming happily at them. "I’m happy to see you all, but what is going on? Is this…” She looked around. "This is the laboratory where I hatched! Have the Titans returned?"

"No," Obsidia said, "but their technology is still here, and I’ve used it to restore you, Onyxia, Nefarian and Father!"

Sintharia immediately tensed. “Your father is here?” she said, voice rising in fear.

Only then did Obsidia realize he was not part of the group clustered around Sintharia. “He…was,” she said in confusion. “Where did he go?”

Neither of her siblings could answer.

"It’s okay, though, Mother," Obsidia said quickly. "He’s back to the way he was in the beginning, too. He won’t hurt you."

Sintharia shook her head, eyes wild with terror. “Keep him away from me! The pain is finally gone. I will never suffer that way again. Never!”

"You don’t understand," Obsidia said. "He’s not Deathwing anymore. He’s healed. His body is normal again."

"Impossible."

"No, I promise." Obsidia peered around the enormous room, trying to see where he had gone. "Father!" she called out. "Father, come here. Please? Show her you’re back to your old self."

There was a moment of silence, and then a black-haired human in fine clothing stepped into the room from the hallway. His eyes were on the floor, his expression pained. With obvious
reluctance, he sprouted wings and a tail, growing into a towering giant of a dragon. The artificial lighting in the laboratory made the gems and streaks of precious metals in his scales shine brightly against his ebon hide.

"No," Sintharia breathed. "It can’t be."

He remained looking at the floor directly in front of him, unable to face her.

"Neltharion," she said in disbelief. "Is that really you?"

Their children backed off to give them a clear path to each other, but neither budged.

"Yes, Sintharia," he said, still not looking in her direction. "I am myself again."

She said nothing, merely gawking at him.

Neltharion closed his eyes and words began spilling out in a torrent. "I am so, so sorry for everything that has happened. I swear on Khaz’goroth’s hammer I never wanted to hurt you, and I never will again. I will never even touch you again unless you wish it. I neither expect nor deserve forgiveness. All I ask is that someday—and I realize it may be a long time before that day comes—but perhaps someday you will stop hating me. I just want you to be happy again, Sintharia. I love you, and I’m so sorry…” Emotion closed his throat, and he turned away.

Stunned, Sintharia fumbled for words but found none. “I— I—”

Obsidia lightly nudged her from the side and guided her to a clear spot where she could sit. “Rest, Mother. I know this is all really disorienting. Take all the time you need to get your bearings.”

Sintharia nodded.

"Who’s next?" Seara asked while peeking into the crate.

"Sartharion," Onyxia said immediately, although Fahrad and Wrathion both had their mouths open to ask about Nyxondra.

"Of course," Seara said with an understanding smile, pulling out a dark chip of scale.

"We’ll have to use some of your Apexis crystals," Obsidia said. "I’m starting to run low."

"Of course." Seara removed the string of crystals around her neck and cut off a few to put in the drawer. "How many?"

"He wasn’t undead or corrupted as severely as Father and Mother were," Obsidia said. "So we probably don’t need more than that."

"Don’t be stingy," Onyxia said with a frown. "This is my prime consort we’re talking about."

Seara chuckled and dropped in another two crystals.

Onyxia nodded gratefully.

As soon as Onyxia was reunited with Sartharion, Fahrad approached the Synthesizer. Obsidia smiled at him. “Nyxondra next?”

"Um, actually… I was thinking I should do this before we bring her back.”
Wrathion and Obsidia both frowned in confusion. “But you’re not dead,” she said.

He took a small vial out of a pocket inside his tunic. “That’s easily remedied.”

Wrathion grabbed his arm. “What? No! Fahrad!”

The rogue gave him a sad smile. “This poison works swiftly and painlessly. I won’t know a thing. Trust me, I’ve thought this through.”

"But—"

"This Titan machine will bring me right back. You saw it work for them,” he said, gesturing toward Nefarian and the others.

"But—"

Fahrad put his hands on Wrathion’s shoulders. “I know you’re scared, my boy, but if I can finally be truly free of them…” His voice trailed off, and he shook his head. “I have to do this.”

Wrathion blinked back tears and nodded. “I understand,” he whispered.

"You won’t even have time to miss me.”

Obsidia started to hand him some Apexis crystals, but he rolled back his sleeve to show he still had his own bracelet.

"The poison works fast. Count to a hundred and press the button." With that, he climbed into the Synthesizer chamber, shifted back into a dragon, and tossed the entire vial into his mouth.

Obsidia put an arm around Wrathion’s shoulders and nudged him to look away. “Count with me,” she said gently.

There was no sound from Fahrad. His expertise in poisons served him well.

When they reached one hundred, Obsidia started the machine.

"Scanning sample," it said.

"You can press the button when it tells you to," she told Wrathion.

He could not help glancing at Fahrad, but the hatch cover was now shut and only a motionless silhouette was visible.


Wrathion shifted into his true form and landed on the button, using his body weight to depress it.

The usual concert of strange noises emerged from the machine. Fahrad’s silhouette shimmered and faded away, then reformed. When the cover retracted into the ceiling, Wrathion zoomed over to him.

"Fahrad? Did it work? Wake up!"
His tall head fin twitched, and he gave a deep sigh but still didn’t open his eyes. He didn’t look any different than he had before.

Wrathion landed on his snout. “Papa?” It was the first time he’d used the term, and it was enough to shake Fahrad out of his stupor.

He opened his eyes and squinted. “Wrathion?”

The whelp gasped in delight. “Your voice!”

Fahrad sat up groggily and put a paw to his throat. There was no sign of the scar that had marred his throat. “Never mind my voice,” he said, although the scratchiness was indeed gone. “I… I can’t hear their voices anymore!” He looked around with an unfocused sheen to his eyes, listening intently. “They’re gone!”

Obsidia and the others smiled and nodded in satisfaction.

Fahrad slid out of the chamber and took a tentative step into the lab before shifting back into a human. “I can’t hear them,” he said with a breathless laugh. “Not just muted like with the crystals. They’re completely gone! It’s over!”

"That’s marvellous!” Wrathion said, flying circles around him.

"You can’t imagine—" Fahrad began before emotion choked off his words. He snatched the whelp out of the air and crushed him to his chest with a happy sob. "I’m free! They’re gone! I never dreamed…” He began to weep in earnest, letting tears of relief run down his face.

Wrathion said nothing, merely nuzzling against him with a pleased chirping sound.

Obsidia put a reassuring hand on the rogue’s heaving back. “Congratulations. I’ll do some of Nef’s kids next, while you… adjust. Let me know when you’re ready for Nyxondra.”

