



TRAVELER

BOOK TWO: THE SPIRAL PATH

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To my high school history professors,
Mr. [James] Ackerman and Dr. [John] Johnson,
who transformed facts into history, antiquity into
relevancy, cause into effect, and human beings
into the threads of a vast tapestry . . .

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CHAPTER ONE

LADY AND CHILD

Azeroth's largest moon, the White Lady, was waning now, but its second, smaller moon, the Blue Child, remained full, and these orbs provided—despite the lack of a campfire—more than enough light for Aramar Thorne's current undertaking. Aram had his sketchbook on his lap and his dwindling coal pencil in his hand, and was finally sketching the one person in his life missing from this volume's pages.

Makasa Flintwill posed uncomfortably. He had told her, "You don't have to pose. Just don't move around too much."

She had said, "Fine. Good," but her posture remained upright, stiff, and painfully awkward. The upright, he was used to. But he knew Makasa to be a woman supremely at ease in her own skin, so the stiff and awkward was something he was making an effort to compensate for in his drawing. Makasa Flintwill was seventeen years old, with the demeanor of a woman of thirty—or maybe of a military general of fifty. She was five feet, ten inches

tall, lean and muscular, with sable skin, dark-brown eyes, and short black kinky hair. On board the *Wavestrider*, she had kept her trimmed hair very short indeed, to match the shape of her skull. But they had been in Feralas's trackless rain forests for close to a month, and—though no objective observer could think of it as anything but still quite short—Aram knew his sister well enough to believe she must already regard the length of her hair as “completely out of control.”

“His sister.” It seemed so natural to think of her that way now—and almost impossible to believe that, only a month ago, the words he would have used to describe her were closer to “my nemesis.” They had been through so much since then, and both of them had the scars—external *and* internal—to prove it. As he sketched in thin, dark scratches across her left cheek and forehead, he thought of their first meeting seven long months past . . .

Aramar Thorne was the captain's son, officially brought aboard Wavestrider as a cabin boy, but really there to finally get to know the father who had abandoned his family when Aram was six.

While Captain Greydon Thorne attempted to teach his son everything from life lessons to swordsmanship to knowledge and trivia about the flora, fauna, and sentient species of Azeroth, Second Mate Makasa Flintwill took on the task of making a sailor out of a twelve-year-old child who had never before seen the ocean, let alone shipped out upon it. Aram was, he had to admit, a poor and

resentful student to both of them. He flat out didn't want to be there with either of them and made no attempt to hide that fact.

And worse, he had inadvertently come between Makasa and Greydon, whom she also regarded as a father. To say, in those first six months, that Aram and Makasa had not gotten along was practically the definition of understatement.

Aram sketched in multiple scratches on her bare arms and wondered how or when she had gotten them. He detailed her weapons: the cutlass and hatchet on her belt, the iron chain crisscrossing her chest, and the shield—an iron circle covered with layer upon layer of impact-absorbing rawhide—kept within easy reach.

But everything had changed over the last month. Tragically severed from Greydon and Wavestrider when the ship was attacked, Aram and Makasa escaped in a lifeboat and were left marooned and alone in a hostile land—where they had finally found each other. How many times had he pulled out his sketchbook only to have her growl, “You better not be putting me in that blasted book”?

He had always responded by intoning, “I promise I won't sketch you unless you ask me to.”

And, of course, she never had. Not until this morning, when she surprised him with a smile and an “I might ask you. I've heard it's good magic.”

“Good magic.” That’s what they had between them now. They had been through hardship and loss, danger and tragedy. But together they had survived and, along the way, not simply made peace with each other but recognized their common bond. Their true kinship. Their . . . siblingness.

Aram paused and looked up. The White Lady was sinking behind Skypeak’s rocky spire, where their friend, the night elf Thalys Greyoak, had died the night before—after extracting one last promise, giving them one last charge.

Makasa moved for the first time, following Aram’s eyes to look over her shoulder. Though they were now a long day’s walk from Skypeak’s heights, both of them could still see the Blue Child’s light glistening across the waterfall, at the foot of which Thalys had been laid to rest that morning. Makasa turned back to Aram and nodded sadly, knowing instinctively where his thoughts had flown. Forgetting to pose, she was herself again, and Aram raced to capture the hard-earned sympathy in his sister’s eyes.

It didn’t matter now that Makasa hadn’t had the time or opportunity to know and love Thalys as Aram had. It was enough that she knew how Aram felt. Frankly, it was enough that the kaldorei had sacrificed his centuries-long life saving her brother, taking two crossbow bolts in the back that had been

meant for Aram. That was more than enough to forever enshrine the elf in her memory as a friend, compatriot, and hero.

Aram felt Thalyss's absence more acutely, more personally; the companionship of the wise, perpetually amused night elf had briefly filled the void created by the death of his father. Now, both Greydon and Greyoak were lost to him. *Not lost*, Makasa would say. *Dead. They're dead. Face it. Don't sugarcoat it.* She was a hard woman, that Flintwill, unfailingly honest and direct. But he had come to appreciate those qualities.

"Mrksa?" a strange little voice called out hopefully. It was Murky, their young, small, green, and gangly murloc companion—with a body that was practically one big head, including large, soulful puppy-dog frog eyes. He and their other current traveling companion, Hackle, had returned to their camp with firewood.

