Eye of the Storm

by OlegGunnarsson

Summary

It came to them in dreams. Hints of worlds beyond their own. Of far-flung heroes and epic, eternal battles. And of a place called the Nexus. When a warrior from another world appears out of nowhere, the heroes of Overwatch realize that their dreams are real - and that the nexus they have dreamed about is beginning to invade their world.
Winston loved spending time with his newly reunited family. But sometimes he longed for the quiet of his lab.

These late nights were when he got his best work done. Athena would scold him gently for staying up and working into the wee hours, of course, but sometimes there were questions that he had to answer.

And if he did get too tired, he had a cot in the storage room and his desk could support him if he laid his head down for a nap. Not that that had ever happened, of course.

This night, however, the long hours working on mech designs for Hana caught up with him. With a yawn, Winston put his head down on his desk and let his eyes close.

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“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Winston of Overwatch.”

The voice was quiet and pleasant, and had the sound of a greeting given to an old friend. It didn’t set him on edge, as it probably should have, what with his lab being locked for the night and Athena warning him of no visitors. Speaking of which…

“Athena?” he said. The AI made no response.

“I wanted to have a chat with you, if you have a moment. I didn’t want anyone interrupting us.” Winston could almost hear the smile in her voice. “I didn’t mean to alarm you, but it wasn’t easy finding this time.”

As Winston slowly rotated in his chair, his eyes fell on a very young woman. A child, perhaps? No, but she is small, he thought. But one look at her eyes told the tale - whatever her appearance, she had seen and experienced many things.

She stood easily, smiling up at him. She was wearing some sort of armor, and its gold color complemented her short blonde hair. She appeared to be waiting for him, and now he saw more than age in her eyes - he saw patience.

Winston glanced at the window of his lab, and saw that it was still night. There was no moon tonight, but the stars over Gibraltar were always brilliant. He saw but a few clouds blocking the view. In the distance, he could see the steady glow of a supply aircraft’s running lights, as it hung in the air. Waiting for clearance to land, I guess.

...except that a fixed wing aircraft wouldn’t hover in the air like that. And its running lights would blink. Winston looked toward the landing field, and saw the white Overwatch flag standing proudly - frozen in the air.
“A woman I know,” he began, “has the ability to move through time. She can only do it for very brief intervals, you understand, and even then she needs a great deal of technology to make it work. Just to exist normally, in a fixed timestream, Lena needs to wear a device.”

Winston looked back to his visitor. “I know time can be manipulated. I’ve done it. But that was nibbling around the edges of the equation, compared to this.” Gesturing to the aircraft, he continued. “That plane is at least 2 kilometers away. No one can create an effect that pronounced. Not without enormous power reserves and the high risk of catastrophic failure.”

His visitor smiled. “The trick to dealing with high magic is to deal with it as little as possible.” A small hand pointed to the clock on the wall, and Winston watched as it held still. “Which would be simpler, Winston? To freeze a large area in time but protect one room from the effect? Or to place one room in its own timestream, divorced from the world, to allow two beings a few minutes to talk?”

Winston regarded her, unsure how to answer.

“My world does not deal much with science. We rely on magic and ancient wisdom and forces quite different from those of your world. But I have seen how your science works. You don’t see wonders and say that they cannot happen, you see them and say ‘This does not make sense to me and I cannot yet understand it.’”

“Winston, the word ‘yet’ is the most important one there. Because you will understand what is happening, in time. First you will learn of the what, and then you will work your way past who and how, before you and I - together - determine why.”

“What about when and where?” Winston asks, almost without thinking.

The woman giggled, and Winston could not help but smile. “That's the easy one. In about seven minutes, your friend Hanzo will set off an alarm in his room. That is when it begins.”

She reached out a tiny hand. Winston took her hand, shaking it gently.

“My name is Chromie,” she said. “And we need your help.”

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“Winston!” The voice brought his head up from the desk with a start. “Winston, wake up!”

“I’m here, Athena.” he said, shaking off the sleep. Had he just been talking to someone? “What’s going on?”

The AI brought up a display of the compound. “We have a perimeter alarm in the North Barracks, Winston.” A light began blinking in one of the quarters assigned to the Overwatch team.

Winston didn’t need to check to see which room it was. “Hanzo?”

Athena hesitated slightly before responding, which - for her - was as telling as a gasp. “Affirmative. Were you expecting an incident with Hanzo Shimada this evening, Winston?”

That stopped him in his tracks, halfway to the door. How did I know…? No time for that, though.
“Athena, make sure Angela is up. And tell Medical to prepare for two incoming wounded.”

“Already done. Two wounded, Winston?”

In the hallway, Winston didn’t pause. “Yes. Hanzo is injured as well.” He rounded the corner and saw Mercy coming from the other direction. *So someone else was up late, I see?*

“Winston,” she began.

“I know, Angela. I know. We’ll figure it out.” He entered the residential hallway too quickly to register the look of shock on the doctor’s face.

Approaching the room, Winston saw that the door was still closed. “Athena, override the lock on Hanzo’s door, please.”

“Override,” he heard, and the door slid out of his way. Beyond it, Winston came to a halt. Hanzo Shimada was standing there, in his quarters. He was wounded, and Winston could see what looked like a burn mark on the archer’s shoulder. None of that was as remarkable as the woman in Hanzo’s arms.

She was a study in gold and red. Her pristine gold armor was accented by the long red cloak hanging from her shoulders. Her red hair was framed by some sort of crown or headdress. Everything showed signs of damage, the dirt of the battlefield. The woman herself was unconscious, and even in the dim light of Hanzo’s quarters, Winston could see she had been injured.

“Hanzo? What happened?” asked Winston. The archer blinked twice, looking at him without seeing him. It was as if he was recognizing a friend he had not seen in some time. Winston heard Angela arrive behind him, and held a hand up.

Finally, Hanzo focused on Winston’s eyes. “Koko wa dokodesu ka?” he said. *Where am I?*

“You’re at Gibraltar. You’re home.” Winston took a small step forward, and nodded toward to woman. “Angela is here, and I’m betting she’ll want to make sure you and Allie are ok."

“Alexstrasza” Hanzo said, absently. “Her name is Alexstrasza.” Winston ignored the gasp from Angela at the mention of that name.

“Well then. Why don’t you let me take Alexstrasza to medical while Angela has a look at you?” Winston held out his arms.

“I will not leave her. She did not leave me.”

“We’ll all go, then.” Hanzo turned to look at Angela, as if seeing her for the first time. The tone of her voice had been that of Doctor Ziegler, rather than their friend Angela - and it brooked no arguments. After a moment, Hanzo nodded, and they moved to the hallway.

By the time they left Hanzo’s quarters, three members of the medical team had arrived with a gurney. Hanzo laid the woman down gently, then went with the team as they took her to the medical bay. Before Winston could follow, Angela’s hand caught his arm. He looked down at the Doctor.

“You knew her name.” she said. “A woman appears out of nowhere and you knew who she was and where she would be. How? Have you seen her before?"

Winston smiled a tired smile. “Never. But she has a friend, and that friend calls her ‘Allie’. It was she
who told me to come.” He remembered the gnome’s voice, as she had explained what was about to happen.

“Of course I want to help Hanzo and Allie,” Chromie had said. “We dragons have to take care of each other.”

“This is important. Did she appear to you in a dream, Winston?” When she saw the look of surprise on Winston’s face, Angela nodded. “I thought so.”

Now the pieces clicked into place for Winston as well. “You gasped when Hanzo said her full name. You had heard it before. What does that mean?”

Angela sighed, before starting the walk to the Medical Bay and her patients.

“It means that this is just beginning.”

Chapter End Notes

Hanzstraza got me again. Feedback is, as always, welcome.
Diagnosis

Chapter Summary

Winston reviews his data. Angela reviews her sanity.

Tracer found Winston in Doctor Ziegler's office, tapping away at Angela's workstation. He glanced at her when the door opened, before returning his focus to the display.

_I haven't seen him this upset in years_, she thought. Wordlessly, she took a seat on the leather couch against the far wall, next to the office door. Pictures lined the walls, and the single desk lamp sent odd shadows playing across them.

It took three sips of tea before she heard a deep grunt of frustration from her friend. "Fine, let me have it."

"I didn't say anything."

Now he looked her in the eye. "Jack is convinced that I've caused a security breach, and he's half a heartbeat from calling a lockdown. Angela knew before it happened, but wasn't expecting anything like this. Hanzo is still in shock. And Ana - she hasn't said a word to me. But when she saw me in the med bay, she was looking at me as if she'd never seen me before." An error beep sounded from the workstation, causing Winston to shove the keyboard across the desk before he smashed the thing to bits.

"And now you're here. So go ahead, tell me I'm going crazy."

Tracer shrugged. "Are you?"

"No!" he growled. Then he saw the look on Tracer's face, and took a deep breath. "No, I'm not going crazy. But I can't explain what I saw."

She took another sip of her tea before responding. "So when you have a science thing that you can't figure out, what do you do? What did you teach me?"

Winston smiled at that - it was her way of calming him down, getting him to focus on the science. And the truth of it was, there was little else that could reliably calm him beyond science. Before he had been anything else, before he had devoted himself to anything, his first allegiance had been to knowledge.

"That's better, big guy." said Tracer, returning his smile. "Okay, out with it. What's step one?"

Winston sighed. "Figure out what you do know."

Tracer raised her cup in salute. "So what do you know? What are you sure of?"

Now he paused. Where to begin?

"Lena, the strangest thing that happened to me tonight was when I had a timewalking gnomish dragon from another universe explain Occam's Razor to me using high magic."
Now it was Tracer's turn to stare at him. Then she chuckled. "Pull the other one."

Winston raised a hand. "I swear to you, I'm being honest. To the best of my knowledge, right before the alarm went off I was having a conversation in my lab with a woman who claimed to be a dragon from another world. She warned me that Hanzo would need help, and that he would have a companion from her world who would need help, too."

Tracer followed his words closely, and some of the worry remained on her face as Winston described his visitor. "A dragon?"

"She said she was a bronze dragon, but that she took the form of a female gnome because it was more fun that way."

"Was she blonde?"

What.

"Lena, how could you... You've had dreams too, haven't you?"

A sigh. "Nothing I could pin down. But I really haven't been sleeping well for a few weeks, on and off. I figured this thing needed an adjustment or something, but hadn't made it to your lab." She tapped a hand on the glowing device strapped to her chest. "But put it this way - if I told Angela that I was dreaming of gnomes and dragons, she'd put me in a soft room."

"Don't be so sure." Dr. Ziegler replied, as she entered her office. Winston started to rise, before she held up a hand. They watched as she sat tiredly on the other end of the couch.

"How are they?" Tracer asked.

Angela stretched her arms out, letting some of the stress of the evening bleed away. "Hanzo's going to be fine. Other than some superficial injuries, most of his troubles are psychological. It's quite a shock, to find that the woman you've been dreaming about on and off for weeks is not only real but has appeared as if from nowhere." Now she looked at Winston. "But I'm thinking you know something about that, yes?"

Winston nodded. "Lena was just telling me that she has had dreams involving the same woman who told me what was going to happen with Hanzo. That can't be a coincidence."

"No indeed. That's one point of data. Here's another - the woman with Hanzo? Alexstrasza? He has been dreaming of her for weeks, now. He drew a portrait of her and everything. And now she appears?" Angela shook her head. "This isn't just fatigue."

"How is Alexstrasza?" Tracer asked. "Is she awake?"

"She is battered and bruised, but I guess that she will be fine."

Winston raised an eyebrow at that. "You're not one for guessing, Angela."

"Ja. But every test I performed on her gave me contradictory results." She rubbed her eyes, the fatigue catching up with her now. "For instance, her body temperature oscillates hot and cold, as if she is cold-blooded - but her metabolism generates extra heat to compensate. Under other circumstances, it'd be remarkable on its own. And speaking of metabolism - her bones look like they have been broken repeatedly, but healed perfectly, as if it's a regular occurrence. That headdress? We tried to remove it, but could not - because it's not headgear, it's her head."
"So those horns...?"

"Near as I can tell, Winston, she was born with those. But they show the same evidence of breaks as the rest of her. I can't explain it."

Winston leaned forward, one arm across the desk. "Did you run a DNA profile?"

"Na sicher, Winston." Of Course. "But her DNA was unlike any I have ever seen. It has what looks like a baseline human-ish form, only the chromosomes are unusual. And there is another layer on top of that, as if the code is rewritten at the molecular level."

"Who is this woman?" Tracer asked, almost to herself. A soft beeping drew Angela's gaze to her wrist, where a display showed her patient. With a sigh, the doctor rose.

"You can ask her yourself, Lena. She is awake."

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When her eyes finally opened, the first thing Alexstrasza saw was Hanzo, standing near the door of a featureless white room. She could not read his expression, except that it was clear he had not gotten any rest. As she stirred, he stepped closer to the foot of the bed.

"Our medics examined you, briefly. They said you would probably be fine once you got some rest." Now he smiled softly. "And what they cannot heal, I imagine you can manage."

Closing her eyes, Alexstrasza reached out in search of... anything, really. The voices of the dragonflight, the familiar life-forces of her world, even the low hum of the nexus' magic. And found nothing - just strangers, most of them human, in a castle built of steel she had never seen. She was surrounded by life, but not her life.