Fahrad nodded, gulping for breath.

Nefarian and Seara eagerly welcomed their six eldest sons back, then revived Atramedes as well. Nefarian’s unofficially adopted son had been returned to life with two fully functioning eyes, and he flapped around the laboratory enjoying the ability to see again.

By then, Fahrad had composed himself, so Wrathion approached Obsidia with his ring in the palm of his hand. “We’re ready,” he said, doing an admirable job of hiding his nervousness.

"All right," she said with a nod and a smile. She placed the ring containing a chip of her sister’s scale into the machine’s sample drawer along with two of their dwindling supply of Apexis crystals.

Fahrad had shifted back into his true body again, and sat with Wrathion in front of the Synthesizer chamber. They watched, hardly daring to breathe, as a draconic shape slowly took form inside.

Wrathion didn’t need to ask if Fahrad recognized her. The grin spreading across his father’s face was proof of that.

The machine announced that reconstruction was complete, and the hatch opened. Fahrad rushed forward. “Nyx!”

Wrathion was frozen in place, gawking at the dragon who had appeared before him. The family
resemblance to her parents and siblings was clear. She had dark, brownish-black scales like Neltharion, and the sweeping spread of her horns mirrored Sintharia’s.

Fahrad nuzzled his head against hers. “Nyxondra, wake up,” he murmured. “It’s me. We’re safe now.”

Wrathion gasped as his mother opened her eyes, which were a striking crimson just like his own.

“F’rad?” she mumbled, blinking heavily. "How’d you get here so fast?"

“No, Nyx, we’re not in the Badlands,” he said, stroking her cheek. "It’s a long story. But we’re safe. It’s all right."

She sat up groggily and leaned into his embrace with familiar intimacy. “Oh, Fahrad, I’ve missed you.”

"Not as much as I’ve missed you," he said, voice breaking.

She rubbed her eyes and pulled back from him a bit, looking around at their strange surroundings. “What is this place? And who— Oh!” She recognized her siblings watching from a short distance away and backed further into the Synthesizer chamber, back fin springing up in a defensive posture.

"Nyx, it’s okay," Fahrad said quickly. "They’re helping us. This is a Titan laboratory in Uldum."

“Uldaman?”

“No, Uldum. South of Tanaris.”

Her eyes widened. “How…?”

"This is where the Titans first made the Aspects and the rest of our kind. This machine purified them, and you, and me. Listen. The whispers are gone."

She scowled skeptically. “That’s impossible. They…” Her gaze darted around wildly as she listened to the silence in her head. “Can it be?”

He hugged her reassuringly. “It’s true, Nyx. We’re free.”

"You can’t hear them, either?"

"Nope," he said with a toothy grin.

"The children…?" She looked around and saw only two unfamiliar whelps present.

Fahrad’s expression grew solemn again. “We couldn’t do anything about the ones in the Badlands,” he admitted. “But I did rescue one from the red flight.” He turned to his son. “Come on, Wrathion. Don’t be shy.”

The whelp was trembling, staring at his parents but too overwhelmed to make a move toward them.

Nyxondra crept forward and bowed her head to the ground, leaving her nose inches from him. “Hello there, little one,” she cooed. “Oh, you’re definitely one of mine. Don’t be scared. It’s all right.”

Unfamiliar sensations swept over Wrathion, quenching a thirst he hadn’t even been aware of having
until now. “M—” He swallowed, then tried again. “M-mama?”

"Yes," she said with a warm smile. "I’m sorry we were separated, my baby."

Wrathion suddenly flopped forward against her snout and hugged as much of her as his arms could reach, making burbling chirps.

Nyxondra shifted into her human form, a dark-skinned woman in a practical dress of gray and tan, and scooped him up in her arms. “Oh, there, there, little one, it’s all right.”

Seconds later, Fahrad’s human arms encircled them both. “Welcome back, Nyx,” he whispered, leaning over the whelp to give her a tender kiss.

"Oh, Fahrad," she said, leaning into him. "I don’t really understand what’s going on, but as long as I’m with you…everything’s going to be all right."

He hummed in agreement and squeezed her and their son tightly. “Nothing’s ever going to tear us apart again. I promise.”

It took well into the afternoon to revive the rest. Sartharion and Onyxia lay side by side with their tails intertwined while they slept to recover their strength. True to his word, Neltharion made no move to approach Sintharia. She ignored him, dozing lightly beside Onyxia. He also respectfully kept his distance from Nyxondra after his first attempt to smile at her from across the lab sent her running into her mate’s arms in tears.

Nyxondra kept her interactions with her siblings brief, polite but detached. “I know you’re all…purified,” she said carefully. “But so much has happened, and…I need time to get used to this.”

"Understood, sister," Nefarian said. "It’s pretty jarring for all of us. For what it’s worth…I’m very glad to see you again."

Later Obsidia steeled her courage and did as Fahrad had done, taking a dose of his poison in order to be revived in a purified state. Just as he had promised, the poison was swift and painless. One moment she was nervously gulping it down, and the next thing she knew she was waking up in the Synthesizer, feeling more clear-headed than she had in millenia. Seara followed suit.

In the interest of bolstering the black dragonflight’s numbers and genetic diversity, Seara had insisted on bringing along samples from a number of other dragons that were not close relations. There were, of course, many notable faces missing. Neltharion’s other consorts had been gone for ten centuries, and no shrinekeeper had been on duty to bring Kalaran, Nalice and Myzerian’s remains to Dragonblight.

Nefarian and Seara spent the afternoon exploring the rest of the laboratory, poking their noses into every nook and cranny. They had no idea what most of the devices did, but the possibilities thrilled them. When it came time to leave, they were so reluctant that Obsidia feared they would insist on staying. Eventually they came along with the rest, although Nefarian did mention returning someday to investigate further. With a fresh supply of Apexis crystals, there was nothing stopping them from reviving others and even perhaps experimenting with protodrakes like the Titans had.

A pair of tol’vir ambled along their patrol route around the pyramid complex, taking their time in the afternoon heat. A small scorpion skittered past, but otherwise everything was quiet. They were discussing last night’s card game when the younger of the two guards suddenly pointed at the distant courtyard. “Look! What is— Titans have mercy!”
The older guard turned in time to see a column of smoke rising from the entrance to the Halls of Origination. No, he realized as he shielded his eyes against the blazing sun to get a better look. Not smoke. Black dragons. Two dozen, at least, pouring out of the pyramid in a flurry of dark wings.

Before either tol’vir could think of any kind of response, the dragons had disappeared into the sky, heading east toward the ocean.

