



# Terror by Gorchlight

BY CHRISTIE GOLDEN



*All right . . . just like we practiced. Deep breath, tap your heels for good luck.*

“Why, good afternoon, my esteemed spymaster without compare!”  
Captain Flynn Fairwind marched up to Mathias Shaw’s desk with a flourish, followed by a bow that made his long coat flutter behind him.  
“Fancy finding you here.”

“I work here.” The timbre of Shaw’s voice indicated he couldn’t decide if his answer was a statement or a question.

“Right! You do an awful lot of that. Working, I mean.”  
Flynn set both hands on the edge of the polished but sensible wooden desk, careful not to flatten any of the parchment scrolls Shaw seemed to

“You sailors have a lot of superstitions about ghosts and such. Duskwood has one of the biggest cemeteries in Azeroth, and not all those graves are peacefully occupied. It’ll likely be dangerous.”

have created a fortress with. Each was bound with ribbon and bore the seal of the Kingdom of Stormwind: a lion’s head pressed into blue wax.

“In fact”—Flynn grinned and thrust a folded, yellowing map into the other man’s gloved hands—“I’m rescuing you from your work.”

“A map,” Shaw said, slowly, lifting his green gaze to Flynn’s.

“Brilliant deduction.”

“Of Duskwood.”

“Blimey, you’re clever.”

“Where did you get this?”

“Won it in a card game.”

“And you’re handing it to me, why?”

Flynn tapped the large X scrawled upon the map. “To find treasure, of course! You’re slow for someone so smart.”

Shaw sighed, staring at the piles of scrolls.

“Come on,” Flynn urged, laying a hand on Shaw’s arm. “I’ve scarce seen you for more than a moment since we returned from Zandalar. Just picture it, mate! Two dashing adventurers—one uncommonly handsome; the other one, you—riding together in the fresh air, treasure gleaming, ripe for the taking . . .”

“Few would describe the air in Duskwood as *fresh*. And the Night Watch might have something to say about treasure being taken.”

“Ah, but you *know* them. You can talk them into permitting a tiny little treasure hunt. And besides”—Flynn nodded to Shaw’s desk—“you can check in with them while we’re there. They might have some intel for you on . . . something or other.”

Shaw's gaze traveled back to the desk and the scrolls. "What's the point in running around Duskwood finding old goblets or tarnished silver?"

"Fun, mate. Which you haven't had a lot of lately. I've stayed around here and learned about . . . diplomating and so on." Flynn flicked the map. "This is *my* world. And . . . I want to share it with you."

Shaw looked again at the ratty map.

"You sailors have a lot of superstitions about ghosts and such. Duskwood has one of the biggest cemeteries in Azeroth, and not all those graves are peacefully occupied. It'll likely be dangerous."

"Erm—well, yes, we do have a lot of superstitions. And I admit, I prefer the company of living people. But I prefer *your* company above all. And besides, the bloke who lost the map to me swore it was genuine."

Flynn put on his most charming smile. He'd promised Shaw he would be patient with him, and he had really tried to be. He knew that a spy's trust was gained even more slowly than that of a seasoned captain. Still, at Shaw's silence, his heart began to sink. He'd sailed into the room like a ship borne on the high tide of excitement into a peaceful harbor, its sails swelling with determination and now . . .

"I still have so much to do here," Shaw said.

Down, down sank Flynn's heart, down to the bottom of the sea, just like the wreckage of—

Shaw clapped Flynn on the shoulder and gave a gentle nod. "So . . . go get us some supplies and be ready by sunset," he said. "I'll have this wrapped up by then."



"Bit chilly here, isn't it?" Flynn wrapped his coat more tightly around himself as they followed the faded treasure map through Duskwood. The place was positively depressing. Even the inn and town square they'd passed didn't look the least bit inviting. The odd lantern hung from a post here and there, its small orange-yellow light straining feebly to hold

back the cold, dank darkness. Shaw had been right about the “fresh” air; everything smelled slightly of mildew. There was, thankfully, sufficient moonlight so that Shaw, who was presumably accustomed to doing such things as reading maps at night in a place named Dusk-bloody-Wood, had no trouble following the trail.

A faint light shone from the window of an old house very nearby. Something flickered past it. “Someone’s still up,” Flynn commented.

A ghastly groaning issued from inside.