For all that, she still felt as if she were in a place of safety. Hanzo's lack of tension was one reason - his aura was cool and calm, despite his fatigue, and the added warmth of concern for her personal well-being was only a mild surprise. I'm getting old, she thought, if I'm so blind as to miss that. Beyond the sterile walls of the exam room, she felt concern and worry. No malice. No malevolent anger. Nothing that indicated a threat.

"Where are we, archer?" She asked, gently.

"Watchpoint Gibraltar," he said. She could see that my home had been on the tip of his tongue, but he had not said it. Interesting. "This is the headquarters of... well, of an alliance called Overwatch."

"And you protect those who cannot protect themselves, if I remember correctly." She said. He nodded slowly.

"We try to. They have not always succeeded. After a failed operation, this world's governments shut down the team." His eyes closed, and his voice sounded troubled. "About a year ago, one of us reactivated Overwatch. He saw the threat on the horizon, and summoned heroes old and new. My brother answered the call, and later convinced me to join as well."

Smiling at him, Alexstrasza closed her eyes. "It sounds very much as if your world is in good hands, Hanzo Shimada."
She sensed the three approaching the exam room before Hanzo heard their footsteps. Only one aura was familiar to her - but would she be familiar to Tracer? The other woman was a healer, one focused on the health of her charges to the exclusion of all other concerns. Alexstrasza could detect Mercy's trust in her team - if there was a threat here, they would protect her while she did her job.

The third aura had the flavor of a mage's library - the being's head was filled with arcane knowledge and high learning. She could tell that he had not been born on this world, but that he was from this realm. That would have to be a question for Hanzo, later. A light touch of gold in his aura spoke of Chromie's influence, which meant that part of the plan had worked, at least.

*Good,* she thought. *This will be easier.* Then, with a wince, she brought herself to more of a sitting position. Hanzo reached over for a control panel and pressed a button, and the bed adjusted itself to support her. She still wore her armor, which made laying about an uncomfortable prospect - but the bed helped tremendously.

The door slid open, and Dr. Angela Ziegler entered first. Walking to the head of the bed, she examined the readouts on the display. Tracer entered next, taking a chair near the door. She, too, said nothing.

As Winston entered, Hanzo saw Alexstrasza's eyes widen slightly. She had not been expecting him, apparently. He wondered if they had gorillas in her world. Certainly none like Winston, he thought.

"This is Doctor Angela Ziegler, whom we call Mercy." he began. "She is our chief medical officer, and was the doctor who examined you last night." Angela smiled at her, then continued to review readouts.

Hanzo nodded toward the door. "I believe you know Lena Oxton, whom we call Tracer." Both women nodded at this, then looked at each other. Tracer chuckled and leaned back in her chair.

"And this," Hanzo said, indicating Winston, "is our head scientist, Winston. He knew where we would be before we did."

"It wasn't just me, I had help." Looking at Alexstrasza, he paused before continuing. "Chromie sends her regards, Alexstrasza."

"Good." She said, closing her eyes. She made no effort to hide the relief she felt. "Winston, did Chromie tell you anything about what we were attempting?"

"She hinted that it might somehow destroy space and time. But probably wouldn't." He shrugged. "Since she can manipulate time on an unimaginable scale, I took her assurances at face value. Besides," he continued, indicating the archer standing beside her. "I don't believe Hanzo Shimada would knowingly put his entire universe at risk to rescue anyone."

Alexstrasza laughed at that. *Of course he would,* she thought, *if the stakes were high enough.* But out loud, she made no reply.

Winston studied her, absentmindedly pushing his glasses up his nose as he did so. If she had been born in Winston's universe, she would have thought that he had her under a microscope.

"Very well, then. Let me begin at the beginning..."
A threat to the Nexus emerges. The beginnings of a Plan take shape.

Alexstrasza was not accustomed to waiting.

Actually, that's not strictly true. Alexstrasza was not accustomed to being kept waiting. Her role as a protector of life was, by its very nature, one of waiting. She stood watch over the people of her world, protecting them as best she could.

Waiting, she could do. She had not been eager to attend a meeting in some nexus version of a forest, less so to do it at night. But to invite her to a secret meeting and not show up? One risked their life with such a slight.

Jim Raynor poked the small campfire with a stick. The warm glow was brighter than it might have been, back home. He assumed Alexstrasza was augmenting the fire with her own powers - another sign of her impatience.

"He'll be here." Jim said. "He takes some getting used to, but if he gives his word, you can take it to the bank."

"Where is here, Marshall Raynor?" she asked, turning to him. "That this is a forest, I don't doubt. But is it one from my world? From your own? Until some hapless creature stumbles upon us, we won't know. The whole point of the nexus is that it is a blending of place and form and force."

Their companion stirred from his meditation, opening his eyes. He remained seated on the ground, hands folded before him. "We know, my lady," the monk said, in his strange accent.

Alexstrasza took a deep breath, perhaps hoping to mimic the calm she sensed in Kharazim. "My apologies. But we all know the nature of the Nexus. We don't understand it, quite, but we know what it is. When a universe exists, it radiates energy, like a star radiates heat and light. The nexus absorbs the energies of many realms, and those energies take the form of places like this." She waved a hand at the forest around them. "If the nexus becomes unbalanced, it bleeds chaos back into the realms."

"So you have said. And the task falls to warriors such as we, to ensure that the balance is maintained. Thus are we plucked from our homes and our lives and placed here from time to time." The monk's eyes closed once more. "Some believe they fight in dreams, lending their energies in that way."

Nodding to Alexstrasza, he continued. "Others come here voluntarily, for their own purposes."

"And some," the voice in their minds sounded, "Some choose to serve chaos itself."

Kharazim rose in an instant, and Jim saw that Alexstrasza had readied a ball of fire. Chuckling, he
stood as well. "You can come out now."

A few feet in front of Alexstrasza, the air shimmered, and a being seemed to emerge from thin air. Clad in ornate golden armor, the creature had glowing blue eyes and grey skin. No mouth was apparent, and Alexstrasza realized that he had spoken to them via telepathy. He stood still, his four-fingered hands open.

"Greetings, Executor." said Jim Raynor. "This is Kharazim, a monk of Ivgorod. And this is Alexstrasza the Life-Binder, formerly of the Red Dragonflight."

Alexstrasza straightened, letting the fireball dissipate. "And who are you?"

"This is Tassadar," Jim replied. "High Templar of the Protoss, and one of the newest residents of the Nexus."

“He is from your world, then?”

“Raynor and I come from the same reality,” said Tassadar. “But not the same world. I was born many centuries before he, and on a different planet altogether. My people are a long-lived species.”

“Indeed.” the monk said, almost to himself. His eyes focused on Raynor, and the reserved expression on the man’s face was telling. “And yet…?”

Tassadar and Raynor shared a glance. Then Raynor looked at Kharazim and spoke. “And yet, near as I can tell, Tassadar died four years ago. He sacrificed himself to save millions. But when I wake up here in the nexus, who should be standing there?”

Alexstrasza gazes on the Protoss, her eyes narrowing. “Death holds little meaning here, as I’m sure you’ve learned. Why would one death matter in the grand scheme?”

Tassadar took a step toward her. “Because this death took place in our home realm. I entered a meditative state aboard my command vessel, at the head of a battle fleet, preparing to go into battle. A battle that, from Raynor’s telling, results in my death. But for him, that battle happened years ago.”

“So we are pulled from time as well as space,” remarked Kharazim. “Which means someone is doing the pulling.”

Now she caught on. “If we were just summoned here at random, it could be a natural event. But to pull someone out of time, and a very particular time and place at that - such a feat would require thought. Which means intelligence. Which means that there is a force behind the nexus.”

Tassadar nods, a very human gesture that looks odd on his alien form. “Raynor and I believe that either someone created the nexus for their own purposes, or that someone in the nexus has learned to harness its power for their own gain.” The glow of his eyes flared slightly, and though his voice carried little emotion, Alexstrasza could feel the rage boiling off of him. “In either case, they must be stopped.”

Before she could respond, she felt the change in Tassadar. She saw him turn, saw him raise a hand. To her surprise, a beam of pale blue energy shot forth, stabbing into the dark forest around them. Raynor had a pistol in his hand before they saw the explosion, and before they heard the whimpering beeps of a dying… something. Tassadar shifted his aim and fired again, and again an explosion was the result.

Tassadar rose slightly, floating forward. He made no noise whatsoever, but kept his hand aimed at
the burning wreckage. Alexstrasza and the others followed him. When they approached the fire, her eyes grew wide.

The wreckage was a pair of what could only have been robots. She had seen many such contraptions in the nexus, but none like these. The nearest one’s weapon was intact, and looked like it was more than half of the robot’s mass. One of their heads, a small rectangular device, had been blasted clear, and Kharazim was examining it.

Lowering his hand, Tassadar looked to Raynor. “These were of Earth manufacture.”

Kneeling beside the robot’s weapon, Raynor nodded. “Looks that way. But it’s not any Earth I know of. Even if it came over with the UED force, they never had technology like this. And have a look at this ammunition, these rounds are just metal. The UED would have depleted Uranium.”

The monk joined them, still holding the robot’s head. “This has writing on it.” Alexstrasza raised a hand and brought forth a small glowing ember. It floated in the air over the monk, and he held the head out. Under the soft glow of the light, the purple metal was unlike any she had seen before.


“The Nexus has claimed another world, James Raynor.” Tassadar regarded the destroyed robots. “And I believe we can use this opportunity to our advantage.”

Chapter End Notes

This is intended to be a pair of generic Omnic Bastions, not the actual Bastion himself.

In a very Asimovian way, this story seems to be writing itself in bits and pieces. I am as eager to see how it turns out as you are. Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Alexstrasza winces slightly and closed her eyes. She was still in some pain, and did not want to reveal her healing magic just yet. But she also wanted a chance to observe her audience without looking at them.

And she sensed that they believed her. Tracer, of course, had been to the nexus. She had met Raynor and Tassadar and the others, and knew that the tale was a true one. Hanzo as well - he knew the story already, and his mind had been elsewhere. Mercy had no opinion on the facts themselves, but only cared about how they posed a threat to her world.

Winston’s was the toughest aura to decipher. He had listened quietly, asking none of the questions that sprang to his mind. He asked for no clarifications, no finer points to supplement his data. Alexstrasza worried a little at this - Chromie had been firm about the fact that this one had to be convinced. If they had any hope, it ran through this man’s mind.

“Who is Athena?” Winston asked.

“Yes, Winston?” a voice came from the ceiling. It was a woman’s voice, calm and assured - though Alexstrasza could sense no one else monitoring them from elsewhere.

“Did you get all of that?”

“Confirmed. A transcript and analysis will be waiting for you in your lab.”

Winston was looking at Alexstrasza now, taking her measure. She held his gaze, seeing his mind as it came to a decision. He relaxed slightly as he spoke again. “Give me your summary, please.”

A slight hesitation, then the woman spoke. “Biometrics are imprecise due to the physiological differences noted by Doctor Ziegler. However, based on my analysis of the readings available, the woman known as ‘Alexstrasza the Dragon Queen’ is being truthful in her statements. She has every appearance of believing what she says.”

Winston nodded as the report continued, but kept his gaze on Alexstrasza. He was watching her reactions to Athena’s reactions, it seemed. Fair enough, Alexstrasza thought.

“The substance of the statement cannot be evaluated using data on hand. However, certain findings at Oxford and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory hint at atypical endothermic reactions in the upper atmosphere. These findings, when coupled with a detailed analysis of the total mass of the earth and its contents, might substantiate the existence of habitable and traversable extradimensional spaces of the type described. I note that no method for conducting such an analysis exists at the present time, except on a very small scale.”
Winston nodded again, as if that mouthful had made sense. Hanzo, meanwhile, cleared his throat and glared at the scientist.

“Further analysis suggests—” Winston cut her off at this point.

“Thank you, Athena. I agree with your read on the situation.” Now he looked at Mercy, who nodded to him. “Athena, monitor biometric readings for the prime team and command staff, and for Alexstrasza. Notify myself and Jack if anyone on that list departs the Watchpoint, in any manner and for any length of time.”

“Confirmed, Winston.”

Off Alexstrasza’s look, Winston shrugged. “Athena is vastly intelligent, which is why she runs this facility. And Overwatch, you might say.” That last got a chuckle from Tracer, the first sound she had made since Alexstrasza began telling her tale. “Athena believes that what you describe—another universe that receives energy and matter from our own—is possible. She even found evidence that might prove it.”

Now Alexstrasza smiled, though she was still unsure. “Athena sounds like a wise woman. I look forward to meeting her.”

“You already have.” Winston waved his hand around the room. “Athena is a digital intelligence embedded into the systems of this facility. If the Watchpoint had a mind, she would be it.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, your grace. I look forward to learning about your homeworld.” Now that she was not providing hard analysis, Athena’s tone was much more pleasant and conversational.

A building that speaks? She thought. At least she believes me, I think.

Now it was Mercy’s turn to clear her throat, and Winston turned to her. She said nothing, but pointed at the readouts on the display.

Winston nodded. “I get the impression that Chromie enjoys being enigmatic.” A smile from Alexstrasza was all the confirmation he needed. “Good, it’s not just me then. She did say, however, that time runs differently in each world, and that time spent in one does not mean that time elapses in another.”

