

### **No Better Be Safe**

'No no no no no no NO!' Sorinaril Flashfire bit back a wave of panic as he rushed to cast his spell before the few filaments of magic left in the leyline dissipated. 'One half the etheric constant squared...factor for this world's arcane frequency....' He sketched a quick series of sigils in the air, infusing the faintly glowing amber symbols with the tattered scraps of energy he'd be able to gather. The spell wavered and sputtered, and he poured his will into it, struggling to keep it functioning. Mists started to coalesce in the archway, pulsing and twisting. 'Too unstable...it would tear me to pieces....' His fingers flicked through the motions, drawing Hale's Rectifier at the vertices. He didn't have much to work with, but he, like the other Harbingers, had been taught to work with dribbles and drabs of energy, casting spells with the slimmest glimmers of magic. The pulsing subsided, but the spell still faded like mist in the sunlight.

He groaned, breathing heavily through his nose. He did not have time for this. Not now. After breaching the defenses and killing the last of the Dragons, the Vreech had bled out the ley-lines, leaving all of Protectorate's infrastructure lacking power. Options disappeared with each heartbeat. If he didn't figure something out quickly, he was going to be stuck.

He pulled a bottle from his pack, pulling the cork and drinking deeply in a single, fluid motion. The end of this world might be upon him, but that was no reason he needed to be sober. He started to recork the bottle as the liquor burned its way down his throat and filled him with fire, then paused. Perhaps... perhaps a second drink was in order, given the state of things. It might make this next part easier. He picked up the spent crystals from the table as he swallowed the second gulp, putting them and the bottle into his bag. He could reactivate the portal if he could get them charged. He could even pull off the spell without the portal if he got access to enough energy, though that was unlikely without a harmonic convergence or a thaumaturgical resonator, neither of which was the sort of thing that he was likely to just stumble across. His mind raced as he gathered up things to flee. 'Imbued chalk.... Labyrinth stone.... Vial of congealed astrum....' The energy in the ley-lines flowed in predictable patterns, moving like tides of water. If he followed them quickly enough, he might be able to get ahead of the ebb, gather sufficient energy to charge the crystals so he could get out of there.

The alternative was not something he wanted to contemplate.

He drew a deep breath. Keep to the Plan. That would be his salvation in all of this. His people had prepared for this, the greatest minds strategizing and plotting for countless years. Well.... Not this, specifically - he was pretty much screwed, on the personal level - but on the grand scheme of things, things were going exactly according to Plan. Unfortunately for him, that meant there was a strong chance he was going to die, consumed by creatures who would barely even spare a passing awareness of his existence. Such was the burden of the Harbingers. All that stood between him and a very painful end was his skill at magic and his inherent brilliance. Which was why he'd wanted that second drink.

He left the workshop at a sprint, straining to follow the path of the now-depleted ley-line. If he followed the holloway that ran along this line, he'd have some level of concealment from the Vreech - perhaps even enough to hide the signature of the items he was carrying.

The rocky ground of the road gave way to earth, and slowly that gave way to the sloping banks of the sunken lane. He settled into a slow jog, observing the ley-line as he moved along. Empty, a tapped out vein, with only a faint residue of the energy it recently held. His crystal would scrape those last morsels, but unless he got lucky, it was going to take forever, which was far longer than he had. He could see the ley-line constricting, shrinking in size to accommodate the lack of energy. Given long enough, it would shrivel, just as countless others had done on countless worlds, ground to dust in the Vreechs' wake. He would be ground to dust in their wake at this rate.

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An hour of jogging later, and the most that he could say that he'd gained was an hour's distance from the portal. The crystals were still mostly empty. The ley-line hadn't constricted quite as much as it had farther away - he was getting closer - but the energy levels were still abysmal.

Sori paused to drink some water from a stream that had skirted close to the holloway. He splashed some on his face and tried to come up with new options. This wasn't working. Wasn't going to work. At this rate, he'd end up following the drained ley-line to a Vreech nest itself - at which point he'd either be eaten by the Vreech, or be stuck with the Stalwarts. Truth be told, he'd rather be eaten than be forced to serve the Vreech, scraping together tidbits from the depleted ley-lines to make meals for them.

He frowned, considering. Maybe... maybe that was exactly what he was going to do. A plan started to form in his head. Bold. Audacious. And probably requiring a lot less sobriety by the time he was through with it.