Shaw didn’t acknowledge it; he continued on. At that moment, a shape blocked the faint light from the window. Flynn could clearly see the fletching and point of an arrow had penetrated the thing’s head. Another undead.

*What would its expression look like, he wondered. Its face—*

“Tides,” Flynn muttered. He quickened his pace, moving past Shaw. “We should be coming across something nice in a few minutes.”

“Nice?”

“The Tranquil Gardens, good man! A whiff of flowers would do me a world of good right about now.”

“Flynn, Tranquil Gardens is a *cemetery*.”

Flynn felt the blood drain from his face. “So, that’s why those rocks look like tombstones.” He plucked the map from Shaw’s hands, glaring at it. “All I saw was ‘Tranquil Gardens.’ I thought, you know. Gardens. That are tranquil.”

“This whole area was once beautiful. Brightwood, it was called. Darkshire was Grand Hamlet. Hard to imagine now.”

Flynn sneaked a swig of bracing rum and took a quick inventory of his pack to soothe his nerves: *healing potions, caltrops, mild poison, rum, bandages, hardtack, rum, extra socks, rum*. He listened with half an ear as Shaw, the thorough man that he was, continued telling the history of the place. Something something Medivh something something Scythe. They passed fields of rotting pumpkins, overseen by a scarecrow clearly capable of scaring more than just peckish corvids. As they followed the map, which Flynn was starting to regard with increasing resentment, he walked

straight into a spiderweb.

Shaw plucked a long, gooey thread out of Flynn's chestnut hair. "We're close," he said. "Assuming the map is right."

"It is, I'm sure. You know, after all that rubbish about—"

The swashbuckler was interrupted by a long, low howl of pain. The sound cut through the muggy air like a barber's razor in an uneasy apprentice's grip. The mangled noise had to have come from a wolf. *Hopefully* came from a wolf. Shaw raised an eyebrow.

Flynn turned on his heel, searching for the red eyes, white teeth, and black fur that would surely spring upon them. He'd already used up his allotted amount of quaking-in-his-boots, and Flynn Fairwind wasn't about to let his resolve fail so soon. Wolves were one thing; undead people were quite another. He could handle this.

He stepped ahead, wading into the brush, calling to Shaw. "I got it, don't worry! And that treasure should be—"

Flynn stopped and cupped a hand over his mouth.

Shaw immediately bounded to Flynn's side. "What happened?"

Flynn knelt beside a woman, her dark uniform marred by a spreading stain. "Hold her head up," he told Shaw, then reached into his pack. He uncorked a small vial and poured it down the woman's throat. She swallowed reflexively, and for a moment seemed to rally, but then her head lolled against Shaw's chest.

"Do you recognize her?" Flynn asked.

Shaw's face was grim as he gathered her limp form in his arms. "Sarah Ladimore. Commander of the Night Watch."



"Shaw . . . shouldn't the commander of the Night Watch be able to hold her own against local threats?"

"She is able to," Shaw said, but offered nothing more.

“That potion may have stopped the worst of it, but she’s not well,” came a gruff voice. Watcher Cutford, a tall, older man with white hair and fierce eyes, stood in the open door of the small Night Watch office. “Follow me. She’s going in and out of consciousness.”

Ladimore was in bad shape. They’d had to cut away some of her clothes to dress her wounds, and her hair—where it was not covered by bandages—was matted with blood. Flynn had paid a pretty copper for the most effective potion in the shop to prepare for his and Shaw’s treasure hunt. The commander should have been doing better with that in her system.

Shaw went straight to her bedside. “Ladimore?”

Her eyes fluttered open for a moment. “Sh-Shaw,” she whispered. “The Torch of . . . of . . . H-Holy Flame. Gone. Got a report . . . needed to check. My res-responsibility . . .”

Flynn had not been born yesterday. He knew that something described with the words “flame” and “holy” was an object one didn’t want to go missing in a place like Duskwood.

“Where was it?” Shaw was all business now—arms folded, face hard. Damn the man, he didn’t even seem to blink.

“Forlorn Rowe,” one of the watchers answered when the commander nodded off again. “After it was used to defeat Morbent Fel, Commander Ladimore placed the torch right in front of the bastard’s old house, facing the cemetery.”

“Who’s Morbent Fel when he’s at home?” asked Flynn.

“A necromancer. And a lich,” the watcher added. “We owe a great debt to the group of heroes who took care of him a while back. The torch was made from lightforge iron. For the last several years, it’s done its job well—dispelling dark enchantments, keeping the undead docile.”