“Which means,” said Mercy, “that you can all give this woman an opportunity to rest. She is still healing. These other worlds will keep, yes?”

Tracer stood, waving a hand to Alexstrasza before disappearing into the hallway. Winston turned to follow. “We’ll give you some time. I look forward to speaking with you later tonight.” It was not a typical thing to see a gorilla bow, but Winston pulled it off. “It has been a pleasure, your grace.” And with that, he was in the hallway as well.

Hanzo’s features were unreadable. Alexstrasza reached over and placed her hand on his, as it held the bed rail. “I’ll be fine, Archer. Go get some rest. You need it more than I do, I think.”

She could tell that he agreed, that he needed rest. But still he hesitated. Noble Hanzo, what have I done to you?

“Go. Doctor Ziegler will take care of me. And you know I am not entirely unskilled in that arena, myself.”

Hanzo sighed. “If you’re sure. I will not be far away if you need me. Athena can find me anywhere
in the complex.”

She smiled. “And I’m sure Doctor Ziegler can teach me how to do that. But later. For now - go rest.”

Even as he left the room, both women could see his reluctance. Mercy remarked on it as the door closed.

“I’ve never seen him quite like that.”

“He is a true noble, it seems. Has he always had such a sense of duty?”

Mercy nodded. “It has gotten him in trouble, though.”

“I can believe it.”

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When Doctor Ziegler continued to fuss over her test results, Alexstrasza decided to clear the air.

“You have concerns, Doctor?”

Mercy looked over. “I do. I don’t really like how your shoulder is healing, but I don’t know what to do about it. Your bone structure is not typical of the… I mean… you…”

Alexstrasza laughed. “Not typical for a human, you mean?”

Mercy looked annoyed. “Not to put too fine a point on it, but yes. That.”

“Easily explained - I’m not human. I am a dragon in humanoid form.” Off the doctor’s look, she chuckled. “I find that it is easier to meet with humans and elves and such if you can actually fit into the room with them.”

“Oh. Well, yes, I guess that makes sense.” Mercy pulled a chair over to bedside and sat down. “And as a dragon, you’re reptilian? How large, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Most dragons are reptilian, though obviously there are some differences. And I don’t know how you measure lengths here - but I’d probably fill this room to bursting, were I to transform.”

Angela’s eyes were wide, though she tried to hide her surprise. Then she smiled. “You know, of course, that Winston will not let you leave without demonstrating that? Growing to that size, it would throw half of the physical laws he knows out the window.”

A grin. “It would be my pleasure.”

She attempted to sit up a bit, and winced - she had moved wrong and her rib shot pain through her side. “Doctor, would you be offended if I tried something?”

“I’m out of ideas, go ahead. I didn’t want to try something that might do more harm than good.”

“A wise precaution. But I think this will work. You see, I also do some healing on my world.” With that, Alexstrasza raised her hand, and a soft green glow radiated from it. She held the hand over her left side, and the glow seemed to reach out to her injured side. As Mercy watched, the bruising faded, and Alexstrasza began to breathe a little easier.

She moved the hand to her shoulder, and it too began to heal. Mercy watched, fascinated.
“You know, we have technology that can do something very similar. But I didn’t want to risk it. Turns out I didn’t need to at all.”

Hearing Mercy, Alexstrasza looked over. “You’re not redundant, if that’s what you are thinking. I was unconscious for how many hours? And you didn’t know what I could do and what I needed. Yet you took in a stranger who appeared out of nowhere and kept her safe.” Smiling, she nodded to the doctor, as the healing glow faded. “For that, Angela Ziegler, I am in your debt.”

“It was nothing, your grace.”

“Though you can do another favor for me, if you are so inclined.”

Mercy raised an eyebrow. “What might that be?”

“Why does everyone call me ‘Your Grace’?”

Now it was Mercy’s turn to laugh out loud. “It’s my fault. When Hanzo started having trouble sleeping, we thought it was just nightmares. We didn’t know about the nexus or what have you. Then he told us about a woman he had dreamt about. He drew her picture and wrote her name at the bottom. The woman’s name was ‘Alexstrasza, the Dragon Queen.’”

As she put her tools away, Mercy continued grinning. “So when you showed up, we assumed you were royalty.”

Chapter End Notes

Two in a day. I’ve learned not to argue with myself when I get into writing mode. It helps that I want to read the rest of this as much as y’all do.

Comments always welcome.
First Impressions

Chapter Summary

Alexstrasza meets Hanzo, and they flirt (by trying to murder each other). Ana learns a secret.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A soft beep was the only indication that the training drone was active and searching for a target.

Ana Amari could see that the training ground was in use, and the drones were active, but she could not tell who had been using them. Perhaps someone had left them on? Or maybe they injured themselves and left in a hurry?

Her question was answered when an arrow planted itself in the drone’s chest. Without so much as a puff of smoke, the machine fell to the ground.

Shot directly in the control interface, Ana noted, impressed despite herself. And with the angle of that shot, he had to be one level above her. She walked out into the training zone.

“I thought you were supposed to be resting.” She said, simply. Behind her, she heard the soft noise of his landing. She turned to see the archer looking at her. His wounds were healed, but she could still see that haunted look about him.

“Sleep eluded me.” Hanzo said, as he walked toward her. “And always there was the fear that I would not wake up here.”

Ana said nothing. Instead, she removed his arrow from the fallen drone. When he approached, she held it out to him.

“It must have been that way for you, surely. When you began going to the Nexus.” When he saw her look of shock at his words, he smiled and took the arrow. “You don’t remember.”

Ana shook her head. “I remember snatches, moments from dreams. But now Lena tells me that they weren’t dreams, that I was really fighting monsters in some in-between dimension.” She looked him in the eye. “I don’t even know how long it’s been. None of the dreams felt new to me, as if they were repeated. That’s part of what made me think they were just dreams.”

“And then I appeared with a dragon woman in my arms.”

“And then, that, yes. In my dreams, I had seen warriors fight and die. Some of them died quite painfully.” She began walking slowly toward a bench along the far wall of the training area. “I will kill, without hesitation, if the cause is worth it. But I did not want to be a monster fighting monsters. And now I learn that it was real, that those deaths were real, those lives... “

He finished the thought. “You find it unsettling.”

Ana could only nod.
“If it makes you feel any better,” Hanzo said, “everyone who dies in the Nexus is revived. Death is… well, more of an inconvenience, really. And certainly it is temporary.”

“I have a hard time believing that.” She replied.

“Alexstrasza tells me that I died seven times before we came here. I don’t remember them, of course, because in the Nexus, memory is just as temporary. Most of the time.” Reaching the bench, he sat down at one end, looking out onto the grounds. Ana sat down nearby.

“And yet you are explaining how this Nexus works, as if you are the expert.” Ana met his gaze as he looked at her. “What changed?”

Hanzo closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. “Everything.”

-----

Alexstrasza gloried in the breeze across her scales, the bite of her wings in the fresh air.

It was not often that she found time to relax, here in the Nexus. And there had been little to calm her, in the past few days. This patchwork of worlds and realms had been in upheaval, as cities and temples and castles began appearing and rearranging what had come before.

Tassadar had suggested that they learn all they could about these new worlds. And with no battle to wage, Alexstrasza had jumped at the chance. Literally. The look on Jim Raynor’s face when she dropped off of the battlement was nearly as priceless as his scream when she flew up past them, in her true form.

Compared to her human form, it was harder to grin as a dragon - but she found a way.

Now she was flying East, toward the sun - even though days and seasons were irregular, the sun had to appear somewhere. That was their East.

It was the cherry blossoms that first caught her eye. In fields of mostly green and brown, the soft pink color was soothing. As she drew lower, she saw whole fields of the blossoms, all surrounding what appeared to be some sort of wooden temple. An old castle stood nearby, and it seemed as if this temple had been dropped beside it, as a child would drop a toy.

Flying lower still, Alexstrasza reached out with her magic, searching the temple for life. She did not know what to expect, or if there was anything to find. But she wanted to know what to expect before she explored the temple.

One aura was revealed to her - a human. His spirit was cold like steel, and it seemed to be in a perpetual state of strained readiness. There was also… regret?

Landing outside the gates, Alexstrasza shifted her form into her human guise. Her bones knitted themselves into shape, as her armor reformed itself about her. Her cloak appeared on her shoulders, flowing about her in the gentle breeze. With a deep breath, she began the short walk toward the temple. The Nexus, she knew, could create copies of real places from the realms, but seeing these ancient trees with their delicate blossoms was still a delight. She wondered at the sort of world that might produce such beauty.

A large wooden door stood open at the edge of the temple grounds, its surface carved in intricate designs. Entering the courtyard, she found the remains of an enormous bell. It was largely intact, but she could see where it had been exposed to fire. The wall it had crashed into was burned somewhat,
and she could see the scratches of some great beast.

*What battle was this?* she wondered. Looking to her right, she saw further signs of combat. Now fully alert, Alexstrasza followed the wreckage. It led her through an archway and into the large structure at the center of the temple.

Inside was a man. He was kneeling before some sort of shrine, and to her eyes he was completely still. Incense burned before him, the gentle smoke wafting around him in the calm air. To one side sat a quiver filled with arrows, each made of a metal she could not identify. To the other, an elaborate bow. It was made of the same metal, polished to a pristine shine - yet Alexstrasza could tell that the bow had seen years of use.

The archer had dark hair tied in some sort of ceremonial knot. His right arm was clad in some sort of armor, while his left was bare. She could see the artwork tattooed upon him, and smiled softly when she recognized what had to be a dragon.

His aura had lost its calm, and she knew that he had detected her entrance. He was poised and ready, but had not moved a single muscle.

And now it made sense. His icy calm, his readiness - like a drawn bow, his spirit was always in a state of tension. As if, at any second, he could explode with deadly force. *What a fascinating soul*, she thought.

“Were you the one who defiled my home?” He asked. His voice was deep, and had an accent she had never heard before. Still he did not turn to face her.

“No.” She replied. “Until this day, I had never seen your home.”

“Yet you are here.” Now he turned, and Alexstrasza saw rage in the man’s eyes. But it was bored rage, as if he was angry because he felt that it was his job to be.

“I am. Where is here, archer?” She watched him carefully, but he made no move for his bow.

“If you do not know what this place is, then you are a fool. This is Shimada Castle, and I am the last of the Shimada Clan. The task falls to me to defend my honor.” Now he rose, turning to face her fully.

“Your honor is intact, Archer. Of that I have no doubt.” She kept her gaze on him, but took a step back. Her cloak flared behind her as she opened her right hand in preparation.

“My name is Hanzo Shimada.” And now the bow was in his hand, drawn and ready. “And you will explain yourself.”

Alexstrasza grinned. She was going to enjoy this. “No.”

His eyebrows rose at this. “You dare?”

“I dare, Hanzo Shimada. I dare because I know more about where we are than you do.”

“I know where we are. We are in Hanamura.”

Feeling the power flow into her hand, she laughed. “Are you sure?” And with a flourish, she threw a ball of fire at the far wall. The thin wood exploded. “Because from where I stand, you’re not ready yet.”
That did it. Alexstrasza ducked as the arrow flew overhead. Spinning to her right, she ran for the new opening. Another arrow nearly caught her, but she deflected it with her armored left hand.

Out in the open, she saw the stone walls of the adjacent castle, and began running to them. She had no time to transform, not yet, but she didn’t want to transform. That would be cheating.

As she ran up a set of small stone stairs, she heard his armored boots behind her. At the top, she found a narrow battlement, cracked and decayed. This would have to do.

When Hanzo reached the top of the stairs, he saw the woman spin in place, and a ball of fire shot toward his feet. He jumped, loosing arrows from midair.

Alexstrasza knew he was quick, but this was not what she expected. He dodges another of her fireballs, then another. And the arrows keep coming. She dodged one with a spin, another with a flip, and her gauntlet deflects a third. Then she decides to change the game.

The arrow flies true, aimed directly at the bridge of her nose. The look on Hanzo’s face when she catches it in mid-air is worth the entire chase.

Magic flows through her hand, and the arrow turns into a twig. “Impressive, Archer.”

Then she grins at him. “But you’re going to need to do better than that.”

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“Yield!”

Alexstrasza opened her eye, looked up at the archer. Then she let the magic shroud her transformation. When the green glow dissipated, she stood before him - once again, a human-looking woman.

Hanzo lowered his bow. He is relaxed, more so than she had yet seen him. Their chase through the old castle had proven to him that, wherever they were, it wasn’t Hanamura.

“You show promise, Hanzo.” And now she smiles at him. “Well done.”

Turning, she walked to the edge of the castle. “But greater challenges still await us.”

Hanzo walked with her, looking out onto the valley. He did not know where he was, or what lay ahead. But his confidence in his own training was supreme - and he had just defeated a dragon, after all.

“I believe we are ready.”

A green glow came to her hand, and a gust of air dispersed the cloud layer. “It’s time to find out.”

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Ana chuckled softly. “She does make quite an impression, doesn’t she?”

Hanzo smiled in spite of himself. “She does. I met her with rage and fury, and she decided to toy with me. But she knew that I couldn’t understand the Nexus until I saw it, and I was so blind to anything but my honor that I would not leave the castle.” Shaking his head, he sighed. “It wasn’t even my family’s castle, it was just a copy. The real one is still in Japan, I checked.”