The younger guard looked to his elder for guidance, eyes huge with panic. “What do we do?”

"About what?" he said, gripping his weapon for stability. "I saw nothing but some birds."

"But—" A stern look from the other silenced him. "Ah. Yes. Birds. We don’t need to file a report on birds."

"Exactly."

"They’re gone now, after all."

"Right."

"So, what were you saying about the game?"

Chapter End Notes

Sorry (but not really) for the cheesiness level, but this is a “fix canon” wish fulfillment AU, after all. With all the horrible things that the black dragonflight has gone through in canon, I thought they deserved some schmaltz.

If you think the concept of sticking a magic crystal and a dragon scale into a machine and having a fresh copy of a character come out seems totally implausible and goofy, well…I agree with you, but so what? Again, it’s a wish fulfillment AU. Remember the title and just go with it. ;)

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Obsidia leads her family to their new home in Outland. Many rifts remain to be mended between them, however…

Chapter Notes


Crossing the ocean took several days under the best of circumstances, but with so many dragons, many of them still weak from the regeneration process, it took even longer. Fortunately, Neltharion's bond with the earth made finding dry land to rest an easy task. By the time the verdant expanse of the Cape of Stranglethorn appeared on the horizon, most were back to full strength and eager to leave Azeroth behind.

Only a few had chosen to return to their old lairs and pick up their lives where they left off. Most were terrified of falling prey to the Old Gods again, and Obsidia's tales of the whisper-free haven in the Blade's Edge Mountains seemed almost too good to be true.

They flew at the highest safe altitude, hoping to avoid the notice of any mortals below. The dense jungle canopy served them well in that regard. After passing the abandoned troll city of Zul'Gurub it was a short flight to the Dark Portal.

The Portal was guarded, of course, by forces of both the Horde and Alliance, as well as neutral organizations like the Argent Dawn. The dragons landed on a barren cliff overlooking the Portal to discuss their options.

"We could just rush through," Nefarian suggested. "If we fly fast enough they won't have time to react."

"One lucky shot and someone could be lost," Onyxia said. "I'd rather just pose as a mortal and get permission to go through. It's safer."
"Posing as a mortal is always your solution, isn't it?" her brother teased.

"She's right, though," Obsidia said. "You haven't been through the Portal yet. It's very disorienting, and it would be easy for mortal forces on the other side to attack before we got our bearings."

Neltharion considered this and nodded. "No sense in taking unnecessary risks. Everyone, take a moment to rest and practice shapeshifting. When we're all comfortable with it, we'll approach the camp. I'll do the talking."

Many of the dragons had not changed their shapes since their restoration and were out of practice. After a few minutes everyone had managed to turn themselves into either humans, elves or draenei. One started as an orc but realized he would look odd among Alliance races and changed into a dwarf instead.

Ashy had never been able to shapeshift, but he was so accustomed to hiding in Obsidia's knapsack that he dived inside without hesitation.

Nyxondra looked over Wrathion's human form with an impressed whistle. "My, my, you look so grown-up! Normally my children wouldn't learn to shapeshift until they were at least two or three years old."

Wrathion squirmed in embarrassment. "It was...necessary. Mortals have difficulty taking me seriously in my, er, real form."

She laughed and kissed his forehead.

Neltharion surveyed the gathering, finding nothing amiss. "Excellent. Everyone follow me, and stay together." He hiked down the rocky ridge toward the encampment, completely surefooted despite the impractical shoes his human form wore.

His famous silver tongue and powers of persuasion made it an easy matter to talk his way through the Alliance checkpoint.

Obsidia went through the Portal first and Neltharion waited until everyone else was safely through before following.

"My, my, this looks slightly different than I remember it," Neltharion said, peering out at the ruddy, lifeless wastes of Hellfire Peninsula. "A lot less jungle and a lot more barren, floating rock."

"Yeah, this planet's seen better days," Obsidia said with a smirk.

He raised his voice. "Everyone, gather over here!" He shepherded the group around to the edge of the portal platform, overlooking the bottomless expanse of the Twisting Nether. There were no mortal sentries around at the moment. "On
the count of three, everyone return to your true forms and fly in that direction," he said, pointing to the north-west. "Put on some speed. We don't want to attract any more attention than necessary from the camps below." So far the Horde and Alliance forces at the foot of the portal platform were paying them little if any attention.

Satisfied that everyone was ready, Neltharion counted down, "Three, two, one." Immediately, he shifted back to his natural form and launched himself into space, spreading his wings to wheel around in the right direction. His children and their mates were close behind, and the others followed. Sintharia brought up the rear, as usual keeping as much space between herself and her former mate as possible.

If the mortal forces camped below the Dark Portal noticed them, the flock of black dragons were out of sight far too quickly to feel any repercussions. They skirted along the northern edge of Hellfire Peninsula until the stark red terrain gave way to the misty, mushroom-strewn Zangarmarsh. Here they dared to stop for a rest, drinking from the waters west of the Dead Mire. Sartharion caught a sporebat to eat with Onyxia, and a few of the others fanned out to hunt for their own lunches.

Obsidia delighted in stalking prey alongside her eldest brother again. The wildlife was already a bit picked over by the rest of the group, so they ventured further west and found a large naga camp.

"It's been a long time since I've had fresh seafood," Nefarian said with a hungry grin, diving off one of the towering mushrooms to attack a group of pavilions.

Obsidia and Seara flanked him, picking off any naga who tried to flee. It was odd to see Nefarian breathing normal, orange fire instead of the shadowflame for which he was so well known, but even that bit of corruption had been cleansed. He aimed it with the same precision as its purple counterpart, however, and it set enemies ablaze just as well.

They gathered up as many naga in their mouths and claws as possible and fled before reinforcements arrived from the rest of the encampment. The other dragons regarded them with jealousy as they returned with the feast. Nefarian's six sons, Neltharion, and Atramedes all helped themselves to a naga or two.

Obsidia looked around for her mother, planning to share the food with her, as well, but Sintharia was sitting under a giant mushroom, gnawing the last bits of meat from the bones of a fen strider. Obsidia left the extra naga with her siblings and went to sit by her.

"Hello, Mother," she said.

"Hello, dear," she said with what Obsidia thought was a sad smile. "I see you and your brother found quite a feast."
"Did you want some? I was going to offer, but you looked full."

"Oh no, I could barely finish this thing." Sintharia pushed away the fen strider's carcass. "Those tentacles are surprisingly tasty. Thank you, though."

"How are you doing?" Obsidia asked.

"I'm fine," Sintharia said casually.

"I mean, how are you, with...everything."

