

FALL

“Why are you wearing your hair like that?” Tal’enthiel asked Orvynia, eyeing his daughter sceptically as she approached him.

“It’s my dragonhawk riding hair.” she answered, fastening her topknot tighter as she smiled smugly up at her father.

“I see. And are you mimicking myself or Starbreeze?” he questioned.

“Does it have to be just one of you?” she answered with snark, flicking the tail of her topknot back away from her face. “If I pick Quallathon, will you be upset with me?”

Tal’enthiel stared blankly at her, face frozen in displeasure.

Trotting past her father, Orvynia walked straight towards her waiting dragonhawk. Solan rested her six wings across the soft Eversong grass, the purple-feathered dragonhawk craning her neck about to watch Orvynia with diligent green-glowing eyes. The young elf hiked up onto the dragonhawk’s saddle, taking the reins confidently in hand and hitching her riding boots into the stirrups. Once comfortable, Orvynia reached into a saddlebag and pulled out a dead Eversong hare, tossing it to Solan who swiftly caught it in her beak. The dragonhawk threw her head back and gobbled it up instantly, trilling with delight afterwards.

Orvynia leant forward and tucked snugly against the saddle, following the instruction of her flightmaster at Sunwing Rookery to the letter. Last lesson, he called Orvynia ‘arrogant and unteachable’, so she intended to prove just how diligent a student she was to spite him.

“Rise, Solan!” she commanded, giving the reins an encouraging tug. Pressing her many wings off the ground, Solan sprung up with her serpentine form and took to the air, purple-feathered wings beating in perfect synchronicity as she flew higher than the city walls.

“What is it about my granddaughter and her love of flying?” enquired Arneris. He walked up beside Tal’enthiel, resting the weight of his right-hand on his phoenix-headed cane.

“I blame Valyn for taking her flying when she was young.” Tal’enthiel sighed, looking across to his father. “It clearly left an indelible imprint. She levitates everywhere now.”

“Did her mother’s family not breed dragonhawks? Maybe it’s just in her blood.” Arneris said absentmindedly, failing to notice the way his words made Tal’enthiel wince.

Every recent meeting with Arneris reminded Tal’enthiel just how frail he was beginning to look. Sallow skin, visible veins, a thin frame, the typical cunning in his eyes occasionally appearing dulled and misty. He worried just how many decades his father might still have. Today, at least, he was well enough to come watch his granddaughter fly.

Oblivious to his son's concern, Arneris watched Orvynia soar through the air, wrinkles creasing across the old lord's face as he smiled proudly. His pale green-blue eyes trailed after his granddaughter as she and Solan spun through the rays of sunlight cresting over Silvermoon's walls. He winced when the beams of light caught his face, shielding his eyes with a gloved hand.

"She's shot up like an Eversong sapling. I wouldn't be surprised if she's taller than me by tomorrow." Tali'nera remarked, joining them. She held a parasol over her and Arneris' heads, protecting her ailing husband from the sun's harsh glow.

"Thank you, dear." he whispered in appreciation.

"She is growing fast, yes, but she still complains incessantly that her shal'dorei classmates loom over her." Tal'enthiel added, crossing his arms against his chest. "Patience is not Orvynia's strength."

"Give her time. Soon she'll complain about being just as tall and lanky as her father." Tali'nera said, looking along at Tal'enthiel.

"Must you still insist on that word?" Tal'enthiel threw a defensive look back at his mother. 'Lanky' was an old family descriptive he still detested hearing, even two hundred years later. It conjured images in his mind of some gangly, bumbling elf neither worthy of his height nor station.

"Your stature is a trait you inherited from your father, you should be proud of it." Tali'nera responded, stern-faced and unrepentant. She never missed an opportunity to graze the surface of Tal'enthiel's steely facade.

"Yet he never—no, this topic bores me." Tal'enthiel rubbed his temples, trying to ease the strain of a growing headache.

"The two of you, honestly." Arneris rasped out an amused chuckle, coupling his hands atop his cane. "Like mana wyrms in molt, pecking at one another."

Orvynia shouted something barely audible from above as Solan did a clean barrel roll through the air, likely a call for them to watch.

Huffing with displeasure, Tal'enthiel turned his eyes back to Orvynia soaring through the sunrays. He still occasionally felt his stomach lurch with panic whenever she flew alone, worried that every needless loop Solan flew would send Orvynia toppling down to the ground far below. Nevertheless, he silenced such worries, knowing his daughter was more than capable of looking after herself.

"I received a peculiar letter a few days ago." Arneris said, looking over at Tal'enthiel.

Tal'enthiel glanced back at him, waiting for his father to elaborate.