“You thought it was a dream. She woke you up.”

“Yes. I wonder if that is why I remembered more about what happened there. How I remembered… her.”

Ana had no answer for him. Instead, she asked the question she had been waiting to ask.

“So we sleep here, and wake in the Nexus. There we do battle and chase beautiful dragon women and fight orcs and so forth. And then we wake up here, none the wiser.” Ana looked over at Hanzo. “So how did she follow you home?”

Hanzo looked troubled. “I need to ask her that. The last thing I remember is that we had gone to fight… someone… but it was a trap. The realm we were in began to collapse, and a swarm of insect creatures attacked us. We made our way to an exit, but I was trapped. She came back for me, but her path home had closed before we could escape.”

“When I found myself standing in my quarters, she was on the floor, bleeding. I thought she had died. Honestly, I thought we both had died. Then Winston came in and I snapped out of it.”

Ana’s attention snapped onto the key word in his account. “Someone in the nexus, laid a trap? They sent you to a world, or knew you would be sent to a particular world, and collapsed it?”

“Hai.” said Hanzo, coldly. “Someone tried to kill us both.”

Chapter End Notes

Most of Hanzo and Alexstrasza’s first meeting comes from the "Dragons of the Nexus" trailer from Blizzcon 2017.

Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Cocktails

Chapter Summary

Winston thinks of home. Sake makes everything better. Hanzo and Alexstrasza have a moment.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was nights like this one that made Winston glad they had built balconies onto the residential wing.

When Gibraltar had been part of a multinational task force, the barracks had been utilitarian and sparse. This was a temporary duty station, fit for weeks at a time - but no more. Now, however, everything had changed. Their resources were whatever they could scrape together, coupled with Athena’s savvy on the financial markets and Torbjorn’s wizardry at repairs. It wasn’t pretty, but it got the job done.

The facility itself was largely has it had been, but the hundreds of tiny bunkrooms had been replaced with apartments. For most, the bed was moved to an actual bedroom, leaving space for a living area and small kitchenette. Athena had also added balconies to most of the rooms. She reasoned - correctly - that it would be a shame to waste such a beautiful view of the ocean.

So when the moon was full, and the sky clear, Winston made it a point to spend some time on a balcony. Sometimes it was his own, if the others were on a mission or otherwise engaged. But not often - he preferred company.

The door slid open behind him, and he heard Hanzo approach with another round of Sake. Setting the jug down on the table, he poured a small cup for himself, then a larger one for Winston. It would take a great deal more sake than this to get Winston even a little bit drunk. But the sake was not for him, not tonight.

They raised their glasses, and Winston tried his hand at a toast. “Kanpai,” he said. Hanzo smiled at the gesture as he emptied his cup.

They sat quietly, each keeping his thoughts to himself. Winston glanced at Hanzo, and saw equal parts worry and relief. He had the look of a man preparing himself for a challenge, but one he had survived before. Winston could see that Hanzo felt at home, here - and he was glad to be back. The fact that, officially, he had never left didn’t enter into the equation - to Hanzo, it had been a very long three days in the nexus before this last incident. But he had survived, and rescued his ally to boot - something worth celebrating.

“Winston,” Hanzo said. “Do you ever look up there and get homesick?”

The scientist looked up at the moon, considering his answer. “Sometimes.” Then he waved his hand and indicated their surroundings. “But that chapter of my life is over, and has been for a long time. This is my home, now.” At that, Winston moved to refill their drinks. “Yours too, I suspect.”

“Until today, I would have agreed.” Hanzo accepted his cup, but did not drink it.
Winston looked at him. “From what you said earlier, the Nexus must have seemed remarkably lifelike. Almost like it was real.”

“That’s just it, Winston. It was real. Is real.” Hanzo sighed. “We lack the words. The first time I awoke in the Nexus, do you know where I was? I found myself in my old bed, in my room, at Shimada Castle. And when I walked around the grounds, for as far as I cared to walk, it was home. In every way that mattered.”

Now the archer looked over at Winston. “The building was empty, of course. I saw no living soul until Alexstrasza found me. But when I saw the shrine, it had been wrecked. There had been some sort of battle there, and all I could think about was that someone had to pay for their crime.”

“And then Alexstrasza woke you up.”

Hanzo nodded. “Then Alexstrasza woke me up. She showed me what the Nexus was, what it could be. And she showed me that I had a part to play.”

He leaned back now, placing his feet on the handrail. “You were not here when I first arrived at Watchpoint. When I walked in the door, I expected to train for a few weeks and move on, staying just long enough to say I had tried. Genji put a lot on the line when he invited me here and vouched for me - I could not dishonor him by saying no.”

“I did not expect to be accepted, or even welcomed. I did not expect to find a home here. And yet,” Hanzo continued, raising his glass. “Here I sit, on a balcony overlooking a military base, watching the stars with a scientist born on the moon.”

Winston chuckled at that last. “Welcome home, then, Hanzo Shimada.”

Hanzo laughed, then emptied his glass. He set it down on the table as the door opened again.

“Your brother said you would be here,” Alexstrasza said as she walked onto the balcony. “May I join you?”

Hanzo stood rapidly, and the sake gave him a slight wobble as he did so. Winston stood as well, setting his glass on the table next to the jug - and the third glass he had not noticed before.

“Please, take my chair. I was just about to go get some rest.” He smiled at the Dragon Queen. “It has been a long day, after all.”

“Don’t let me run you off, Winston.”

Winston dismissed the thought with a wave of his hand. “Nonsense. We’ll have plenty of time to talk tomorrow.”

“Be well, Winston. And thank you again.”

Winston’s eyes met the archer’s. “You and I both know that, had the situation been reversed, you would have done the same for me. It’s nothing.”

Hanzo, having no response, offered Winston a slight bow in appreciation. Winston nodded to them both and made his way out the door. As it closed, Alexstrasza took his now vacant seat.
“Winston is a wise and thoughtful being, it would seem.”

Hanzo nodded, as he poured two cups of sake. The clear liquid was not as hot as it had been when he brought it out onto the balcony, but it was still warm enough to serve. He had enough sake in him to not worry so much about how warm the drink was supposed to be - but this would be her first taste, and he wanted to make sure it was a good one.

“Winston is a good man.” he replied, setting his cup down in front of him. The other cup he set down next to her.

Alexstrasza took the cup, looking at its contents.

“This is Sake. It is a rice wine from my homeland.” Hanzo raised his cup, and she followed suit. “To our miraculous escape from Braxis.”

Alexstrasza smiled at that. “To life.” Then she drank. The warm sake was unlike anything she had tasted, back home. She found that she liked it, and the fact that Hanzo did as well factored into her opinion not at all.

They sat for a moment, and Alexstrasza gazed up at the moon. It was larger than either of the moons of her homeworld, though its bright color reminded her of the White Lady. How strange it would be, she thought, to live in a world with only one moon.

Hanzo followed her gaze, and smiled. “Winston came to look at the moon as well. He said that he doesn’t, but I saw where he looked.” Pointing up at the moon, Hanzo chuckled. “Winston is very good at hiding his emotions, but I know a homesick man when I see one.”

“Homesick?”

“Winston was born on the moon.” Hanzo was looking intently at the moon, trying to remember where Horizon was located. He did not see her look of surprise at the idea of living on a moon.

Alexstrasza looked over at Hanzo. “My homeworld is filled with wonders, but travelling to either of our moons is not among them.”

Hanzo met her gaze, then turned back to the moon. “That dark patch on the right is the Sea of Tranquility. Americans landed there over a century ago. Later the Russians sent missions there, followed by the Chinese. Then a group of scientists took the next step and built a base on the surface. That base is where Winston grew up.”

Remarkable, she thought. Between the unfamiliar stars above, the moon overhead, and the rolling waves below, it was quite a view indeed. She was content to enjoy it for a few minutes, and Hanzo watched her drink it in.

Alexstrasza noticed his glance, returned it. He saw her smile softly, and found that he was doing the same. She slid her glass over to him, and he poured the last of the sake.

Handing her cup back to her, he held his in the air. “Domo Arigato, Alexstrasza Queen of the Dragons, for saving my life.”

She raised her glass, then emptied it with him.

Alexstrasza rose. “So, Hanzo. What now?”
Hanzo, still seated, looked at her. As she watched him, concern washing over his face. “I think we should deal with the crisis at hand before we answer that question.” His eyes found hers, and she could tell he was unsure - but boldly he kept going. “But for all that - I think you know how I feel.”

She blinked. Then she smiled.

“I don’t disagree. Waiting would be wise.” Now she inclined her head, a playful smile remaining on her face. “But I meant what happens now, as in with this crisis, tomorrow.”

Now it was Hanzo’s turn to be caught off guard. “Oh.”

Alexstrasza laughed. Then she walked to the archer and planted a kiss gently on his forehead. “I’ve lived for thousands of years, Hanzo Shimada. Waiting is no problem.”

Now he stood, unsure what to say. She filled the silence.

“Doctor Ziegler assigned me quarters. Tomorrow morning, will you have breakfast with me?”

“Of course.” he replied. There was still worry on his face, and she started to wonder if some of that was the sake.

Alexstrasza nodded. “Good.” She started walking to the door. “Sleep well, Hanzo Shimada.”

“You do the same, Alexstrasza Queen of the Dragons.”

She turned and walked into the apartment, leaving Hanzo alone on the balcony. He did not see her smile as she exited, nor did she see the smile on his face as he gazed out to the horizon.

Chapter End Notes

So it's harder to write a new romance than I expected. Which is Ironic, for a fic that began as a prompt that was essentially an "I ship it" moment from a trailer. But Hanzo won't hurt her if he can avoid it, and Alex knows who she is and what she wants - she has seen some shit, y'all. So I expect diminishing levels of awkward as we move forward. Possibly.

Feedback is welcome.
Braxis

Chapter Summary

Seeking answers, Alexstrasza and Hanzo follow a lead to Braxis Holdout.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Alexstrasza did not get along well with Abathur.

In hindsight, Kerrigan really should have expected no less. The dragon queen was dedicated to the preservation of life, and had spent lifetimes devoted to the task. When the nexus was discovered, she journeyed there of her own volition to see this new threat for herself. Abathur, on the other hand, sought to absorb the best of other creatures into his own DNA, becoming something new, something more. Any concern for those creatures was immaterial, so long as their essence served the swarm.

Where Alexstrasza focused on being, Abathur was devoted to that becoming - and the friction their approaches created was immediate.

“Good essence,” the zerg had replied when Kerrigan introduced him to Alexstrasza. “When dead upon the field of battle, your essence will make many beneficial combinations.”

Alexstrasza looked at the slug-like creature, not sure how to react to that. “Many have tried to speed my way, creature. None have succeeded.”

Abathur had no real expression to read, but Kerrigan had known him long enough to detect his utter lack of concern over her reaction. “The swarm is eternal. You are biological. We will be patient.”

Before Alexstrasza could reply, Kerrigan decided to step in. “Abathur, you underestimate this woman at your peril. Her essence is not yours to take.”

The creature looked from one queen to the other, before turning and withdrawing into the citadel. Kerrigan sighed and watched him go.

“He really is brilliant, and finding him here was a lucky thing. But he takes some getting used to.”

Alexstrasza nodded, her annoyance fading. “As long as he keeps his essence to himself, he’ll have no problem from me.”

“Good. If what Tassadar said was true, we’re going to need him today.”

“She’s coming with us?”

“He is,” Kerrigan replied. She had discussed this with Jim that morning, and they had come up with the plan together. It reminded her a lot of her days as a ghost, so long ago - reconnaissance and infiltration.

“Who else?” Alexstrasza asked.
They had discussed this as well. “We’re going to a world from our universe, one that Jim and I know very well. He insisted on coming along, and suggested that we bring Nova. I agreed - she knows the lay of the land, and will be able to sneak past anyone we find there. Abathur can tunnel underneath them, but I expect he will spend most of the mission in a support capacity, providing intel.”

“And me?”

Kerrigan grinned. “If all goes well, we can sneak in and figure out what the core is doing, stop it, and get out. But failing that, you’re plan B. You burn the whole thing down with fire and blood, and then carry us to the well and out of danger. Simple.”

*Simple, she says.*

“I can do that.” Alexstrasza replied. “When do we leave?”

“As soon as Nova reveals herself.” Kerrigan’s annoyance at the ghost was clear, and Alexstrasza could tell there was history behind it. She wondered how personal it was.

Kerrigan looked off to the side, and Alexstrasza recognized the look. She was wearing her radio, so someone was probably on comms already. Kerrigan’s face clouded over as she listened, and Alexstrasza watched the anger building.

“Fine. We’ll be right there.” Kerrigan snapped. Reaching up, she pulled out the small earpiece. Such was her anger that she had to consciously will herself not to crush the device in her hand. “Come on, Alexstrasza. Everything just changed.”

The women entered the command center, a low dome of steel. This was another artifact from Kerrigan’s world, though its presence here was unusual. At the moment, the structure sat on a hill, overlooking the edge of the Jade Forest. Alexstrasza was certain that no one in Pandaria had ever seen a building quite like this one.

Jim Raynor was already there, checking his weapons. Today he wore black armor, and had justified the choice by saying that if they planned to sneak around he wanted to look the part. Kerrigan knew that the zerg would detect him no matter what he wore, but said nothing - if it helped him feel confident, that was enough.