“Its absence would be a perfect opportunity to catch Duskwood unprotected,” Shaw theorized.

Flynn could feel his pulse racing. Without anything to keep the dead at bay, they would be free to roam Duskwood. And if the torch were to be

“We’re going to have to find that torch, aren’t we?” Flynn said, and sighed.

snatched by someone powerful and not terribly scrupulous, Tides knew what would be unleashed.

The door banged open. More Night Watchers stumbled inside, carrying injured comrades. The commander clearly hadn’t been the only watcher attacked tonight.

“Raven Hill,” one of the wounded whispered. “Ghosts, skeletons, walking corpses—all heading this way.”

Flynn’s stomach tightened. *Stupid bloody treasure*. What he wouldn’t give to be back in Stormwind, sulking into his beer and fretting that Shaw would rather scribble scrolls than join him.

Ladimore’s face contorted in pain, but what would have been a cry came out as a smothered gurgle. Blood and saliva dripped from the corners of her mouth. While Shaw discussed the matter at hand with the watchers, Flynn grabbed a damp cloth. The commander’s face and neck were still covered with blood. Years at sea taught him to always keep the sick and injured clean. And, if he was being honest with himself, he felt truly terrible for her. Flynn pulled the blanket back to clean Ladimore’s hands—and gasped.

There were discolored sores all along her arm, from her knuckles to her shoulder. Some were still pustules, straining to break; others had burst and were oozing. Flynn was no stranger to sickness, injury, or even death. They held no fear for him. It was what might happen to someone *after* that tragic trio was finished that alarmed him. An abscess split open, and a horrible stench reached his nostrils.

“Tides,” Flynn whispered, coughing. As the watchers talked among themselves, he gestured for Shaw to come closer and murmured for the other man’s ears alone, “It’s like she’s . . . *decaying*. And she’s not even dead.”

Shaw set his jaw and pulled his gloves up.

“We’re going to have to find that torch, aren’t we?” Flynn said, and sighed.



“I must say, this evening just got a little bit nicer.”

“It has,” Shaw agreed.

The two sat astride a single gryphon, winging their way toward Raven Hill. Flynn had his arms around Shaw’s waist and his chin on the spymaster’s shoulder. Flynn’s backpack was crammed with all manner of traps, poisons, bombs, and caltrops. He tightened the sword frog around the new blade hanging from his waist. “Can’t wait to try my Cutlass of Exceptional Undead Fending-Offing.”

“That’s not the name—”

“It’s the name now, too late.”

“Just don’t confuse the potions with your flask,” Shaw warned him.

“I don’t know, mate, might be the right thing to do. They do call it ‘liquid courage.’”

Shaw’s voice was unusually warm. “I don’t think you’ll need it.”

Flynn blinked. *Had Shaw just . . . ?*

But the spymaster was all duty in the next heartbeat. “We may be heavily protected, but there’s going to be a lot of wild undead out there. Many of them won’t be stopped by a blade—or your cutting remarks.”

Flynn stealthily reached for his flask, accidentally stealing a glance down. Duskwood’s thick tree canopy hid most of what was going on along the roads. But not all of it. The road was *moving*.

It was as though a dam had been broken. Bodies ungentled by the soft light of the moon surged toward Darkshire. Here and there were patches of light, but that offered no comfort. If the flood was truly composed of animated corpses, it would take a miracle to turn the tide.



“Do we *have* to follow the road?” he asked Shaw very casually, but the cracking of his voice betrayed him.

“Let’s move a bit north,” Shaw said. He sounded like he hadn’t noticed the chip in Flynn’s courage, and the swashbuckler was grateful. The gryphon climbed higher into the sky, slowly careening over a mesh of trees that seemed significantly more alive than the rest. This time, when he glanced down again, Flynn saw a soft blue glow that looked nothing like the bobbing specters. A white paved road, gleaming in the moonlight, led up to the area, and Flynn felt his apprehension recede ever so slightly.

“What’s that?” he asked, with a pointed finger.

“The Twilight Grove,” Shaw said. “I thought it would do us both some good to glimpse something soothing before heading into the fray.”

Flynn catalogued the sentiment as his eyes caught a shimmering blue light creeping through some of the dense brush. It radiated from what looked like the edge of a tranquil pool. “I think I’ve seen one of those before . . . that’s a moonwell, right? A night elf thing?”