Makasa shook her head impatiently. "No. No fires. I told you we're still too close to Dire Maul. We're not sending up a column of smoke that'll lead our enemies right to us. I thought you were off looking for windblossom berries."

"No berries," Hackle said, dumping the unwanted pile of wood between Aram and Makasa. The furry hyena-man was a gnoll warrior—though little more than a pup himself (if a strong and broad-shouldered pup).

They all paused then to look about their camp, a rocky clearing

by a tiny creek, near the border between Thousand Needles and the dense forests of Feralas, its trees leaning, looming in the moonlit night. The not-to-be-used woodpile now sat where a campfire might have been, where—if there had been time to hunt or fish and not just flee—they might have cooked and enjoyed an evening meal. Almost as one, their four stomachs growled.

Aram remembered then that he was hungry. Very hungry.

Murky said, “Urum n Mrksa mlgggrrr. Murky n Ukle mlgggrrr. Murky mrrugl frunds mmgr mmm mmmm fillurlok, nrk nk mgrrrrl. Nk mgrrrrl!”

Makasa squinted at the murloc, then turned a questioning glance on Aram.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I think I’ve figured out a few of his words. I know I’m Urum, and you’re Murksa—”

“Mrksa,” Murky corrected.

“Hackle is Ukle,” Hackle said.

“And we’re all his frunds. Friends. But beyond that, I really don’t know.”

Murky just shook his head and repeated, “Nk mgrrrrl, nk mgrrrrl . . .” three or four more times. His stomach grumbled loudly to punctuate his lament.

When did we last eat anything at all? Aram wondered. *Three days ago?* And there had been plenty of exertion during the interval: forced marches, gladiatorial combat, daring escapes. He knew he should be clawing at roots by now. Desperate. But

strangely, he felt more at ease than he had in weeks. Months, even. His belly might gnaw at him, but his soul was calm. Yes, they were hungry and hunted. But the enemy was a distance away, and—because Aram and his friends had escaped through the air on the back of an actual wyvern—had only the vaguest idea of their heading and no logical way to pick up their trail. So for now, Aram could relax under soothing moonlight with his companions.

He finished the sketch by signing his name to it with a slightly exaggerated flourish, before dropping his pencil into his shirt pocket. Makasa scowled—an all too familiar expression to Aram. He said, “Would you like to see it?”

Hackle and Murky practically climbed over each other to get to Aram and see his latest endeavor.

“Mmmm mrrrggk,” Murky said, cooing, which Aram knew from Thalys to mean *good magic*.

Hackle nodded firmly and echoed Murky’s praise. “Good magic,” he said with confidence.

To the murloc and the gnoll, the “good magic” of Aram’s sketchbook was not a metaphor. To them, there was something truly mystical about the way Aram and his pencil captured the likenesses of the people and places and things around him. If he had materialized some actual windblossom berries in his hand, Murky and Hackle could hardly have been more impressed.

Aram just knew he liked to draw. He liked to think he was

pretty good at it, too. His stepfather had thought him talented enough to spend a week's wages to purchase this leather-bound sketchbook for Aram's twelfth birthday, and it was Aram's most prized possession. Or at least it used to be, before his father gave him the compass and Thalyss gave him the acorn.

But Aram didn't want to think about compasses and acorns now. He wanted Makasa to *want* to see her picture. But she hadn't made a move to look at it. Nor, it occurred to him, had she responded to his asking her if she'd like to.

Suddenly insecure, he asked again, "*Don't* you want to see it?"

She scowled again. "I don't know. Do I?"

He resisted the temptation to roll his eyes, since he knew that particularly aggravated her. He got up, sidestepped the firewood, and moved toward her. "I hope so," he said.

He held the book under her nose. She studied it in the moonlight for a suspenseful minute. Finally, she said, "Is that what I look like?"

Murky said, "Mrgle, mrgle," which Aram knew meant *yes*.

Hackle said only, "Makasa." To him, it was definitive.

Aram scrunched up his face. He said, "Well, that's what you look like to me, anyway. Don't you like it?"

"She's too soft," Makasa said.

Not "I'm too soft," Aram thought. "*She*." He said, "You don't look like this every second. It's just how you looked in one particular moment. But . . . but this is the *you* I see when I close my eyes."

MAKASA



A. Thorne

“If you see me with your eyes closed, why’d I have to pose for you?”

“No, see . . .”

“It’s good, I guess,” she allowed.

But now he felt like she was simply trying to placate him. “You don’t have to like it,” he said, trying to hide his disappointment. He closed the book and wrapped it in its oilskin cloth. He stuffed it into the back pocket of his breeches and returned to his seat.

“No, it’s good.” But she sounded less convincing than ever.

“You’re impossible,” he muttered.

She smiled then. It angered him. She said, “Brat.”

“Me?”

“If we’re not all singing your praises, you sulk.”

“No one asked you to sing. Do you even know how to sing?”

“I don’t sing. Not for you. Not for anyone.”

“And that’s our loss, I suppose.” He shook his head. “What are we even talking about now?”

“My sulky brat of a little brother.”

Aram stared at her. She was still smiling.

And soon enough, he was smiling, too.