Abathur was looking at a map of the Nexus. It was never complete and always changing, especially now that Hanzo’s world was being copied and absorbed into the fold. Two areas were blinking in red, and Alexstrasza recognized one of them as a copy of the Braxis facility - the one they planned to invade.

“Nova got sent to Dragon Shire,” Jim said, without preamble. The Nexus manipulated space and time, but this was new - of course, so was an off-books mission. “We need a fifth.”

Alexstrasza felt his presence before he spoke, and so did not have the wherewithal to stop him.

“I can go,” Hanzo said from the doorway.

And he could, Alexstrasza knew. He was already incredibly skilled, but what amazed her was that Hanzo kept getting better and better. As if his training, routine though it appeared, was somehow more impactful in the Nexus than it had been in his home.

Jim looked carefully at the archer. “We can use you. And for you, it’s a personal thing.” Nodding, Raynor seemed as if he had talked himself into it. “Sure, come along. The more the merrier.”
Hanzo approached the map. “Why is it personal for me?”

Abathur took that response. “Your world, its essence. Brought here deliberately. Upset the balance, upended the order.”

Raynor pointed at the Braxis site. “There’s a power core there that is sending a beam of energy directly at what we believe is a portal to your world. If we want to find out how and why they brought you all here, this is where we begin.”

“We’re not waiting for the nexus itself to send us somewhere and make us blow up a core. This time we’re going on our own. If we play our cards right, we can stop your world from being brought here, or at least most of it. We also have a chance to find out who controls the nexus, or at least this part of it.” Raynor looked back at Hanzo. “If that sounds good, then we’re getting ready to move.”

Hanzo nodded. “I will help you, Marshall Raynor.”

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It had gone to hell almost immediately.

They arrived without incident, stepping out of the Well of Storms normally. The facility was on what appeared to be an island floating in space. The ruins surrounding them were a mix of high-tech research facility and broken stone.

Kerrigan had paused, her bladed wings stretching out. “Something’s wrong. I can sense Zerg here, but…”

“Essence corrupted.” Abathur confirmed. “Very bad.”

Alexstrasza reached out with her magic, trying to determine what life surrounded them. There was nothing sentient nearby, or anywhere on the island. What life she could detect was limited to small creatures burrowed into the rock. They were unlike anything she had seen so far, but they felt similar to Kerrigan and Abathur.

Raynor consulted a device on his wrist. “The energy signature is that way. Let’s get this done and go home.” He began to walk forward, and Kerrigan followed.

Hanzo walked with Alexstrasza, his bow at the ready. “I don’t like this.”

“Nor I.” she replied. If every zerg she could detect attacked at once, they could easily deal with the onslaught. But she could not help thinking that something else was waiting for them.

A noise behind them caught her attention, and she turned to see Abathur tunneling into the surface. Kerrigan saw their reaction and shrugged. “He’s going to scout ahead, see if he can figure out what we’re dealing with.”

Alexstrasza and Hanzo shared a look, and she realized that the archer was as unconvinced as she was.

They continued forward, slowly, walking past broken structures and machines of indeterminate origin. Alexstrasza could make no sense of what she was seeing, only that it had been destroyed
completely. None of the zerg revealed themselves, though she could sense them nearby.

Hanzo sensed the intruder before she did, which surprised her. He pulled back on the bow, and she saw a blinking blue light on the arrowhead. Then he spun to his right, loosing the arrow.

It struck a target in midair. There was no cry, no scream of pain. As the air around the arrow shimmered, they saw only a white-armored ghost, weapon in hand and aimed at them. She fired, and Hanzo dodged left. Alexstrasza dodged right, coming up from her roll with a fireball in hand.

Now it was Nova’s turn to dodge, and the fireball flew over her head as she knelt. Another shot struck at Hanzo’s feet, but his arrow had already taken flight. The archer’s aim was better than Nova’s, and the arrow buried itself in her helmet.

Kerrigan and Raynor, hearing the commotion, had turned. Now they sprinted forward, joining Alexstrasza and Hanzo at the corpse. Kerrigan gasped.

“I know, I know. You’d think we’d have learned not to trust her by now.” Raynor said, seeing the woman’s blonde hair. Kerrigan shook her head and pointed at the corpse’s neck.

“It can’t be,” she whispered.

Alexstrasza knelt beside the dead woman, and saw what Kerrigan had detected. A small purple pustule was beginning to peel from the back of Nova’s neck. As she watched, the body began to dissolve - but not in the manner of the nexus, where the dead vanish into air and are resurrected. No, this corpse was dissolving into a puddle of… something.

Only the symbiote remained, before it too dissolved.

Kerrigan’s eyes glowed with fire. “Abathur.” she said.

“Abathur,” Raynor confirmed. “Which means we need to get out of here yesterday.”

Alexstrasza gasped just as Kerrigan groaned. Raynor’s sensors beeped, and his eyes grew wide as he saw the readout.

The life force she had detected before, with only a few zerg, was gone. Now there were waves and waves of them, and many were between their position and the well of storms. Their only escape was blocked off.

Kerrigan grunted under the mental onslaught. Where Alexstrasza was overwhelmed with the information coming in, Kerrigan was being buffeted with a direct mental attack. Which meant…

“A Psi Emitter. They built a Psi Emitter.” Raynor spat the name in disgust, then saw Hanzo’s look. “They have a device that can control the zerg. Think about a light that attracts moths, only a thousand times more powerful. If that light could issue commands to those moths, you’d have an idea of what this can do.”

Now Hanzo looked to Kerrigan. She had closed her eyes, concentrating on blocking the signal. Hanzo found himself wondering if the zerg woman was immune.

A green glow appeared to his left, and Hanzo turned to see Alexstrasza sending healing energy into Kerrigan. Her breathing slowed, and both women seemed to relax. Kerrigan stood up, and her blades stretched out angrily. “Thanks, I needed that.” she said.

Alexstrasza nodded, saying nothing. Hanzo continued to look at her, the concern plain in his eyes.
“Are you…?” he asked.

“I’m fine, I’ve blocked it off.” Alexstrasza said, as Kerrigan spoke with Raynor. Nothing had approached them yet, but… “Hanzo, they are coming.”

Hanzo readied an arrow. “We need to move!” he shouted.

“Let’s go.” replied Raynor. The group began moving back to the exit. Alexstrasza send blasts of fire at anything that approached on the right, while Kerrigan and Raynor defended the left. Hanzo watched forward, but so far nothing had blocked them.

The steps up to the platform were visible, maybe 200 meters away. “Keep going!” Raynor shouted, as another zergling met its death at his hands. For a fleeting second, Alexstrasza thought they might make it out. But then she sensed the creature approaching them, and Kerrigan’s muttered curse said that she had sensed it as well. Raynor and Hanzo heard the thunder of its steps, as the thing charged them.

The ultralisk was massive, and it was angry. Alexstrasza began to glow with green energy, letting the change come to her. Fire with fire, she thought.

Hanzo watched as the glow grew rapidly in size, engulfing Alexstrasza. Before she was even finished changing, a gout of fire emerged and struck the ultralisk. It staggered, but kept coming.

Kerrigan and Raynor continued circling to the left, hoping to flank the beast. Hanzo continued aiming and firing as he moved behind Alexstrasza.

A roar told him that her transformation was complete. The Dragon Queen had arrived, and she dwarfed even the mutated ultralisk. That did not slow its charge, of course.

Another shot of fire kept its attention focused on her, and she backed up against a rock face. The ultralisk roared and gained speed. At the last second, Alexstrasza’s great wings lifted her into the air, almost in a standing leap. The Ultralisk shot underneath her, crashing headlong into the rocks. Debris flew everywhere, and one of the stones struck Hanzo in the head.

The ultralisk, too, was dazed, and Alexstrasza took the opportunity to escape.

Hanzo had fallen to one knee, and did not see the hydralisk approaching him. Alexstrasza did, however, and with a snarl she incinerated the zerg without a second thought. Wasting no time, Alextrasza grasped Hanzo in her front claws and took to the air.

Raynor and Kerrigan, she saw, had already made it to the well. The platform was intact, for the moment, but she could see that the patterns of energy surrounding the portal were changing. As she watched, the two vanished - hopefully to their homes.

Alexstrasza began to arc down, aiming for the portal. The platform began to collapse, and she didn’t know if they would make it through. The energy waves crackled and sparked angrily, and the portal itself seemed to groan under the strain. Hanzo had lost consciousness. No time. Tucking her wings back, Alexstrasza dove.

As they reached the portal, a bolt of energy struck her, and the last thing she saw was Hanzo tumbling into the vortex of the Nexus.
Chapter End Notes

The mission to Dragon Shire that kept Nova away from Braxis may be found in the side story "End of Mission". You don't need that story to explain this one. And remember too, that time does funny things in the nexus.

Feedback is welcome, as always.
Aftermath

Chapter Summary

Chromie and Alexstrasza come up with a plan. Soldier 76 likes it not one bit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was the silence that she noticed first, as she began to wake.

The battle had not been a quiet affair, and the last thing she remembered was the otherworldly rage of a zerg horde chasing her into… a doorway? No, a portal. She had dove into a portal, the wind screaming past her ears as she flew.

Alexstrasza opened her eyes, and saw the vaulted ceilings of the temple. Her hand felt the stone bench beneath her, and it was cold to the touch - as if she had not been laying there for very long. It was a full minute before she realized which temple it had to be.

Wyrmrest, she thought. The portal, it must have worked.

Then she remembered why she had gone back. “Hanzo?” she said, out loud. Her voice echoed throughout the chamber.

“How will be fine,” a voice replied. It was light and pleasant, but Alexstrasza knew the wisdom that hid behind the child-like facade. Sitting up, she looked across the room at the approaching woman.

“Chromie,” she said. “What happened?” Chromie said nothing, but her eyes told the tale. The smile never left Chromie’s face, of course, but Alexstrasza had known the Bronze Dragon for a very long time. Her eyes and her voice carried the subtlest hint of worry, and that was unusual. The fact that Chromie was here, waiting for her, meant that something was still wrong.

Once, long ago, Chromie had learned the date of her death. She did what any time travelling magical dragon gnome woman would do - she travelled to the time and place of her death and attempted to stop it. When she succeeded, her enemy attacked again, and succeeded again. So Chromie went back and saved herself again. And then again. And again, until eventually it stuck.

Alexstrasza had never gotten the full story about that particular time loop, despite having been present for parts of it. But what had struck her, at the time, was that Chromie had been utterly untroubled about the prospect of her own death. “A paradox,” Chromie had said, “can be para-doctored.”

For Chromie to be openly worried about whatever was happening - that was something worrying indeed.

Chromie sat down on the other end of the stone bench. Alexstrasza watched her, waiting for her to decide where to begin. After a few moments, the gnome sighed.

“You know, some beings do not actually travel to the nexus.” She began. “They dream of travelling
here, doing battle, but they never actually seem to leave their homeworld. Between blinks, between heartbeats, they disappear, fight for days or weeks, and then,” Chromie snapped her fingers. “They return. At the exact instant they left. And no one is the wiser.”

Alexstrasza watched as Chromie spoke. “Others travel deliberately, as you and I have done.”

Chromie nodded. “Yes. And the portals connect the worlds to the nexus, and the nexus to those worlds. And the travellers can enter the same portal and appear in different worlds, because all of the portals overlap.”

Alexstrasza shook her head, still feeling somewhat disoriented. “You tried to explain this to me once, and it didn’t take.”

Chromie turned and looked at her. The smile had vanished, and now her eyes were those of the dragon - filled with ancient wisdom and the determination of youth.

“Your portal collapsed. You’re falling through Hanzo’s portal, and I don’t know what will happen.”

Alexstrasza stared at her. “Is that even possible?”

Now Chromie smiled softly, kindly. “We’re about to find out. In a few minutes, you’re going to wake up in Hanzo’s world.”

“I’m going to…” and Alexstrasza looked around at the great hall of Wyrmrest Temple. “Dreams.” she said to herself. “I’m unconscious. And somehow you’re speaking to my dream.”

“You are unconscious, but I left this dream for you before you left. As far as I know, you are still in the portal.” Now a grin crossed the gnome’s face. “This is pretty much the conversation you and I had before you told me to warn you.”

Alexstrasza rolled her eyes in mock annoyance. “What did I tell you about involving me in your loops, Timewalker?” But she was smiling as well, now.

*If Chromie and I could discuss what happened later, it means that we make it out. That Hanzo… and with that, her train of thought stopped.*

“So Hanzo and I make it through the portal? We arrive in his world.”

Chromie looked at her. “He does, but the trip was not easy. He wakes up dazed, and startled to find your unconscious body nearby.” Now she shrugged. “The transition must be a rough one, to go to a world not your own.”

Alexstrasza thought about the situation. She would not be able to heal herself if she were injured and knocked out. “Chromie, can you summon aid for us from Hanzo’s world? Get word to someone? Tracer or Ana?”

Chromie’s face lit up, as the plan began to take form. “Of course I can! They both know me, they would trust that it was real and not just a dream.” She stood and began walking briskly to the north exit. “I’ll be right back.”

Alexstrasza watched her leave, wondering why she didn’t just disappear. If this was a dream, the rules didn’t really apply, did they?