“Yes. Moonwells are sacred to their goddess, Elune. The waters have healing properties. Very calming places.”

“Calm sounds brilliant. I propose that, for our next adventure, we forget about the adventuring part and just head to a moonwell.”

“I did promise we’d go somewhere peaceful after our last mishap, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but you’re forgetting that *this* mishap is technically all mine.”

Shaw flashed one of his rare smiles. “So, moonwell it is, for our next adventure. But for now”—Shaw’s voice shifted into its customary cool tone—“we’re almost at Raven Hill.”

“No worries, mate,” Flynn said as the gryphon descended. “I am totally ready for this.”



*Tides save me, I am not ready for this.*

Shaw considered their landing site to be a safe distance away from the cemetery proper. Flynn rather thought that Kul Tiras might be a better definition of “safe distance,” but said nothing. Shaw released the gryphon, letting it return to Darkshire. Flynn envied it.

It had been bad enough glimpsing the undead from the beast’s back, but the throngs along the roads had been a chummy gathering compared to the numbers here.

“Remember,” Shaw said, “these are feral undead. They operate on instinct, not intellect.”

Flynn straightened. “Couple of rogues like us will sneak right past them! Er . . . where are we sneaking to?”

“Forlorn Rowe, where the torch was last seen. Might find a clue as to what happened.”

Flynn watched as Shaw chose his cover carefully and disappeared from view. Flynn did the same with the practiced skill of a pastry-stealing child hiding from a parent. Slowly, Flynn followed the spymaster, both moving so carefully that scarcely a blade of grass bent beneath them. Up close, the wild undead were even worse than Flynn’s imagination. Everything in him screamed against the wrongness of beholding putrefying, spongy organs and naked bones outside the skin; his stomach roiled at the reek of decay. But he kept his focus—and his breakfast. Shaw needed him at his best right now, so that’s what he would be.

“Ramshackle” was the kindest word to describe the house, which looked every bit like a lich once called it home. Shaw pointed to a post near the door surrounded by some kind of ritual circle. The protective ring had been breached, as was evidenced by—

“Footprints,” Shaw whispered. “But not just any footprints. See how the grass is withered?”

But Flynn couldn’t concentrate on the footprints. Or even on Shaw. He had already found what fiend could make the ground rot beneath her feet.

She was human . . . or had been, once. She was swathed in a gray robe that appeared stained with dirt, blood, and other things too distressing to contemplate. Her hood was down, revealing wind-tangled black hair. The stranger's face was sunken and discolored as if she were dead herself. But somehow, Flynn didn't think so. Her eyes glowed a sickly green hue, and he realized that wherever she stepped, the grass crackled and turned brown.

*Well, that's one mystery solved.*

Two ghosts escorted her, drifting about, forming a sort of swirling, protective barrier. Their faces were bloated like drowned corpses bobbing to the surface before disappearing beneath the unforgiving waves; a sight Flynn had beheld far too often. Other unnatural things fell in line beside her, as if by an unspoken order. The rest continued to amble about with neither purpose nor thought.

But there was one other thing, one humiliating, heartbreaking thing, about the image before him: the sorceress—or necromancer, whatever flavor of awful she was—carried a slender, silver-handled relic with a metal halo encircling white fire. It could only be the Torch of Holy Flame.

A hand fell on his shoulder.

Flynn almost jumped out of his skin, but it was only Shaw. "She can't sense us," Shaw whispered. "If she did . . . we'd know. We have to follow her and find out what she wants with the torch. See that cloth wrapped around the hilt? Looks like she can't touch it directly, which is good news for us."

Their quarry headed for a large structure of carved white stone. She stood before the entrance for a moment, then descended the stone steps into the sepulchral depths below.

"Do I want to ask where she's going?"

Shaw didn't answer at once. Instead he turned to Flynn, looking him right in the eye. "Into the catacombs," Shaw said, his voice steady and calm. "She will likely be at her strongest there. It's sensible that she'd go where she has access to plenty of bodies."

Dark, sickly tendrils snaked their way up the torch's silvery hilt, and its flame flickered madly, shifting from a soothing golden-white to a darker purple-black hue, looking like an ugly bruise.

Flynn realized he was trembling. He wanted to kick himself. He'd been doing so well, keeping a grip and staying brave for Shaw. And now, this.