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Pretending to be a Stalwart was both easier and more difficult than Sori had expected. He spent a few utterly terrifying moments as the guards looked him over - at least, that's what he assumed they were doing, he couldn't really read facial expressions of Vreechspawn. Hopefully, they were just as bad at reading Elven body language. They chattered to each other, looming over him - and then let him pass. He supposed he smelt enough of desperation to be one of the wretches, though who else would willingly walk up to a nest by themselves? Trying not to sag in relief, he approached the nest itself.

He had no clue where he was going, and needed his wits about him. Well, truth be told, he needed something to calm his nerves, but wandering drunkenly would pretty much give him away immediately. Stalwarts hadn't exactly cultivated a reputation as connoisseurs of fine liquor. He tried to focus - magic first, booze later. He was going to need it after surviving this.

Built over the intersection of two ley-lines, the fledgeling nest would absorb the energy of the nexus, and store it as food for the Vreech. Unless, of course, it was used for other things. He could charge his crystals here, and, depending on how much he could take, he might not even need to get back to the portal. The mists would be closed by this point - there was no getting out of the trap by now - but at least he'd be able to escape to that little bunker that the locals had concocted. He'd be able to ride out his time in relative safety

He strode past a few drones who were building the nest out - they likely wouldn't bother him as long as he didn't interrupt their task - and tried not to show how much his skin crawled. He'd normally adopt an imperious approach, but that would give him away as well. So... 'downtrodden but occupied with an important task' would be his guise for today. Eyes down, purposeful steps, following the traces of magic towards the center depot that would serve as a larder.... He paused, a stray sigil catching his eye. That was...unexpected - at least, he assumed it was. It was an unfamiliar design, low-powered, hidden at a point where a corner of wall met a floor. He worked his way deeper into the nest, finding several more - all barely-there, obscured, combining to form a singular spell. It was familiar in a manner he couldn't quite put his finger on....

"What are you doing here?" hissed a quiet, dangerous voice. He spun, trying not to stammer... and froze when he saw the speaker. The figure was covered in dark chitin, like a Vreechspawn would be...but the body shape was all wrong, more akin to an Elf. Sorinaril stared in horror. Had the Vreech developed a hybrid? He started to stammer, unsure of how to respond. The creature in front of him reached up, grabbing its own head, and lifting... revealing a Harbinger's face, partially obscured by a black bandana. He tucked the helmet-like Vreechspawn head he'd been wearing under his arm. This time, Sori actually did sag against the wall in relief.

"What are you doing here?" the Harbinger repeated, his low voice drawing out each word, anger gleaming in his eyes. "I'm looking for the central depot," Sori responded, hoping his voice wasn't as shaky as he felt. The other man's eyes narrowed. "Depot is...off-limits for now. It's not safe." Sori's eyes widened. He realized what the spell was. "Curran's Detonation... that's what that is. You're blowing the depot!" The man drew a dark blade. "I can't have you spoiling this, Stalwart!" he hissed, stabbing at Sori. "Wait wait wait!" Sori begged, diving back from the man. "I'm not a Stalwart!" He held up his hands, shaking his head. "I'm just here to steal from the depot." The other man stopped, wary, and stared at him. "What?! Are you insane?" "Probably," Sori said dryly. "This was the only way I could get the power to open a portal out of here."

The man studied him for a moment. "We need more people like you." He sheathed his knife and put his helmet back on. "Don't take more than 45 thaums, or the explosion won't take the whole nest. You've got two minutes to be beyond the blast radius. Good luck." He turned and stalked off, and Sori sprang into action. As he carefully filled up his crystals, he wondered about the man. He'd heard rumors... Harbingers who had turned their back on the Plan. Who'd taken up with that madman Tarrencrest and started their own guerilla war. Clearly, this was one of them...right?

Sori slipped the crystals back into his bag and tried to aim for somewhere between 'nonchalant' and 'running for his life'. He'd made it outside, barely. As the explosion threw him into the bushes surrounding the nest, he realized he should have run a little faster at the end. He sat there for a moment, head ringing, body aching, hoping that nothing was broken too badly. Brambles had torn up his face, and a spreading wetness was covering his back. For a moment, he'd wondered if he was bleeding out, until he detected the smell of the alcohol.

Sorinaril groaned softly and gingerly pushed himself to his feet. The nest had been torn open by the blast, and parts of Vreechspawn bodies had been scattered over the area. Farther off, he could see the armored Harbinger surveying the wreckage, before he turned and walked away.

With little else for options, Sori staggered away, dripping blood.