"I am whole, and the pain is gone. That is all that matters."

"Father--"

"--has kept his word and stayed away from me," she said curtly.

"I hope someday we can spend time together again as a family. All of us, I mean."

Obsidia glanced over to where Neltharion and her siblings were chatting over the pile of dead naga. Nyxondra, Fahrad and Wrathion were sharing a hydra some distance away, ignoring the others.

Sintharia leaned back against the mushroom stalk. "Perhaps one day I will be able to tolerate his company at times like this. But not yet. Definitely not yet."

"You don't have to be afraid of him anymore," Obsidia said softly. Sintharia's eyes narrowed. "That's not for you to decide."

"I know, but...look at him. That is not Deathwing anymore."

Sintharia reluctantly looked over her shoulder. Neltharion was laughing at something Nefarian had said, and tearing off thin strips of naga meat for Ashy. The whelp had been having difficulty getting through the scales on his own.

Obsidia saw her mother was not in the mood to discuss it any further, so she hesitantly returned to the others. Her big brother greeted her by flicking a pawful of naga scales in her direction.

"Hey!" she protested, curling one wing around to the front to shield herself. "What's that for?"

"I thought you liked shiny objects," Nefarian said with a twisted smile.

She brushed scales off herself with a noise of disgust. "I'm so glad you're back, Nef."

"I know."
The dragons spent the night on top of the enormous mushrooms that blanketed Zangarmarsh. The largest had room for two adults to rest on, and there were plenty of smaller ones to accommodate lone sleepers.

Nyxondra felt a peculiar twinge of jealousy as they settled down for the night and Wrathion immediately curled up in the crook of Fahrad's arm. She was used to her children being more closely bonded to her than their father. This was the first time one of her offspring had hatched without her present.

Fahrad noticed her frown and made a questioning noise, but she quickly smiled and laid down beside him. "I always knew you'd be a wonderful full-time father, if you ever got the chance," she whispered.

He made a sour face. "I don't know how wonderful I am, but..."

"Nonsense," she murmured, nestling her head against his neck.

Wrathion wasn't sleeping very soundly yet, and stirred when his mother's warmth enveloped him. She nuzzled her nose against him, and he made a contented trilling noise before drifting into deeper sleep.

His parents both smiled at him.

"And he'll make a wonderful big brother, as soon as we have a new lair," Nyxondra whispered in Fahrad's ear.

"You're sure about this?" he whispered back. "Being around your family again?"

She glanced around at the indistinct, black shapes on top of the surrounding mushrooms and shrugged slightly. "So far so good. I mean, they've all been surprisingly...normal."

"I got to know your little sister a bit on the way to Uldum. She sort of reminds me of you: a kind heart deep down, but stubborn as hell."

Nyxondra chuckled.

"And your father... At first I tried to kill the bastard, but--"

"You what?"

"He just showed up out of the blue claiming to be cured, acting all apologetic and calm. I figured it had to be a ruse. The whispers took over, and..." He swallowed. "Anyway, Obsidia and Seara stopped me and gave me the crystals so I could control myself again."
"Oh, Fahrad..." She shook her head sadly.

"Hey, that's all over and done with now," he said firmly. "Regardless, I've been watching him like a hawk ever since, and...either he's really dedicated to faking it, or he's actually sane again. And now that I've been remade the same way he was, I feel..." He took a deep breath as if relishing the smell of freedom. "I believe him."

Nyxondra nodded slowly, deep in thought.

"But Nyx, if you're not comfortable with him, with any of them, I completely understand. We could fly south instead of north and find a lair of our own, away from the others."

She gave a grateful smile. "I've thought about it, but... This is a fresh start. We all did things we regret because of the whispers. If Mother is willing to give this a chance, then I am, too."

Fahrad brushed a paw across her cheek, drawing her closer. "I'll be right beside you, whatever happens."

She sighed happily and snuggled against him. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Nyx."

The black dragons resumed their journey early the next morning, heading toward the soaring spires of the Blade's Edge Mountains. Obsidiana led the way toward Sabellian's lair. She had considered sending word ahead to let him know they were coming, but decided the surprise would be far too great to pass up.

"You say the gronn have been exterminated?" Neltharion asked, flapping along beside her as they flew over Bloodmaul Outpost, an ogre settlement.

"Yes," Obsidiana said. "Mortal forces stormed Gruul's lair several years ago. Gruul and his sons are dead, and the ogres who served them have scattered."

"Good. Those one-eyed brutes were responsible for far too many deaths among our kind. Even I had to be on my toes when facing Gruul. What he lacked in intelligence he made up for in sheer strength."

"I saw some gronn around the mountain beneath the Bastion of Twilight," she said. He squinted, trying to remember. "Ah, yes. That was Cho'gall's idea--or the Old Gods through him, perhaps. Certainly not something I would condone when in my right mind."
They continued flying north-west, climbing higher to clear the spires of rock above Sylvanaar. As they reached the plateau, afternoon sunlight struck the huge formations of Apexis crystals jutting from the ground.

"I told you there were plenty more where ours came from," Obsidia said, seeing her family's surprised reaction.

"Some of those crystals are as tall as Stormwind's walls!" Onyxia said.

"Fascinating," Nefarian said. He began to dive lower to take a better look, but his youngest sister stopped him.

"There will be plenty of time for that later. Besides, there are demons and rock flayers and other nasty creatures down there that I'd rather not get involved with right now."

"Aww, you're no fun."

"I can't wait to see the look on Sabellian's face when he sees you all," Obsidia said with a wicked giggle.

Nefarian did a barrel roll around her. "What about that beau of yours? Riverdark, was it?"

"Rivendark," Obsidia corrected. "And I don't exactly know where we stand, to be honest. Not that it's any of your business, but I sort of snuck away without saying good-bye. Everyone here thought the remainder of the flight on Azeroth was a lost cause and didn't want me to go back."

"We're all very glad you did," Neltharion said earnestly.

"So am I." She grinned at the flock of dragons stretching behind her across the orange sky. Her smile faded as she wondered what sort of reception she would receive from Rivendark. Yet, even if his affection had faded, her potential broken heart was insignificant in light of all she had accomplished. Azeroth was safe from the Old Gods--for the time being, she conceded, for they could never truly be stopped while the planet remained intact--and she had her family back at last.

The dragons kept a safe distance to the south of Ogri'la, flying out a short way into the Twisting Nether before angling downward and back around. It took Obsidia a few minutes to remember exactly where Sabellian's lair was, but she eventually spotted the cave entrance yawning from beneath some particularly large rock spires.