"Mate . . . not helping," he said, with a feeble attempt at a laugh.

"You don't need help, Fairwind," Shaw said. "You've taken everything this Light-forsaken place could throw at us and yet *here you are*. I know there's a lot of them. But that doesn't matter. We only have to do one thing: get that torch to safety. I want you to know I've got your back. And . . . I know you've got mine."

Wordlessly, Flynn nodded. Of course he had Shaw's back. He'd face a dragon for him. What, indeed, were a few—many?—creatures that weren't even alive?

"I do, mate," he managed. "That torch is as good as ours. Let's go kick their bony arses."

And it was he, Flynn Fairwind, who entered the catacombs first.

They sneaked through the top floor without rousing any of the undead. *Couple dozen or so*, Flynn told himself. *Good on you, mate*. Then another floor. Slowly, they made their way down into the musty depths of the serpentine tombs. The light radiating from the stairwell that led to the deepest level told the tale. So carefully did they descend that the brazier flames didn't even waver with their passing.

The sorceress stood with her back to them, whispering unknown but unsettling words, in the center of a circle of white powder. *Bones*, Flynn

thought. *With my luck, I bet it's bones.*

The Torch of Holy Flame hovered before her. As Flynn watched, it became clear that she was asserting her will upon it. Dark, sickly tendrils snaked their way up the torch's silvery hilt, and its flame flickered madly, shifting from a soothing golden-white to a darker purple-black hue, looking like an ugly bruise. Flynn realized he was watching a battle unfold between the will of the holy and the unholy—a battle certainly for the future of this troubled land of Duskwood, and maybe beyond.

As if sensing the thought, the sorceress paused her chanting. Her head turned slowly to the left, and a revolting smile curved what was left of her lips.

"I know you're here," she said in a ghastly, hollow voice.

Shaw glanced at Flynn and shook his head ever so slightly: *Stay hidden.* Then he straightened, permitting the necromancer to see him. The spymaster had his poison-slicked daggers at the ready.

"What is your purpose?" Shaw challenged. "Have you brought Morbent Fel back to torment the people of Duskwood?"

The woman gave a throaty laugh. "Ah, Morbent Fel! That's almost endearing. No, Spymaster, I've no interest in that sack of compost. Nor is my vision so narrow."

Quietly, Flynn slipped his hand into the side pocket of his bag, hoping his bone dust hunch was right. He delicately knelt near the ritual circle and slowly withdrew his flask. Whispering an apology to the beautiful liquor inside, he tipped the container over and let the rum begin to carry the ground bone away.

"*Vision?*" sneered Shaw. "So, you're dangerous *and* delusional."

Flynn again looked at the torch. A necromancer . . . a tainted artifact . . . Oh, this wasn't sounding good at all.

The necromancer merely smiled. "I've seen things changing, Spymaster. Visions in the rot. Decomposition making truth plain. Those close to life and unlife can feel it in our marrow. Death comes for the

soul of this world, and I intend to prepare for its arrival. I've my sights on finer cities than Duskwood, but it's always fun to visit one's old haunts." She gestured, and her spirits swirled about her like puppets on a string. "So many dead things to play with. Maybe I'll take the king's spymaster with me when I head to Stormwind. I'll turn you against everything—and everyone—you love. You're no stranger to killing, are you, Spymaster Shaw? You'll adapt easily."

The last bit of bone dust yielded. The circle was broken. Flynn lunged forward, slashing with his swords, doing his best to sever the necromancer's head from her body. But she dodged at the last second, slicing up with her own dagger as a series of ugly words fell from her mouth. Flynn thought he could even hear the *whoosh* as the blade barely missed him.

"Fairwind, the torch!" Shaw shouted, springing at the necromancer. He slipped a garrote over her throat and twisted. One black-nailed hand flew to her neck, trying to pry off the wire, gasping rather than speaking. Flynn reached over the necromancer's flailing form, bracing himself for whatever might happen, and snatched the artifact out of the air.

Time seemed to stop. Instead of upheaval, he felt ease settle upon him. Lightness. *Hope*. But the necromancer's desecration had left its mark. The Torch of Holy Flame hadn't been corrupted yet, but it was no longer the weapon against evil it had once been. Despair came crashing down. Flynn was no priest. Neither was Shaw. They were just two men trying their hardest to make the world a little better. A little safer. Flynn could almost feel the torch, polluted by the necromancer's darkness though it was, struggling to regain its former sanctity.