"From the Sanctum, but not from you?" the old lord queried, quirking a long eyebrow.

“No. Not anymore.” Tal’enthiel answered flatly. He tensed his jaw, teeth grinding together as he considered how much he was willing to disclose. “Who was the letter addressed to?”

“To ‘Lord Sunshard’. Strange that it was sent to me. One might think they are trying to tempt me to read it and spread whatever it contains.” Arneris mused, playfully alluding to the motive of the sender.

“And its contents?” Tal’enthiel asked, astutely aware that Arneris had already read it.

Smiling, Arneris flicked his wrist with a gentle glimmer of arcane. The letter materialised, floating into Tal’enthiel’s outstretched hand. He immediately recognised the detritus of strange magic and the thick scent of sanguithorn clinging to the black envelope: this was sent by one of Astalor’s minions.

Flipping the letter open, his eyes scanned across its neatly flowing Thalassian.

“Another meeting with Magister Astalor Bloodsworn? A dangerous liaison to keep, my son.” Arneris warily suggested.

“Fate has seen our interests align.” Tal’enthiel folded the letter, sliding red-gloved fingers across its creased corners. “And he has the Sanctum now, and one of my demons.”

“He has Valyn?” Tali’nera asked, frowning.

“No.” Tal’enthiel scrunched his face. “Another demon.”

“You keep far too many demons.” she rebuked.

“When exactly do you and Bloodthorn plan to wed?” Arneris interjected.

Tal’enthiel’s ears shot back with alarm, a flash of surprise visible in his fel-glowing eyes. He looked at his father, momentarily stunned with how to respond to the prying question. Parting his lips, he took an uncomfortably long second to measure exactly what he would say.

“We are too busy for something so trivial.” Tal’enthiel said with a dismissive wave of his hand, though even he felt the answer simply sounded evasive.

“Trivial?” Arneris questioned, almost sounding offended.

“Yes, trivial.” Tal’enthiel insisted. “There’s far more pressing matters to attend currently than a self-indulgent ceremony.”

“Like that little ‘research project’ you are oh so secretive about?”

“Among other things, yes. And my appetite for marriage has been entirely spoiled.”

“Come now, Tal’enthiel. Do not deny your family a cause for celebration.” Arneris said in his usually playful yet reprimanding tone. “It’s been too long since we’ve all come together. And age is softening my mind, so I would like to celebrate something before—”

Solan shrieked. Orvynia was startled, urgently regaining control of the slackened reins in her hands, pulling them taut. The dragonhawk rapidly beat her six wings, filled with horror at a threat unseen. Below, father and grandparents all looked up in concern.

“Solan, stop it—obey!” demanded Orvynia, pulling the reins tight as she tried to steer the flailing dragonhawk back under her control. Her panicked eyes then snapped to the darkening clouds to the north.

The sun’s light dulled. The sky turned an unnatural indigo. The firmament above Quel’Danas tore wide open, the pinks and golds of the sky swallowed by the hungry Void as a massive vortex of dark clouds collected around the tear. A few seconds later, the ‘boom’ of the storm’s arrival swept across Eversong, shaking branches and scattering panicked birds.

Overcome by fear, Solan spiralled her serpentine body back and threw off her rider. Orvynia screamed, forcefully dismounted with her hand looped in the dragonhawk’s reins. It caught her wrist with a sudden snap before she fell, plummeting down towards the Eversong grassland below.

Summoning his magic in a heartbeat, Arneris thrust his hands to the sky and conjured arcane to wrap around Orvynia and slow her descent. Tali’nera tossed the parasol aside as she and Tal’enthiel sprinted in the direction of the falling girl. Orvynia fell with the weight of a feather, drifting down into her grandmother’s waiting arms.

The Sunshards crowded together around Orvynia, who whimpered in pain as she clung tightly to her broken wrist. They then looked up in shock towards the sky, watching it rupture open to reveal the darkest depths of the Void beyond.

Overcome by a sudden cold clarity, Tal’enthiel banished his dreadful awe for the Voidstorm above as he pulled his daughter up onto her feet. He looked into her eyes, seeing the pain.

“Go to the woodland lodge. Take Orvynia. If things deteriorate, relocate to Suramar.” he ordered his parents, tone brusque as if commanding one of his apprentices.

“No, no, I’m coming with you!” Orvynia insisted, grabbing for Tal’enthiel’s robe with her one good hand, attempting to cling tight so he couldn’t escape.

Memories shot through his heart like frozen arrows, of a family lost to the Scourge and never found. But rather than freeze and reflect, Tal’enthiel pushed himself back and barked a single, urgent command.

“GO!”