She heard the footsteps behind her seconds before Chromie left her view. *Show-off*, Alexstrasza thought. Turning, she looked to Chromie as she approached from the south entrance.
“Good news,” the gnome said, brightly. “I met a gorilla named Winston…”

Alexstrasza raised an eyebrow. “Even for you, that’s quick work.”

Chromie chuckled. “It was no trouble - he’s really nice, you’ll like him.” She sat back down on the bench, next to Alexstrasza, as if she had never left.

“Now, here’s the plan…”

———

“…And then you woke up in our medical bay.”

“Yes.” Alexstrasza took a sip of her tea. She had finished telling the tale, and the conference room was quiet as the Overwatch team considered its ramifications.

Winston had brought Tracer and Ana, both of whom had confirmed that they had been to the nexus. Hanzo was there as well, of course. His brother stood at the back of the room, arms folded, and she knew that Genji was listening intently to every word.

Doctor Ziegler was sitting at the other end of the table, sipping tea of her own. Next to her was a man in a metal face mask that Ana had referred to as “Jack”, but who introduced himself as “Soldier 76”.

The group seemed to defer to him, and Alexstrasza had the impression that he was the closest thing they had to a commander. His aura revealed a man who was used to giving orders, and to having those orders obeyed. He had lost soldiers under his command, and regretted the sacrifice, even if it had been necessary one - for he had been in command. It was his job to protect them, and he should have been able to find a better way.

_So much regret_, Alexstrasza thought.

The man’s visor turned toward her, and she could feel his gaze. Then he spoke.

“So let me sum up. Our world is being dragged into an interdimensional war being waged across time and space, and when you and Hanzo and some others tried to find out what happened, one of your men betrayed you, and in the face of a massive attack you two barely escaped with your lives.” Soldier 76 leaned forward. “Is that about right?”

Alexstrasza nodded. “Yes, Commander, that’s correct.”

“According to this,” said Winston, looking at his display, “There isn’t much danger to our world, if the contact is limited.” He looked at the head of the table. “But Chromie suggested that we should be able to reverse the process.”

Soldier looked at him. “If one woman can cross into our world, so can others.” He nodded to Alexstrasza. “Not all of them will be as polite as this one.”

“How would we reverse the process?” asked Angela.

Winston and Hanzo looked at each other, as if they were deciding who would break the news. To Alexstrasza’s surprise, it was Genji who spoke.
“They want us to send a mission into the Nexus.”

Chapter End Notes

This should be it for the flashbacks, at least for a while. The quote about Paradoxes is from Robert Heinlein. Feedback, as always, is welcome.

Happy Holidays.
Credibility

Chapter Summary

Alexstrasza and Winston attempt to convince Soldier 76. Genji has concerns.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

No one was surprised when Hanzo was the first to respond to his brother.

"There is a threat to the world, and it is in the nexus. How else should we confront it?"

Genji kept leaning against the wall of the conference room, and his arms remained folded across his chest. His helmet, with its green glowing visor, turned slowly to his brother.

“When we know the shape of the threat before us, then - and only then - will we know where to strike it down. But we don’t even know what we don’t know.”

Hanzo began to reply, but Alexstrasza put a hand on his arm. He looked at her, and she met his eyes. Not yet, she thought, hoping that her eyes conveyed her meaning. Hanzo looked as if he were about to speak up anyway, despite the warning, but then sighed and nodded.

She continued to watch Genji. His helmet betrayed no expression, as such, and his body language gave nothing away. But she could sense his mistrust of… the situation? Her? It was unclear. His feelings were even more guarded than Hanzo’s, as it turned out.

Meanwhile, Winston had taken up the argument. “Genji, we’re not suggesting that we go wheels up in the next hour. But I believe that these incursions between worlds are going to get worse, and if they do… “ Now he looked at Jack, and Alexstrasza saw that he was making two arguments at once. “When they do, we’re going to want to be ready.”

“Besides,” added Tracer, “Who else is equipped to deal with something like this? By the time the Security Council gets done debating, we could have swarms of aliens spreading across the globe. And they could appear absolutely anywhere.”

Jack looked around the table. “We’re stretched thin as it is, what with South America and the hostage situation in Nepal.” Leaning back, he looked to Genji. “Your objections are noted. Personally, I share them - this is moving too fast.”

Now the steel visor turned to Alexstrasza. “But being prepared hurts nothing. We’ll be ready. Winston, it’ll be your job to tell us what we’re going to have to be ready for, exactly. Genji’s right, we can’t walk in blind.”

“Agreed. I’ll have Athena loop everyone in. Alexstrasza, stop by my lab later today, and we’ll have Athena link you into our communications.”

She nodded. “Of course, Winston.”

Soldier 76 nodded. “Good. Keep me informed if anything else opens a hole in the universe, will
you?" And with that comment, Jack rose and the meeting broke up.

Hanzo kept his seat, and Alexstrasza remained seated beside him. Genji kept his place as well, leaning against the wall and watching his brother. Alexstrasza was surprised when Angela stayed as well.

When the room was empty, save for the four of them, it was Doctor Ziegler who spoke first.

“So.” Angela began. “Are you two going to discuss this, or do I have to force the issue?”

Genji walked forward, placing his hands on the conference room table. There was no overt menace to him, but Alexstrasza could feel his agitation.

“There is nothing to discuss, Angela.” Despite the expressionless mask, Alexstrasza could feel Genji’s gaze on her. “But I don’t know that we should trust this woman, yet.”

Alexstrasza had not known what to expect from Hanzo’s brother - this was not the Genji she had expected to find.

“Have I wronged you, Genji Shimada?” She asked.

“Wronged me? No. To me, you have done nothing.” Genji nodded toward his brother. “But this man has spent his life in service of his honor, and now you appear from nowhere and suddenly he wants to wage war on another universe. What could happen to a man, to change him so?”

“Perhaps I have grown up, Brother.” Hanzo replied, quietly. “You did convince me to come here, to Overwatch, did you not? To make a difference?”

“Hai, I did do that. And in 7 weeks, the only improvement anyone saw was in you, on the training floor. Even in service to others, you are selfish.”

“7 weeks for you, Genji. Time in the nexus runs differently.”

Genji shook his head, then looked at Alexstrasza. “Years ago, his honor was so rigid and unswerving that he murdered me in its service.”

If Genji expected to shock Alexstrasza with that statement, he would be disappointed. Instead, it was Hanzo’s face that registered shock when she replied.

“I know.”

Genji stood up straight, and Alexstrasza sensed the sudden tension. “How could you know that?”

Alexstrasza looked steadily at him, and spoke calmly. Nothing for it, she thought. “You told me yourself, Genji. In the Nexus.”

Stunned silence.

“You and I fought together in an ancient palace, where a being called the Raven Lord fights against… well, that’s not really important right now.” Alexstrasza leaned back in her seat. “When you introduced yourself, I surprised you when I said that I knew your brother. We talked for a while, after the battle. You spoke of the history between you, and how you had forgiven him.”

“You never said anything to me…” said Hanzo. He looked stricken, as if his greatest shame had been aired out for the world to see. Which it had, she supposed.
“I knew you would discuss it eventually. When you were ready.” His hands were resting on the table, and she gently placed one of hers on them. “I’m the patient one, remember? Everything has a time.”

Alexstrasza looked over to see the door opening, and Genji making a hasty exit. Angela watched him leave, but did not rise from her seat. When the door closed, she sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose.

“Angela…” began Hanzo.

“I know. I’ll talk to him. But you know he will want his space, for now.”

Alexstrasza saw it now, how the doctor’s aura was bright with healing whites and golds, but that it also had a streak of green running through it. She had thought that the gold in Genji’s spirit had been from her healing arts, but now Alexstrasza realized that they were closer than that.

“I should not have put you in this position, Doctor Ziegler.” Alexstrasza said.

Angela dismissed the thought with a wave of her hand. “Nonsense. I knew it would be hard for Genji, bringing his brother here. But they both have healing to do, and I firmly believe they need to do it together.” Now she smiled softly. “Of course, we did not expect other universes to interfere.”

“One rarely does,” Alexstrasza agreed.

They sat for a moment, before Hanzo spoke again. “Genji doesn’t remember the nexus at all, does he?”

Angela shook her head. “No. He has had nightmares, but I never associated them with what Tracer and Ana were experiencing. I assumed, well, that they were about you.” She shrugged apologetically. “I mean no offense, but they started right after you arrived, so the association made sense to me.”

Hanzo shook his head. “It would to me, as well.”

Angela rose, looking to Alexstrasza. “For what it’s worth, Alexstrasza… I believe you. When the time comes, so will Jack and the others. We’ll be ready.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” Alexstrasza replied. “I just hope we’re not too late.”

Hanzo heard a soft beeping from the display along the far wall. Unless someone needed it, the display usually showed a world map with active missions, One indicator marked a terrorist incident in South America, and another marked the team in Nepal. McCree, D.Va, and Zenyatta had gone there to deal with a hostage crisis.

As Hanzo watched, a red indicator lit up over the dead zone in Australia. It was labeled "Spatial Anomaly".

“Perhaps. It looks like we’re going to find out.”

Chapter End Notes

I've tagged Genji/Mercy, though it's secondary to the story here. But I kept thinking
about Hanzo as her brother-in-law of sorts, and decided to make it official.

Thank you for your comments and continued support. Keep it coming.
Fallout

Chapter Summary

Kerrigan and Raynor try to pull themselves together. They quickly meet someone attempting the opposite.

Jim Raynor woke up when he felt the first detonation.

He looked around, and found himself in another arena from his home universe. The Well of Storms was behind him, as usual, but it was dormant. In front of him, the core was without power as well. Unlike Braxis, this land was older and dustier - no pristine science facility here, this was mines and factories and… oh no.

“Nuclear Launch Detected,” said the adjutant, over his armor’s default communications system. Raynor looked to the horizon, and saw another flash in the distance. Another cloud rose into the air, and beneath him another rumble shook the ground.

With no core, there was no battle - which meant he was free to take time and figure out what the situation was. But if there was no battle, why was the adjutant releasing nuclear weapons. And if she wasn’t the one doing it, who was?

“None of this makes sense,” he muttered to himself.

“I’ve been saying that for an hour now,” replied Kerrigan, over comms. “Did you have a nice nap?”

“Still groggy, but I’ll be OK.” Now he stood, checking his armor and weapons for damage. “Got a sitrep for me, Sarah?” He could hear the annoyance in her voice as she replied.

“None. We’re in some sort of weapons testing facility. There’s no sign of anyone else, no Alexstrasza or Hanzo. No Abathur either, fortunately for him.”

Raynor sighed. “That Psi Emitter did a number on you, remember?”

“You don’t forget something trying to eat your mind, Jim.”

“Right. But you have been an individual. You fought it off. Do you think Abathur could have done the same?”

She chose not to reply.

“I’m not saying we forgive and forget. Copying Nova was a low blow any way you slice it. I’m just saying this is more complicated than we thought.”

A sigh. “Copy that, Jim.”

“OK. Now, where are you?”

“-----

“This is gonna be a problem, I think.” said Raynor.
He had met up with Kerrigan several hours before, and together they had attempted to make their way to the other core. Or, at least, the area where the opposing force’s core would have been. Though they could see that it was dormant as well, the defenses surrounding it were very much active. And without an army to support them as they pushed in…

“At least the nukes stopped coming down,” replied Kerrigan. “I wonder why?”

Raynor had thought about that. From what he had gathered through his suit’s interface, the adjutant here would release nukes periodically. If you were linked in (which he was not), she would even tell you when and where they would appear. Collect them, and then launch them at targets - as long as you could stay out of the blast radius, you’d have a nice and simple method for clearing away pesky things like walls and defense towers and opponents.

If they were alone here, somewhere there should be at least one nuke waiting. Opening his suit’s interface, Raynor began tinkering with the internal geiger counter.

“This whole place is saturated with rads,” he said as he worked. “But maybe I can zero in… there!” Turning, he pointed south. “There’s a radioactive source that way. A big one, from the looks of it.”

“Let’s go, then,” said Kerrigan.

When they approached the source, they did not find one nuclear weapon. They didn’t find two. They found fifty-seven.

“Well.” said Kerrigan. “This takes me back.”

Raynor began circling the pile. These warheads were not stacked in any sort of orderly fashion, as he might have expected. Rather, they were sitting in a loose pile, as if they had been discarded cans of beer or some such. He leaned close to the nearest one, and saw that it was indeed active. The telltales were all green, telling him that this warhead was green and ready to fire.

“Jim,” Kerrigan said, from the other side of the pile. “Come here.”

Raynor continued his walk around the warheads, trying to ignore the other green status lights as he passed. The clicking of his suit’s geiger counter, however, was something he couldn’t really ignore. Not for long, anyway - even in armor, he was at risk if they lingered. Kerrigan was not, for the zerg were immune to radiation, or at least she was.

He saw Kerrigan kneeling down as he approached the far side. In front of her was a body. The creature had been human, once. His hair was a singed mess, and Jim could see evidence of burn scars across his shirtless chest. One leg was missing, though there was no blood. He had a satchel of some sort nearby, and Jim almost reached for it before his suit gave him an explosives warning.

Oh, he thought. NOW you give me an explosives warning. Cute.