All this and more he felt in the span of a single heartbeat, and the thought popped into his head: *I can't fix you . . . but I know what might.*

Flynn bellowed with all his strength, "Shaw! Time for our next adventure!"

The phrase was so bizarre that it distracted Shaw just for the instant

it took the necromancer to free herself. She gasped and spat out a flurry of guttural sounds.

Shaw grunted and stumbled, clutching his chest, but the spymaster still managed to find his stride beside him. Together, they hurried toward the entrance. Up ahead Flynn could hear things moving and shuffling, things that ought to have been dead several times over. The necromancer had clearly recovered sufficiently to issue more commands.

“Adventure, huh?” Shaw said, panting as he ran. “Pray, what do you think the moonwell has for us?”

“Rum’s good for cleaning wounds; I figure maybe a magic torch needs a magic something to cleanse it?”

“You’re both brilliant and absolutely mad.”

There was no time for fear, only instinct, and Flynn sprang into the fray without hesitation. One hand clutched the torch, the other his cutlass. He slashed furiously, shattering ribcages, sending skulls flying. When a corpse charged him, all oozing flesh and sharp teeth, Flynn kicked out and sent



it stumbling backward into Shaw's pair of daggers. Flynn tossed his pack to Shaw before they raced up the next set of stairs. Every monster they'd eluded earlier was waiting for them.

"The torch!" Shaw yelled, turning to fight three of the slobbering things.

Flynn waved the torch at the feral undead. Scraps of clothing caught fire, and the dead recoiled, screeching, from the Holy Light. Flynn's heart surged—despite the half-completed ritual, the torch *wasn't* beyond reclaiming! Clearing a path as best they could, the two emerged into the fetid night air and raced toward the cemetery gates.

Behind him, Flynn heard a small explosion as a poison bomb went off, and he grinned. Shaw was using Flynn's bag of tricks, treats, and traps. Caltrops. Small incendiary devices. Vials of poison. Blinding powder. Over Shaw's shoulder they went, and Flynn could tell that at least some of them were having the desired effect.

Flynn heard Shaw's labored breathing as the other man caught up with him. Flynn glanced at him—and froze with horror.

"Shaw . . . your *face*—"

The spymaster's face was slick with sweat, pale in the moonlight . . . and showing small, ugly pustules.

*Tides, no, please, no, not him—*

"Gryphons!" shouted Shaw, pointing toward a blur of movement. Flynn felt almost dizzy with relief. While the watchers had either escaped or joined the wave of wild undead, one of their gryphons was biting frantically at its tether.

"Hello, beautiful," Flynn shouted at it, grabbing the rope. "Half a moment and we *all* get out of here!"

Shaw clambered into the saddle. Flynn cut the gryphon's tether, and she sprang skyward so quickly that he didn't quite make it onto her back and, for one horrible second, was convinced that the beast was going to leave him behind.

But Shaw was having none of that. Ill as he was, the spymaster seized



Flynn's wrist, then swung him toward the front of the gryphon. Her claws opened to catch him, and then next thing he knew, Flynn was being borne aloft.

He glanced down at the rapidly dwindling forms of the undead and made a rude gesture. "Good riddance to bad rubbish . . . *Shaw!* Behind us!"

The necromancer was following them.

The thing she rode was even more terrifying than the shuffling horrors they'd escaped. It glowed with the same sickly aura as its mistress, barely held together by a rotting hide, a crumbling equine skeleton, and necromancy. But no horse Flynn had ever seen had wings. The nightmare steed was a revolting mishmash of everything hideous and unnatural: and the worst part was, it was gaining on them.

The gryphon's wings beat faster. Flynn tore his gaze away from their pursuer and looked down. There it was, drawing closer with each wingbeat: the moonwell. Serene, beautiful, and the answer to Flynn's prayers.

A bright green blast clipped the beast's wing as it came down to land. The gryphon spiraled, and Flynn and Shaw fell off its back. Then it was gone again, limping for Darkshire.

"*Shaw!*" Flynn's voice broke on the word. The sores on the spymaster's face and chest had multiplied. Flynn reached out to steady him, but Shaw pushed him away, firmly but gently.

"I'll keep her busy. You purge the torch. It's the only hope any of us have now."

He turned away, drawing his daggers, looking up, his blistering face resolute as the necromancer descended with a flapping of tattered wings and foul air.