"I hope someone's home," she said. "They spend a lot of time over at Ruuan Weald, disguised as mortals."
"See? I'm not the only one," Onyxia said, raising her nose at Nefarian.

"I never said mortal forms weren't useful," he said. "I just don't use them as an excuse to play dress-up."

"Why you--!" Onyxia headbutted her brother, who ducked away with a roar of laughter.

Even without the siblings' banter, there was no quiet way to herd twenty-odd dragons into a cavern. The last of them had barely landed when a large female dragon came flying out of a side tunnel, looking alarmed and confused by all the ruckus.

Obsidia recognized her right away. "Inklia! It's me, Obsidia! Sorry to drop in like this with so much company, but...well, one thing led to another, and here we are."

Inklia boggled at the crowd of dragons, at a loss for words.

"Greetings," rumbled Neltharion, edging his way through the throng toward her. "You must be my son's mate. Obsidia's told me about you. I trust all is well here in Blade's Edge? I didn't expect to leave you all here for so long, but I hear Sabellian's done a fine job of holding things together."

Inklia's jaw hung open in shock. When she finally managed to speak, her voice shook. "Lord Deathwing! You're alive!"

He fidgeted slightly. "I prefer to be addressed as Neltharion again, but yes. Thanks to my daughter, I am alive and well--quite well, actually. Moreso than I have been in many centuries."

"How?"

"It's a long story, one best shared with everyone at the same time. Is my son here?"

"N-no, my lord," Inklia stammered. "He's v- visiting Thunderlord Stronghold today. He should be back in, um, an hour or two, I would think. You're welcome to, er, make yourselves at home in the meantime, of course."

"Thank you." Neltharion bowed his head and backed away from the flabbergasted female.

Inklia recovered her dignity somewhat when not speaking directly to the former Aspect. "Obsidia, it's good to see you safe and sound. We were very worried."

Obsidia came closer for a private conversation with her sister-in-law. "I know. I'm sorry. I should have written, but I kept waiting until I had something good to report, and then things started happening really quickly. I'll save the full tale for
when everyone's present, but the Apexis crystals were the key. None of this would be possible without Sabellian's research."

"He'll be glad to hear it."

"I'm sure. We both have an 'I told you so' or two to exchange." Obsidia chuckled.

"And you're back to your real body."

She nodded.

"Rivendark was inconsolable when you disappeared. He scoured these mountains for days trying to find you before finally coming to terms with the idea that you had gone back to Azeroth."

Obsidia hung her head. "I definitely owe him an apology. I didn't want to hurt him, but my quest was more important than either of us. Is he angry with me, do you think?"

"He went through a stage where he was, but mostly he's just been moping. He comes by every day to see if we've gotten word from you."

She winced with guilt. "I should have written. I'm sorry."

"You should have, yes, but there's no point in fussing about it now. What's done is done, and you obviously succeeded on quite a grand scale." Inklia shook her head in amazement at all the unfamiliar dragons milling about the cavern.

Obsidia thought for a moment. "You really think Sabellian will be gone another hour, at least?"

"Yes. Probably longer. He's visiting his Mok'nathal friend, Rexxar, and he tends to lose track of time when they get talking."

"All right. That leaves plenty of time to round up everyone else. I assume Furywing, Insidion and the rest are okay?"

"Yes, and their brood has been growing now that the wyrmcult is finally eradicated."

"Good. Can you get word to them and the others? I have an errand to run."

Inklia guessed from her sister-in-law's troubled expression what her plans were, and nodded.

"Thanks." Obsidia went over to her father. "I'll be back in a little while. There's someone I need to see...if he'll even speak to me."
Obsidia had never flown to Rivendark's home cave under her own power before. She had always been stuck in human form, riding on his back. The route came back to her, however, and a brief flight southward brought her to the mouth of a cave similar to Sabellian's lair. She landed at the entrance and cleared her throat. "Hello? Anybody home?"

"Who's there and what do you want?" came a gruff male voice.

"Rivendark, it's me," she said, heart pounding nervously in her chest.

"Huh?" He came lumbering into sight from a side passage. At first her heart sank at his angry expression. He hated her after all, and she couldn't even really blame him. Then it dawned on her that he had never seen her in her true form.

"Riv, it's me. Obsidia," she said with a tentative smile.

"Ob-Obsidia?" he sputtered. "Is that really you?"

"Yeah. It's really me."

His expression immediately turned from suspicion to elation. "You're okay!"

"Yeah, and I'm really sorry I just took off without saying anyth--oof!" He threw himself at her with such force that it knocked the wind out of her, and she tipped back against the cave wall.

"Oh, Obsidia, I was so worried!" He hugged her with all his might, wrapping his arms, wings and tail around her as if he never intended to let her out of his sight again. "I laid awake imagining all the horrible things that could have happened to you, and wishing I had gone with you, and wondering if I'd ever see you again. Don't ever disappear like that again!"

"I'm sorry," she said, trying to nudge him back a fraction so she could breathe.

"But you're back, and you're a dragon again!" He drew back to look at her, his eyes taking a thorough tour of her body. "And you're gorgeous!"

She laughed and felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment. "I'm sure I'm not as pretty as your imagination built me up to be."

"No, you're even more beautiful!"

She scoffed, unable to look him in the eye.

He came closer again and and nuzzled his cheek against hers. "I'm so glad you're back."
"I'm glad to be back," she said, finally allowing herself to believe that he was welcoming her back with genuine affection. "And I'm glad you're not mad."

"Well, I wasn't exactly happy with you, but that's in the past now. We have our whole future to think about. Let me show you what I've been working on while you were gone!" He practically dragged her down the tunnel he had come from and into a second, larger cavern.

"Oh!" she gasped. A hundred different color gemstones of all shapes and sizes were pressed into the walls, interspersed with columns of Apexis crystals. It reminded her somewhat of the mosaic murals in the Halls of Origination, but where those only lit up to give directions this was a constant, shimmering curtain of shining colors. "It's beautiful," she said breathlessly. "But why...?"

"You like shiny things," he said with a grin, "and I wanted you to feel at home. Assuming you still want to make this your home, that is. Gathering all these different stones and then chipping out spots for them in the walls helped keep me from worrying about you constantly. And I made sure to include lots of the crystals so our eggs will be well protected. I mean, if we have eggs. I don't want to rush things, but I just...we were planning stuff like this, and y'know, I thought, just in case..."

She suddenly realized she had been holding her breath while he rambled, and she let it out with a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob. "Oh, Riv! It's wonderful! And yes, I do still want you as my mate, if you'll have me."