Clipped to the man’s belt was a small computer, unlike anything Raynor had seen. It beeped softly, and Kerrigan reached for it. Then her eyes grew wide, and her blades flared out. “This says that another nuke is being deployed.”


Slowly, Kerrigan turned to the pile of warheads.

Jim followed her gaze. “Oh.”
The body suddenly wheezed and coughed. Jim and Kerrigan turned at the noise, then looked at each other.

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Running in power armor was awkward enough under normal conditions. Carrying an unconscious stranger as you ran was worse.

“How long?” Raynor shouted. As they approached the outer defenses surrounding the enemy base, he saw the turrets power down.

“40 seconds.” Kerrigan replied.

Whoever this man was, he had somehow linked himself into the adjutant, overridden the limits on active warheads, and then built himself a little stockpile. Of course, being a human, the radiation must have gotten to him eventually. With no one to direct the release of warheads, the computer began releasing - and detonating - them in order.

By sheer chance, the next one in order would set off a blast big enough to crack the arena in two. If he had his way, Jim Raynor did not plan to stick around to watch the show.

Kerrigan had been impressed as she worked the ancient computer link. The tech was very old, and yet it worked brilliantly as an interface. She had managed to open gates and shut down defenses, and the fact that this man had been able to do that explained how he was able to control the adjutant.

They approached the opposing force’s Well of Storms, and to the relief of both of them, they saw that it was active. The portal would take them away from here - hopefully somewhere safe.

“Jim,” began Kerrigan.

“How about this is the only train in - HEY!” As Raynor spoke, the man he had been carrying arched his back and landed in the dirt. He had a wild look about him, and the disorientation was obvious. The man had no idea where he was.

He landed on his foot, and immediately toppled onto his side. In any other situation, it would have been hilarious - but not with seconds to spare before a nuclear blast.

“I’ve got him, go on - get through the portal!” Raynor shouted, as the man turned to stare at him. Kerrigan stood at the top of the stairs, waiting - she could get through if she had to, but was not willing to leave Jim behind.

The man looked like he was searching for something. He did not panic, necessarily - but he was angry. The withering look he turned onto Raynor was proof of that.

“Where is my FUCKING LEG?” he shouted.

“15 Seconds, Jim.” Kerrigan called.

“Bill me.” Raynor muttered, and an armored fist struck the man in the face. Dazed, he did not object when Raynor picked him up again.

“Nuclear Launch Detected,” the calm voice of the adjutant relayed. Kerrigan heard it too, and stepped closer to the portal. When Jim and his cargo reached the top of the stairs, she stepped through.
“Detonation,” Raynor heard, and the whole world turned upside down. The two men fell into the portal, as the arena shattered around it.
Philosophy

Chapter Summary

Alexstrasza visits Winston's Lab. The source of Genji's anger becomes clear.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In Azeroth, one could channel powerful magics, if one but took the time to perfect their use. Many were the tragedies brought about by mages with too much ambition and too little study. But for those who took the time to hone their craft, to learn the mysteries - there was very little that their magic could not accomplish.

Alexstrasza had studied magic for centuries. Few beings in her home realm had put in the time that she had. Fewer still could match her knowledge of the forces that bind her world.

And her studies had paid off, over time. Without measurable effort, she could heal at will, both herself and others. She could throw fire and apply force to objects. Her connection to life itself allowed her to sense other living beings, with a range limited only to her concentration.

With time and focus, and with her home universe to draw upon, she could avail herself of even more complex magics.

That made being surprised a rare joy indeed.

Alexstrasza considered the small device in her ear. In her world, finding someone was as simple as seeking their life force through her magic. If they were nearby, it was easy. More distant targets required more magic and more focus, but portals and other means could aid the task.

Here, they tap a device and ask Athena.

And there was Alexstrasza’s other surprise for the day. For in her home, she could not carry on a conversation with magical forces. She had learned, long ago, that anything magical enough to be sentient was not the sort of thing with which one should converse.

Athena, on the other hand, had been created by men. As Winston had explained it, they had studied intelligence for decades. Their studies led them to clockwork devices that could react and answer simple questions. As with magic, it was only a matter of time and study before the questions - and their answers - became more complex. The result, barely more than a century later, was Athena.

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When Alexstrasza had arrived at Winston’s lab, she found a large space filled with bits and pieces of technology - items she could never hope to identify. The scientist was busy at a workbench, and did not notice her entrance.

Athena did, of course. “Welcome, Alexstrasza.”

“Greetings, Athena. I believe Winston had been expecting me?”
“I’m almost finished,” Winston said. “But I admit I don’t know if this will work.”

Alexstrasza walked around the edge of the room as he spoke, looking at the various items scattered on shelves and surfaces. “If Athena is really everywhere, then she can keep me in communications. It’s not necessary to go out of your way on my account.”

Winston looked over at her. “That’s not what I meant, your grace.”

Athena chose to rescue him. “I believe,” she began, “that Winston refers to the function of the device during your metamorphic transformations into reptilian form.”

“Correct,” said Winston. He held up his left arm, showing her the small interface he wore on his wrist. “I can look at a display showing whatever Athena needs me to see. I can send and receive messages, and tap into a comms channel if I need to.”

He indicated her gauntlets, with their red and gold. “I could build that functionality into your armor, but… well… “ He looked sheepish, and turned back to the workbench.

“Winston was unsure where your armor went when you became a Dragon, Alexstrasza.” Athena did not remark on Winston’s awkwardness, though Alexstrasza could only imagine how the conversation had gone.

Alexstrasza smiled as she walked over to Winston. Sliding the gauntlet from her left hand, she set it gently on the bench beside him. He looked at it closely, but did not pick it up.

“The metal is enchanted with powerful magic, back home,” she said. “The trick is this, and perhaps this will aid you in your studies. I am not a human who becomes a dragon from time to time. I am a dragon who becomes a human.”

Winston looked from the gauntlet to its owner. “So the metal…”

Alexstrasza nodded. “My armor began as armor for a dragon. It doesn’t have to expand when I transform - rather, it just has to return to its original size.” She lifted the gauntlet, turning it in her hand, before placing it back onto her arm. “In my world, things and beings alike all have a form. Transitioning to that true form is easier than transitioning away from it.”

Winston looked at the gauntlet, then at the devices on his workbench, then back again. He had a small cylindrical device in his hand. “So, if I wanted to make an earpiece that would stay in your ear when you transform…”

“…You’d probably need to build it in my world, and then use a similar enchantment.”

“Alexstrasza,” Athena said. “If you are carrying items other than your armor, where do they go when you change form?”

Alexstrasza lifted her cloak, displaying the small pockets there. “Anything contained in the cloak is safe. Including, I imagine, a device such as an earpiece.”

Winston smiled at that, before handing the device over. “Well then, as long as you remember to remove that before you transform, you should have no problem.”

Alexstrasza looked at the device. It was smaller than the ones in the nexus, but she could see quite a few similarities as well. Unlike those earpieces, however, Alexstrasza knew that this one would not transform with her. She placed it in her pocket.
“Thank you, Winston, Athena. I will be careful.”

Lights flashing in the window caught her eye, and Alexstrasza walked over. The view here matched the one from Hanzo’s balcony, and as she watched a supply flight came in for a landing. The sight made her want to take to the air, and for a brief second she toyed with the idea.

Facing the window was a desk. It was not the expansive and well-used workbench that dominated the room, but a smaller affair more suited to paperwork. A small display sat to one side, next to an empty coffee mug and a small jar with a red lid. Alexstrasza wondered what sort of substance this “peanut butter” might be.

A small stack of books sat on the desk as well. Alexstrasza ran her hands over the spines, reading the titles. The feeling was familiar to her, for some reason. And then she laughed.

“Your grace?” began Athena.

“Winston, I wondered why I felt so comfortable here.” She waved her hand around, indicating the clutter. “In my world, you would be a wizard. Spending years, studying arcane magics and obscure artifacts. You would not want to harness the powers you seek, I think - but you would want, above all else, to understand them.”

Winston smiled at the comparison, nodding. He pointed to the book on top of the stack, on the small desk. “Your wizards would have liked Carl Sagan, I think.”


“He studied intelligence, trying to learn why humans are self-aware in ways that other beings are not. Athena is as much his daughter as anyone’s.”

“I am the result of the work of thousands, Winston.’ Athena interjected. “But Doctor Sagan’s work has influenced much of my study of the nexus.”

“Oh?” said Alexstrasza, setting the book down. “How so?”

“Doctor Sagan suggested that human intelligence was a way for the universe to know itself. But if the nexus is a created place, rather than one that evolved over eons, then it follows that someone knows those answers already.”

Alexstrasza considered that. “We know someone decided to add your universe to the nexus. There had to be a reason for that.”

Winston nodded. “As Genji said this morning, we don’t yet know what questions to ask.” Now his eyes grew wide, as the realization struck him.

First you will learn of the what, Chromie had said, and then you will work your way past who and how…

“We don’t need to know why, we just need to know who and how.”

“Easier said than done, Winston.” Alexstrasza replied. “But you are correct, if we intend to reverse what has been done we will need to know how it was done in the first place.”

She saw another book on the desk, an ornate leather volume. The Tragedies of William Shakespeare, read the cover. Without thinking, she lifted it and opened the cover. Strange symbols were written there, and she could not decipher them.
“That book is a collection of stories by one of our most revered playwrights. It was a gift from a guru named Zenyatta. He is a member of Overwatch, and I expect you’ll meet him soon.” Winston nodded toward the book. “The inscription is in the Omnic language.”

“From one seeker of truth to another,” Athena translated. “Thank you.”

“When Genji came back to us, he would listen to no one - he was full of anger and bitterness. Angela and I had repaired him physically, but his spirit remained broken.” Winston began walking over to Alexstrasza. “Zenyatta tried to convince him to study Zen philosophies. He refused.”

Taking the book from her hands, Winston pulled a purple ribbon from the center of the book, causing it to fall open to a tale entitled *Hamlet*. A passage was highlighted in precise markings.

“And then,” said Winston, “Zenyatta, frustrated at the man’s refusal to listen, quoted this passage. And it got into Genji’s head, and he thought about it, and a week later he presented himself to Zenyatta and asked to call him Sensei, or teacher.”

“This above all,” Alexstrasza read. “To thine own self be true.”

“And it must follow,” continued Winston, “as the night the day, that thou cannot then be false to any man.”

The realization hit Alexstrasza. “He was angry with me when I told him that we had met in the nexus. He had no memory of it.”

“Of course.” Winston closed the book and set it gently on the desk. “He found inner peace only once he accepted complete responsibility for his every action. His actions, his words - he owned everything. How can he know himself if he has lived days in the nexus that he cannot remember?”

“To know yourself,” Alexstrasza said, quietly, “is to be at peace.”

Winston smiled sadly. “That’s it, exactly.”

“I know, Winston.” She looked at him, and there was sadness in her eyes as well. “I know because he said that to me. In the nexus.”

Chapter End Notes

What began as a light exploration of the mechanics of shapeshifting quickly grew into science and philosophy. Because of course it did.

Carl Sagan's book "The Dragons of Eden" was published in 1977, and does indeed deal with intelligence. His quote about the universe knowing itself comes from Cosmos. Meanwhile, the oft overused quote from *Hamlet* is from Act I Scene iii. Both seemed to fit well when thinking about Athena and Genji.

Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Impact

Chapter Summary

Alexstrasza gets real with Soldier 76. Tons of debris get real with the Australian Outback.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For the second time that day, Alexstrasza found herself in the main conference administration conference room at Watchpoint Gibraltar.

The location had several advantages. For one, the windows offered a magnificent view. As the sun began to set over the horizon, she watched as a lone figure exercised in the courtyard below, his green sword flowing smoothly about him.

For another, no one would look for her there. She needed time to think, and knew of no better spot.

Genji’s movements were smooth and unhurried, as if they had been practiced many times before. There were no drones or targets, as this was not a combat drill - any opponent he fought was in his own head.

Many times, she had seen the same precision, the same exacting movement, in Hanzo’s exercises. With Hanzo, much of his training went to endurance and strength - for it took a tremendous amount of strength to pull back that bow. And then to keep it pulled, as he waited for the ideal moment to fire.

*Patience and quiet strength,* She thought. *That was Hanzo, all right.*

As she watched, she saw how similar the ninja was to his brother. How much of that was their shared training, she wondered, rather than their shared heritage? Genji continued his exercise, and Alexstrasza saw that there was never a wasted movement. Every shift, every slow strike, went exactly as intended. His blade never stilled as it orbited his armored frame.

Alexstrasza could barely see which movements were parrying some unknown attack, and which movements were strikes aimed at an unseen foe. He rotated, pivoting lightly on one foot, then the other, spinning and spiraling across the courtyard. She wondered if this exercise was the same every time, or if he was playing out some sort of battle in his mind’s eye.

Behind her, Alexstrasza heard the door open. She did not need to turn to see who had entered.

Soldier 76 approached quietly, standing easily at the window and watching Genji. After a few moments, he spoke.

“When Angela told me that Genji was upset, she wasn’t kidding.”

Alexstrasza did not turn to look at him. “Genji was right about one thing. I did not know what I did not know.”
Jack shook his head softly. “You did the best you could with the information you had.” Now he turned to look at her. “That’s all any commander can do.”