Flynn thought he'd never seen anything braver in his life.

It took every ounce of will he possessed to turn away from Shaw and toward the moonwell. *This will work. It has to.* The alternative was unthinkable.

Flynn dove straight into the blue, beckoning water, then surfaced but barely slowed, splashing and slogging heedlessly, almost sobbing for

breath. He clutched the torch in one hand, and with the other, cupped some of the precious fluid, bathing the torch's hilt. *Come on, come on . . .*

The flames flickered, flared white for just an instant, then subsided to the dark hue. Again and again, Flynn splashed it, his attention not on the torch but on Shaw and the monster he was now fighting.

Shaw had hurt her, back in the catacombs; Flynn saw the thin line of black, syrupy ooze along her throat. She was slower now too, but so was Shaw. Gore spattered his armor, some of it too red and fresh to be from the corpses. The necromancer was speaking, but not spells. Not this time.

Shaw froze for an instant and turned his head to look at Flynn.

It was dark, and the glance brief. Flynn couldn't read Shaw's expression clearly. But something the sorceress said had gutted the man, and he now stared at Flynn with a look of such helplessness and torment that Flynn's heart almost stopped. What had she said to so pierce Shaw's stoic demeanor? To paint such a panicked look on his face?

The woman followed Shaw's gaze and laughed. How childlike they must seem to her. "Dark wings take away all that you hold most dear," she gurgled at Shaw. "And what a day that will—"

Roaring in anguish, Flynn plunged the torch into the moonwell.

The flame went out.

Horror washed over him. Then, a new sensation surged up his arm, touching his heart. Joy. Courage. Conviction. And, still submerged in the night-elven moonwell, the torch burst into blazing, white, holy flame.

Flynn whooped and leaped from the well, bearing down on the necromancer, savoring the look on her hideous face as he set her cloak ablaze. She gasped, cringing back from it even as she shrieked. The flames easily consumed her, devouring body, hair, and clothing alike.

Her skin began to slip off in oily folds. Her cries turned into a wet cough and then silence as both of Shaw's poisoned blades pierced her neck. The necromancer tumbled to the ground, finally as dead as the corpses she once commanded.

The other man was wounded,  
bloody, and exhausted, but whole.  
Flynn stumbled toward him, clasping  
him as if he would never let go.

Panting, Flynn turned his eyes to Shaw.

The other man was wounded, bloody, and exhausted, but whole. Flynn stumbled toward him, clasping him as if he would never let go.



Flynn smiled as he regarded the torch, safely returned to its place of watchful care. It would continue to guard Forlorn Rowe, chasing away dark memories and offering soothing brightness in their stead.

Shaw had located a watcher on patrol and sent her back to Darkshire with the good news that at least one servant of darkness had been halted, and the Torch of Holy Flame had been recovered and purified.

“Captain Fairwind?” Commander Ladimore leaned heavily on Watcher Cutford’s arm. She moved slowly, but she was smiling. Like Shaw, any trace of the unnatural illness that had threatened to consume her was gone.

“Duskwood owes you both a great debt,” she said. “You saved many lives here tonight, including mine. If you hadn’t stopped that necromancer from corrupting the torch . . . It wouldn’t be the first time an entire region had fallen to the undead.”

“Your watchers did the hard work,” Shaw said. “Because of their actions, deaths in Darkshire were minimal. I suggest doubling patrols; I’ll send extra guards from Stormwind to help. The necromancer implied that the threat wasn’t over.” He regarded the torch speculatively. “And keep a close eye on this. A very close eye.”

“Well, mate,” Flynn said, “after all this, let’s clean ourselves up and

celebrate a job well done!”

“You go ahead,” Shaw said. “I have some things to finish up here.”

“Oh,” Flynn said. “Right, right. But, ah . . . we made a pretty good team, didn’t we?”

“We did,” Shaw said. He looked at Flynn for a moment, then nodded, as if reaching a decision. Then he turned to Commander Ladimore.

“Commander, a word?”



Flynn returned to the inn, bathed, and changed clothes with his spirits low. He half expected Shaw to be late, once again. But when Flynn went downstairs, Shaw was already washed and had claimed two seats by the fire.

“You clean up nicely,” he said to Shaw, who did, in fact, clean up very nicely indeed.