"I will! I do! Yes!" He cheered and pounced on top of her.

They rolled over several times before coming to rest against the dazzling mosaic wall. She laughed, shoving at him playfully as they tried to catch their breath.

"I love you, Obsidia," he said, touching the tip of his nose to hers.

"I love you, too, Rivendark,"

They gazed into each other's eyes for a blissful moment. Then, he gave her a sly look and struck what was supposed to be a seductive pose. "So, about making those eggs..."

She stifled a laugh at his exaggerated demeanor and backed away a step. "Yeah, um, that's going to have to wait a little longer. My entire family's waiting back at Sabellian's lair. Like, really, my entire family. Nefarian, Onyxia, Nyxondra, and both my parents."

Rivendark's mouth dropped open. "Your parents? You mean your father is alive? I just assumed since you were back in your real body that he was, you know...not. Alive, I mean."
She smiled. "Well, he is. And I want you to meet him."

His playful attitude gave way to sudden anxiety. "Last time I tried to meet him, it didn't exactly go well. Remember?"

"Believe me, I remember," she said, putting a hand to her neck. "But he's completely different now. Come on, I'll explain while we fly. Sabellian should be back soon and then they'll be waiting for us. There's going to be a meeting with all the black dragons from Outland and Azeroth to discuss what's happened and where we go from here."

"Wow. Uh...okay." He swallowed and seemed to find his courage. "I guess we should go, then. But afterwards, you'll come back here with me?"

"Tonight, and every night after," she said, rubbing her nose against his neck.

The following weeks and months were an idyllic time of relaxation. Nefarian spent hours comparing notes with Sabellian, swapping research and stories. They were no closer to figuring out why the Apexis crystals acted the way they did, but they quite enjoyed the investigation.

One thing was certain, however: the crystals worked miracles. After hundreds of lifeless eggs on Azeroth, nearly all of Seara's now hatched. She was beside herself with joy, and Nefarian couldn't stop grinning.

Onyxia and Sartharion established a lair near Rivendark's cave, and Ashy constantly flitted back and forth between the two. His vocabulary was expanding slowly to include more names and a few simple words like "food" and "sleep." Whenever a clutch hatched he was always nearby to greet his new relatives.

Obsidia and Rivendark soon settled in to their life together, and by year's end the gem-covered cavern was host to several piles of eggs.

Sintharia stayed with Sabellian and Inklia at first. She never initiated conversation with her former mate, and, true to his word, Neltharion paid her no more attention than an occasional smile. To Obsidia's delight, Sintharia returned a few of those smiles.

As ever, Nyxondra and Fahrad chose to keep some distance between themselves and the rest of the flight, although in time they grew comfortable enough to socialize with the others on a regular basis. Their lair was well to the north and east of everyone else's, near where the red rocks of Blade's Edge crumbled away and the purple gloom of Netherstorm began.
Before long Wrathion had a swarm of younger siblings following him around, pester ing him with questions about Azeroth and idolizing him as the first of their flight to be purified. He basked in the attention for the most part, and when it grew annoying he would sneak off to the mortal settlements nearby to binge on reading anything he could get his hands on.

Neltharion had taken over the cavern in Raven's Wood as his lair. It had once been known as Blackwing Coven and was the headquarters for the wyrmcult that had so plagued Sabellian and the rest. It held a series of winding tunnels and several large chambers, and steam vents kept it comfortably warm. There was even a small river of lava running through it.

The deepest recesses of the cavern were actually quite close to the edge of the landmass that made up the Blade's Edge Mountains. Upon realizing this, he used his powers to open a back door of sorts, where it was possible to fly out directly into the Twisting Nether. He summoned a landslide to collapse the old entrance in the woods above to prevent any unwanted intrusions by arrakoa and other land-dwellers.

One evening he sat at the new threshold of his lair, watching the sunset with Obsidia and a handful of her first whelps. One landed on his nose, and he pretended to sneeze. The whelpling fell off, giggling, and fluttered down to sit with her siblings. Obsidia smiled widely and patted her. "You're silly," she said fondly.

"Gran'pa's silly," said the whelp.

Neltharion beamed proudly. "You've got a fine brood, my dear."

"Thank you, Father," Obsidia said, leaning against him.

"You realize you're going to run out of gems to name them after, eventually."

"I know, I know," she said with a sigh.

"I like my name!" piped up one whelp.

"Me too!" said another.

"Ah yes," Neltharion said. "Malachition and Garnetia, isn't it?"

"Yep!"

"That's me!"

"And I'm Citrinia!" chimed in a third whelp.

"Hey, can we have arrakoa for supper? I'm hungry!" asked one.
"No, no arrakoa," moaned another. "I got a tummyache from eating those last time!"

"Cuz you ate the feathers, dummy!"

"I didn't know I wasn't supposed to eat the feathers!"

"Dummy!"

"Am not!"

"Kids, kids," Obsidia chided gently. "Calm down. Your father is hunting further south today, so he'll probably bring back ogre or maybe sporebat for supper."

"Mmm, sporebat!"

"Sporebat makes me sneeze."

"I bet I could eat a whole ogre all by myself!"

"Nuh-uh!"

"Can too!"

"Can not!"

"Can too!"

Obsidia shrugged helplessly at her father, who merely grinned. "Was I like this as a whelp?"

"Oh yes," he said, chuckling. "You all were."

"Are you sure it was the Old Gods who made you crazy?"

He grimaced. "Don't joke about them."

"Sorry," she said, immediately regretting her jest. "All that just seems so far away now, like part of another world."

"They are part of another world," he said. "But they're still very real."

"I know." She hugged his arm comfortingly.

"I wonder sometimes if I should go back to Azeroth," Neltharion said quietly.

"No!" Obsidia said immediately. "You used up all your powers as the Aspect of Earth to seal away the Old Gods again. What more can anyone expect of you?"

"I still have a connection to the earth. I could still help mend some of the damage I
caused as Deathwing. Dry out Menethil Harbor, for a start..."

"It's too dangerous," she said. "Everyone on Azeroth was thrilled to have you dead. They set off fireworks in Stormwind to celebrate! Even if the Apexis crystals protect you from the Old Gods, you still have a planet full of enemies."

"They are Deathwing's enemies. Not mine."

"I know that, and you know that, but thousands of dimwitted mortals don't know that. Even if they don't recognize you, if they see a giant black dragon moving landforms around, they're going to assume the worst."

He slouched. "I would like to see Alexstrasza and Ysera again someday. I owe them, and what's left of the blue dragonflight, an apology. Several apologies, in fact."