“I have a gift from the Night Watch,” Shaw said as Flynn settled into his seat. “We didn’t get to complete our treasure hunt, so I gave them your map. They found this. I think you’ll find it invaluable.”

“Ooh!” Flynn’s eyes lit up as he opened the burlap-wrapped present. He started laughing as he held up a hand mirror with an oddly lustrous gleam. “Perfect for our close shave.” He loved a good pun. “And invaluable indeed. I love looking at handsome men.”

Shaw didn’t respond. Flynn’s grin faded. “What is it?”

“I’ve been thinking,” Shaw said, staring into the fire. “Sarah was right. Tonight could have been a disaster. The torch is a powerful artifact, and there are plenty of similar objects—many of them, mercifully, safely locked away. Occasionally, the king sends me to check up on them. The world is currently about as quiet as Azeroth is likely to get. Now would be a perfect time for me to take a thorough inspection trip, catalogue everything we know about.” He lifted his green gaze to Flynn’s, and Flynn felt his heart drop.

Shaw smiled. It was soft, and warm, and real, and it filled Flynn's very being. "Because," Shaw said, squeezing Flynn's hand, "I trust you."

"I'll be gone a long time. Tonight's events might look like a relaxing stroll. I'll be speaking to my contacts, some of whom are in deep cover, discussing state affairs. I'll be shown secret hiding places. Entrusted with the care of priceless artifacts. There will be caves, and enemies, and ghosts, and crypts. There's always the chance that I won't make it back alive."

Flynn felt a parting of ways coming and found he couldn't meet Shaw's eyes a moment longer. "Is this because of . . . well . . . when you were fighting that necromancer and I was trying to cleanse the torch, she said something. And you looked at me, such a look, Mathias, and she said something about dark wings and—"

Shaw reached over and grasped Flynn's hand tightly.

"I saw, Flynn. I saw everything. You didn't load our packs with rum, but with bandages and traps and weapons. You were kind enough to be with someone who was suffering and sharp enough to spot something deadly in time for us to fix it. Despite your abhorrence of the undead, you chose to face scores of them in one of the biggest cemeteries in the world. You fought a dangerous being, and you figured out how to defeat her . . . and save my life. I'm not saying goodbye, Flynn. I'm asking you to come with me."

Flynn's eyes were wide with hope and disbelief. "Me? Why me?"

Shaw smiled. It was soft, and warm, and real, and it filled Flynn's very being. "Because," Shaw said, squeezing Flynn's hand, "I trust you."

There were many wonderful three-word phrases one longed to hear. *I love you. That's good rum. You're so gorgeous.* But in this moment, he'd take Mathias Shaw's "I trust you" over any other phrase in this whole bloody world.

He sat, grinning stupidly for a moment, then cleared his throat and said with exaggerated nonchalance, "I knew you were going to ask me to come along."

Shaw's eyes danced. "Really?"

"Oh yes, quite." Flynn tugged gently on Shaw's hand. "I mean," he continued, leaning forward, his voice growing soft as Shaw closed the distance between them, "whyever would you want to travel . . . without a fair wind?"

"I can't imagine," Shaw whispered, and kissed him.

# credits

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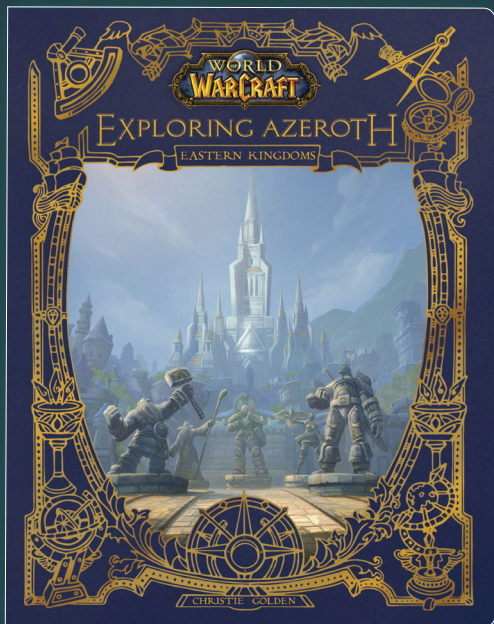
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What other powerful artifacts and terrible secrets will the spymaster and swashbuckler uncover? Journey alongside our beloved duo as they dive into the history of their homeland in *Exploring Azeroth: The Eastern Kingdoms* by Christie Golden!