"Do you really think they would be happy to see you?" Obsidia asked with a concerned frown. "It's been hard enough for some of our flight to accept you back, and you were our Aspect!"

"Happy? No. But perhaps they would listen."

Obsidia looked unconvinced.

"I don't know. It's probably better to let them go on believing that I have been utterly destroyed and the black flight wiped out, if that's what gives them peace of mind."

She hugged him, tucking her head under his chin. "We're all making a new start here. I know we can never forget the horrors we've been through, and we shouldn't. But it does no good to dwell on them, either."

He squeezed her shoulders, and a smile crept back onto his face. "When did my little Obsidia get so wise?"

"Since some mad dragon cursed me into a human body and left me to save the world."

He laughed.

"Mommy, I'm hungry," whined one of the whelps.

"Me too!" said another.

"All right, all right," she said with a fond shake of her head. "Your father will be back with food soon. I suppose we should head for home." She turned to Neltharion. "Bye, Father. It's my turn to hunt tomorrow so I probably won't have time to swing by for a visit, but I'll see you soon."
"Good-bye, Obsidia. And good-bye, little ones."

"Bye, gran'pa!" chorused the whelps, swarming around to lick his face.

Obsidia rounded them all up in her arms and spread her wings, then turned back to look at him once more. She always felt a bit sad leaving him alone. "I love you, Father."

He regarded her and her babies with a proud smile. "I love you, too, Obsidia."

She sprang into the air and flew away.

Neltharion watched his daughter grow smaller and smaller until she disappeared into the distance. After all the time he had spent grooming Nefarian and Onyxia to be leaders of the flight, who would have thought that their silly, self-absorbed, jewel-hoarding little sister would save them all?

He backed up a little from the cave entrance and laid down on his stomach. It was too early to go to sleep but he wasn't sure what else to do with himself. Everything seemed terribly quiet now that Obsidia and her constantly chattering whelps were gone.

He rested his chin on his front paws and watched the sun fade into the Nether, brooding. Self-pity was not an emotion he ever indulged in. It would have crippled him had he wallowed in it during the centuries of fighting the voices while burning from the inside. Even now, he felt something closer to frustration. He should be happy. He was free from the Old Gods, his family was thriving, his children's caves were full of healthy new whelps, and his body was as strong and pain-free as it had ever been. Yet something was missing.

He lifted his head and scowled in concentration. Did he hear...? Yes, that was the sound of wings flapping. Someone was coming.

His first thought was that something was wrong and Obsidia was coming back for help. Then he scolded himself for being a worrywart and hoped that perhaps one of the other children was dropping by. The true identity of his visitor never crossed his mind until she came into view.

"Sintharia?" he gasped, scrambling to his feet.

"Neltharion," she said curtly, swooping down to land before him.

"What are you doing here?"
"I can leave if you don't want me here," she said immediately.

"No, no, stay! Please! I just wasn't...expecting..." He let his voice trail off awkwardly and backed up a few steps to give her plenty of space. This had become such a habit that he wasn't even conscious of doing it until she edged forward to close the distance again. "What...?"

Her face betrayed no emotion as her amber eyes studied him from head to toe. "I've been watching you, these past months."

He said nothing.

"You truly are yourself again, aren't you?"

He nodded.

"I've seen how you talk to the others, play with the whelps, go hunting with our sons... You appear for all the world to be the dragon I fell in love with, so many eons ago."

He swallowed nervously and waited, not wanting to interrupt the first words she had spoken to him since their revival.

She broke eye contact and studied her claws. "I never believed you, you know. The children tried to make excuses, saying you weren't in control of your mind or body when you killed Pyroclastia and Basaltia, and burned me so horribly. It all seemed too convenient. And even if it were true, you were able to break free when the whispers tried to take your precious Dragon Soul away. You had the strength to regain control to save that damned disk, but not your consorts!"

"That's not how it happened!" he said with a stricken expression. "If they had gotten their tentacles on the Dragon Soul, the Hour of Twilight would have been unleashed then and there! At that moment I was not acting as Neltharion or Deathwing. I was the Earth Warder, and I was created to stop that very thing from happening. My powers as Aspect were the only reason I was able to sever their control of me."

Sintharia looked up with wide eyes, clearly never having considered this before.

"Don't think I haven't gone over those days a hundred million times in my mind, trying to see what I could have done differently. Don't think I haven't been racked with guilt over what happened to you and the others. I've relived it countless times, as I'm sure you have. Every time the constant burning in my body grew so intense I thought I would lose my mind again, I thought of how you had to carry some of that burden, too, and the shame of what I had done grounded me in reality once more. I have said it before, and I will say it as many times as I need to until you believe me: I am sorry, Sintharia."
"I believe it now," she said quietly.

He did not trust his ears. "What?"

"I don't think anyone can truly understand what it's like until they've had the Old Gods seize their mind. I used to think they were an excuse, or that only the weak or unexpecting would fall prey to them. I...know differently now. When they brought me back to breed their Twilight dragonflight..." She shivered at the memory. "I was utterly helpless against their will. A pocket in the back of my mind was screaming in protest but no matter how hard I struggled I could only watch as they made me say and do things that I would never have done... They made me hurt my children!" Her voice rose an octave in outrage.

Throughout her description, Neltharion nodded vigorously. It was all too familiar.

"They may have been hideous Twilight abominations, but they were still my children!" she said loudly, her expression one of outrage and grief. "And you...after millenia of despising and fearing you, the Old Gods forced me to accept you again, to submit to that pain again." She hugged her arms close to her chest and seemed to shrink back under her wings.

He ached to hold and comfort her, but did not dare. "They forced me to hurt you again, too," he said with a sickened grimace. "I was fighting it as much as you were, with just as much success."

"How can they take our deepest fears and twist them into reality? How can they force us to hurt those we love the most? And why? What good does it do them to have us suffer so?"

"The Old Gods are unfathomable in the depths of their cruelty and chaos. Trying to understand them will lead to madness just as surely as their whispers."

"I know that now." She finally looked him in the eyes again. "For so long I've been hating you when I should have been hating the Old Gods."

"They were in your mind, too, you know, clouding your thoughts. But even if they hadn't been...Sintharia, I don't blame you for hating me. The things you saw me do, the things I did to you... It was my body, my voice. It was me you saw, not the Old Gods. How could you not hate me?"

Tears glistened in her eyes. "I don't. Not anymore."

He inhaled sharply in disbelief as she took a step toward him. Then another. And another. She was nose to nose with him, so close he could feel her quick, shallow breaths. He remained still as a statue, both yearning to touch her and terrified to do so.
She trembled nervously and tilted her head until her cheek was resting against his. They both froze in place, barely breathing, for several long seconds.

At last, she slumped in relief, putting her arms around him with a breathless laugh. "It is you, Neltharion," she said, resting her chin on his shoulder.

Only then did he finally allow himself to initiate contact, placing his paws lightly on her back as if ready to snatch them away any second. When she did not object, he embraced her more naturally. "Sintharia," he said softly, "I'm so sorry."

She snuggled closer until her head was against his neck, her tail intertwined with his. "I had forgotten how right this feels," she murmured.

"I know--" Neltharion stopped to clear his throat, making a valiant effort to hide how emotional he felt. "I know things can never be like they were before, but I swear by Galakrond's egg, Khaz'goroth's hammer, the Heart of Earth and anything else you might want me to swear by...I will never hurt you again."

"I know," she said. "That's why I'm here."

He held her even tighter, savoring the feel of her scales against his. Oh, how he had missed her! "I love you."

She sighed happily. "I love you, too, Neltharion."

There would be time for more words and further intimacies later. For now, it was enough to simply lie snugly in each other's embrace until morning.
Epilogue

Neltharion the Redeemed sat in the middle of a large cavern. The glow from a steaming river of lava reflected from both the gemstones in his scales and the enormous formations of Apexis crystal that grew from the rock walls. Sintharia reclined nearby, her body forming a protective semicircle around a pile of spiky black eggs: the first clutch born to them in over ten thousand years.

Footfalls and rustling scales announced the approach of visitors, and both dragons turned to look at the tunnel on the other side of the lava stream. Obsidia, still their youngest until the new clutch hatched, appeared, and was soon followed by Nyxondra, Ashy, and Wrathion.

"Hello, Father, Mother," Obsidia greeted, nodding in respect to each. "Any signs of hatching yet?"

Sintharia shook her head. "Not yet, but it must be very soon." Her voice carried an undercurrent of worry but mostly joy.

Ashy flapped over and slurped her cheek. "Graa! Yeep!" It was the closest to "grandmother" that he could manage. He was at an awkward, gangly stage of growth halfway between whelp and drake, and he tripped over his own paws as he landed by the eggs. "Yeep!"

Neltharion stood and stepped over the ribbon of lava with ease. "Nyxondra," he said warmly. "I'm so glad you came." No fire of madness blazed in his eyes now, but they still shone a stunning golden-red that matched hers.

Nyxondra avoided eye contact but smiled. "Well, this is kind of a big day, after all. It's been a long time since I've had new brothers and sisters."

Neltharion did not come any closer, but looked pleased with even this much progress in mending their relationship.

Wrathion had been sitting on his mother's back, but when she stopped to talk to Neltharion he flew around the cavern once before landing next to Ashy at the edge of the nest. He barely flinched when his cousin greeted him with a slurp across his cheek. "Yes, yes, hello," he said. "Here we are again, waiting for eggs to hatch."

"Yeep yeep! Yeep?"

"My little brothers and sisters are doing quite well. Thanks for asking," Wrathion said without a hint of sarcasm.

"Yeep!"
"You seem to have an uncanny knack for guessing when eggs will hatch. What do you think about these?"

Ashy cocked his head in concentration. "Yeep!" he said emphatically, somehow conveying the concept of "Very soon."

Obsidia chuckled and hopped over the lava river to join them. "I don't think you've missed a single clutch hatching since we got to Outland."

"Yeep!" Ashy said proudly.

Neltharion returned to sit with his mate. "And how is your brood, my dear?"

"All's well," Obsidia said with a proud smile. "Rivendark's watching them while I'm here. I'm just glad I laid that clutch a few days ago so I can be here for this." She looked over the piles of spiked eggs and grinned.

Nyxondra sat beside her sister. "Sabellian was telling me yesterday that the druids at Ruuan Weald are starting to get concerned about the sudden increase in the number of dragons around here. He and Inklia tried to assure them that we're peaceful, but it might be a good idea to stay away from there for awhile, just in case."

Neltharion shrugged. "Mortals are used to being nervous around our flight. And I cannot blame them. Give them their space."

"There are getting to be an awful lot of us, though," Obsidia admitted. "Hunting hasn't been the best lately, with so many new mouths to feed. Nefarian and Seara are seriously considering moving to Uldum to investigate the laboratories there."

Neltharion nodded, his expression solemn. "I know. I've also talked to a few others about starting a settlement in the mountains between Nagrand and Zangarmarsh. There aren't any mortal towns there, and plenty of food."

Ashy suddenly reared up on his back legs and gave a loud "Yeep!"

"Look!" Sintharia called out at the same time. "It's starting! They're hatching!"

The others immediately turned their attention to the nest. Several eggs were shaking slightly, and cracks snaked across some of the shells. Neltharion and his family were riveted, hardly daring to breathe as the next generation of black dragons began to emerge. First a tiny snout emerged from within one of the largest eggs, then claws broke through another. Squeaking cries came from some of the eggs, and one tipped over as its inhabitant struggled to exit.

At last the first whelp rolled free of the eggshell, flapping its small wings to shake off the sticky membrane. Within a minute, a second and a third broke into the
world, then a fourth. Sintharia nuzzled her head underneath her mate's chin, overcome by joy. Neltharion beamed proudly, taking in the welcome sight of his children taking their first steps. Only one failed to hatch, and none of the newborns seemed egg-touched. Indeed, they were all bright-eyed and curious, exploring the nest area and gazing up in awe at the sheer size of their parents and sisters.

One tiny female got her wings working and fluttered up to greet her father at eye level. "Papa! Mama!" she chirped. "Hi!"

"Hello, little one," Neltharion said gently, voice hushed with emotion. "Welcome to the world."

"Thanks! I picked Laharia as my name, if that's all right."

"It's a fine name, my dear."

"Ooh, it feels good to be out of that egg. Everything out here is bigger than I thought it would be!" she said, turning in circles to take it all in. "Am I going to get as big as you someday?"

"Almost," he said. "Perhaps as big as your mother."

"Wow," the whelpling said, diving over to perch on Sintharia's outstretched front paw. "I bet I'd have to eat a lot to get that big!"

The adults laughed. Following their sister's example, the other whelplings figured out how to fly and were soon swarming around their parents, chattering in excitement.

One of the male whelps turned to Sintharia. "So can we eat soon? I'm starving."

"Me too!" chimed in his nearest brother.

"Food? Yes, please!" called out another.

Sintharia looked to Neltharion with a fond smile. "Isn't 'normal' wonderful?"

He chuckled, a deep, rich sound that seemed to shake the walls of the cavern.

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