She sighed. “This is truth.”

He heard the uncertainty in her voice, and prompted her. “...But?”

She looked at him, then moved to sit at the table. He pulled out a chair for her, then one for himself.

Alexstrasza considered where to begin. She did not intend to make her case for a mission, necessarily, but she needed this man to understand where she was coming from. She needed him to trust her. And she felt that she could trust him, for he understood the weight of command and expectation.

“In my homeworld,” she began, “I am the queen of the dragons. But it is more duty than honor, for it is my task to safeguard life itself. I take that task very seriously. In my time, I have fought and defeated threats great and small, magical and mundane. I have walked the sundered battlefields and breathed life into the ashen forests left behind.”

“A heavy task,” Soldier said, “even if it is measured in centuries rather than years.”

She looked him in the eye. “I have served Azeroth for tens of millenia, Jack Morrison.”

“Oh.” he said, quietly.

“And in that time, I have had my failures. Once, a portal opened between our world and another. A group known as the Horde swept through the dark portal and waged a war of conquest across the face of Azeroth. I was captured and made to serve them. I was violated in ways not easy to describe.” Quietly, she added, “As were my children.”

She had kept the emotion from her voice up to that point, but it was hard to think about the second war and its aftermath without letting the pain into her voice. And it was not a subject she often discussed - not only was it ancient history in her world, but with whom could she confide?

“I have seen what happens when one world interposes itself on another. I have seen the scars that such a war will leave.” She waved her hand at the world map along the wall, still glowing with its markings and indicators. “I will not allow that to happen to Hanzo’s world. Not while there is something to be done.”

Jack watched her, saying nothing. The steel visor hid any expression.

“If I have to march into the nexus on my own, I will.”

“I know,” he replied. “I knew it when we first spoke.”

He leaned forward in his seat. He had none of the tension that had been evident that morning, none of the uncertainty. The decision had been made.

“You’ll help me?” She asked. It was less of a statement than she had intended, but she dared not ruin what had suddenly become a critical negotiation.

Slowly, Soldier 76 nodded. “If there is a way we can help you, we will.” Now he nodded toward the world map. “You’ve seen very little of our world, and yet you’re willing to risk your life to defend it. I can’t discount that.”
He leaned back in his chair, and his voice took an amused tone. “Besides, do you really think Hanzo would let you go to battle without him at your side?”

“Hanzo is free to do as he wishes.” She said, cautiously.

“You’re right. But you and Hanzo share a bond. It’s obvious to me, it’s obvious to Angela, and it’s certainly obvious to him. He is not the same person, now that he has you in his life. And I’m willing to bet that the feeling is mutual.”

Alexstrasza did not reply. But the look on her face must have told the tale, for Soldier 76 chuckled lightly.

“Your grace, we have a phrase to describe relationships like the one you and Hanzo share.”

The console next to the world map began beeping insistently. Soldier 76 rose and walked around the table, looking at the map as he went. Before answering the call, he paused, looking back at Alexstrasza.

“The term we use is ’It’s Complicated.’” he said. Then he touched the console. “Go ahead, Athena.”

Athena’s calm voice filled the room. “We’re getting additional readings from Australia, Jack.”

“Give me a rundown. I’m here with Alexstrasza. Is Winston on this?”

Winston’s voice came over the speakers. “I’m here, Jack.”

Alexstrasza rose from her chair, and began to walk around the table. As she watched, the world map began to focus on a small-ish island at the bottom right. Additional images began to appear around the edges of the display. One showed a spot in near the center of the island, with rings growing out from it. Another looked like a picture of a desert, with a debris field at its center. The image was obscured by dust and smoke, and it looked to Alexstrasza as if the perspective was impossibly high.

A third image showed rubble, perhaps the ruins of some structure. Great chunks of stone, broken statuary, crushed machinery, and so on. This picture was taken from above, as well.

“These readings were confirmed by three different research stations, Jack. 22 minutes ago, there was a massive seismic event near the center of the western dead zone. The location is not on any major or minor fault lines. Unlike a typical earthquake, there were no aftershocks, and the data suggests that this may have been an impact event. The data actually indicates three separate impacts in rapid succession, all on precisely the same spot.”

“Are these pictures of that impact?” Alexstrasza asked.

“At Winston’s request, we requested copies of satellite imagery showing the impact site. EUROSAT Omicron 9 was in position 7 minutes after impact.” One of the images grew larger. “This image shows the dust cloud dissipating. Some of the debris is visible.” Now another image took prominence, this one the lower, closer view. “A drone flight captured this footage 12 minutes after impact.”

Something about that closer image caught Alexstrasza’s attention, but she could not put her finger on it, yet.

“Did the drone capture anything on thermals?” Jack asked.

Winston took this one. “Those readings are being analyzed, we should have them at any moment.”
Alexstrasza kept looking back to the drone footage. Great blocks of stone had been shattered, and with them statues and the like. It was as if some angry god had reached down and crushed whatever temple had stood there.

“What was there before this impact? Did anyone live there?” She asked. Jack turned to look at her, and the tilt of his head conveyed his surprise at the question.

“Most of central Australia is uninhabitable, Alexstrasza.” Winston answered. “There was a war, and some years ago an explosion scattered radiation over the entire region. This area was empty desert.”

Now she stepped closer to the image on the wall, looking closely. Those were definitely blocks of stone, not mere rocks. And that statue had to be made by sentients. She pointed at the screen.

“So if there was nothing there before, then the ruins of what looks like a temple fell out of the sky.”

Jack studied the image closely. Before he could reply, Athena spoke.

“I have a pattern match on that statue, Winston. It matches an Egyptian God known as”

“Ka.” Alexstrasza finished for her.

“...Ka, yes.” Then Athena paused, before changing gears. “Thermal imaging is coming in now.”

Another image appeared on the display, this one a study in blues and greens. Jack pointed at a series of squares to one side. “This shows the temperature at the impact site. The closer to red it is, the warmer it is. If there was an explosion or a fire, we’d see it. But this also lets us see if there’s anything alive down there.”

A beeping drew their attention to the thermal imaging. Two red splotches stood out among the cool blues and greens of the nighttime desert.

“Athena?” Jack began.

“Confirmed. Two life signs, Jack.”

As they watched the image cycle across the impact area, Jack leaned over to her. “How did you know about an ancient Egyptian God?”

“One of the universes captured by the nexus was apparently very similar to your ancient Egypt.” She nodded at the close-up of the statue. It had a snake wound around an orb. The snakes fangs were bared, and it was clearly ready to strike any who would attack. “This statue is from a place called Luxoria.”

Jack looked at the debris. “So this impact…”

Alexstrasza nodded. “A stone temple from the nexus just fell out of the sky over your Australia.”

Chapter End Notes

As I’ve said, Alexstrasza has seen some shit, y’all. Her motivations are not entirely
related to her feelings for Hanzo, or even her general benevolence - she's seen this before.

Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Zenyatta had never been particularly fond of flying.

It had nothing to do with air sickness or jet lag or the like. The problem was one of physics - when he began his meditations, he would float to the back of the plane. So, either he had to seat himself in a chair, rather than floating as was his custom, or he had to tether himself to the inside of the cargo hold - an undignified alternative.

Hana had suggested that he lock himself in the aft restroom, reasoning (correctly) that since there were only three of them plus the pilot, they didn’t really need both facilities. Zenyatta had patted her gently on the shoulder and promptly ignored the suggestion.

In the end, the chair won, and Zenyatta settled himself in for an 8 hour flight back to Gibraltar. He pretended not to notice Hana as she grudgingly handed a 20 Euro note to Jesse McCree.

He had rendezvoused with the pair in Nepal, after a terrorist group took several Omnics hostage. It had been a simple operation - local officials negotiated in public while D.Va stood by in case things went south. Zenyatta and McCree, meanwhile, had used an emergency exit to sneak into the building. The three men didn’t realize something was happening until one of their “hostages” began rendering them unconscious.

Zenyatta had been unconcerned about the inability of some humans to tell one omnic from another. “They all look alike” was not an insult to him. Today, he had turned their prejudice against them.

He had just gotten into a state of calm, despite the feel of the chair beneath him, when the plane banked to the left. McCree continued snoring in his seat, and Hana was nowhere to be seen. She had gone to the cargo area to make sure her Mech was secure, perhaps she was there?

Zenyatta rose from his seat, walking toward the cockpit. The plane settled onto its new course, which - from the angle of the sunlight through the windows - would take them southeast.

"Is there a problem, Captain Conroy?"

The pilot turned as he entered. “Not at all, sir. We have orders to divert to Australia. There was some sort of incident there and we’re to have a look.”

“Indeed,” replied Zenyatta. “What sort of incident?”

The captain nodded toward an access terminal behind the copilot’s seat. “They didn’t tell me, sir, but Athena said that you have an updated report in your storage space.”

“Thank you, Captain.” said Zenyatta, as he approached the terminal. Ignoring the keyboard,
Zenyatta placed his palm on a small device integrated into the panel. The contents of Athena’s report poured into his memory, including the satellite imagery and a write-up from Winston.

He stood there for a moment, analyzing the data. Then he sent a message of his own.

---OWSATCOM O837-Delta---

TO: Athena@Overwatch Centcom

FROM: TZenyatta@Overwatch Field Team Beta

SUBJ: Field Ops, Former Australian Omnium Irradiated Zone

Query1: Source of data re: origin of debris?
Query2: Any instructions on the disposition of survivors?

A response came within minutes.

---OWSATCOM O837-Delta---

TO: TZenyatta@Overwatch Field Team Beta

FROM: Soldier76@Centcom

SUBJ: Field Ops, Former Australian Omnium Irradiated Zone

In re Query1: You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. Alexstrasza says the debris should be safe, but use your best judgment and be careful.

In re Query2: Friendly, but cautious. Neither one has moved in over an hour, but both are alive. Unless they act hostile, treat them as civilians. We expect them to need medical care.

Zenyatta considered that information for over 10 minutes, before sending his reply.

---OWSATCOM O837-Delta---

TO: Athena@Overwatch Centcom

FROM: TZenyatta

SUBJ: Field Ops, Former Australian Omnium Irradiated Zone

Query: Who or what is Alexstrasza?
Hana Song was proud of the new mech she and Winston has designed.

The hardware was much the same as her typical mech, but to this model they had added afterburners to give her a better burst of speed out of the gate. They also chose a darker paint scheme, which would work well in forests and research facilities.

Winston had asked her why that was important, and she hadn’t really been able to answer. He had answered her shrug with a shrug of his own, and that had been that. Torbjorn hadn’t even questioned the specs, when it came down to it - he just began fabrication.

Of course, any new model of mech was going to have some sort of issue - and this one was no different. Today it was the left leg. When she had tested her mobility, she found that the mech was pulling to the left. Turns out that her stride was a foot longer on the right leg than the left, and she had not been able to figure out why. In tight maneuvers it really wouldn’t matter, but she didn’t need to be thinking about compensating for a bum leg during combat.

Their jet was a converted military cargo plane, based on venerable designs of decades past, but updated with modern tech and VTOL capability. And since the only cargo on board was her mech, it meant that she had an entire flight to tinker. She had already disassembled one of the actuators when the plane banked left, and only a quick reaction on her part kept her tools from rolling away.

She hadn’t really thought about it until Zenyatta walked into the cargo bay an hour later.

“Good afternoon, Hana Song.” Zenyatta said, in Korean. Hana smiled and replied in kind.

“Good afternoon, Zenyatta.” She set her tools down and looked over to him. “Did the plane turn earlier, or was it just me?”

Zenyatta approached her, placing a hand on the mech for stability. “We have diverted to Australia.” Hana shrugged. “Doesn’t bother me. Maybe I’ll get to put this new girl through her paces.”

“Indeed.” replied Zenyatta.

Hana noticed his hesitation. “Why are we going to Australia?”

Zenyatta turned to look at her. “Apparently, the remains of an ancient Egyptian temple have fallen through a portal from another dimension and landed in the irradiated zone.”

“Oh.” She replied. “Is that all?”

Her sarcasm was usually good for an eye roll at best. This time, Zenyatta took it as a cue to provide more information.

“It would seem that our source of intel on this incident is a dragon woman from another universe.”

Hana looked at him. “Seriously?”

Zenyatta nodded. “She is currently residing at Gibraltar, and has been there for 4 days. She appeared out of nowhere in Hanzo Shimada’s quarters.”
Hana blinked at him, then began gathering her tools. “How about this, Zen. I’m going to stop asking questions, and you and I both will pretend that the universe makes sense. Deal?”

“Agreed.” Zenyatta replied. As he made his way back to the passenger area, he turned once more. “We arrive in two hours.”

“I’ll be ready.” Then she chuckled. “Have fun explaining this to McCree.”

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Jesse McCree had not been thrilled about the diversion. He had been less happy that it meant a trip to Australia. The Radiation field he had to wear for protection was just the icing on the cake.

“It makes my cigar taste like iron, Zen.” he had grumbled.

But Zenyatta was insistent, and so McCree protected himself from the radiation that had saturated the outback long ago. They landed a few hundred meters from the impact zone.

“We should approach on foot,” said Zenyatta. “Be cautious.”

“D.Va online,” Hana said over comms, as her mech lumbered out of the cargo bay. On its back they had stowed a cargo sled - if they did find survivors, or if there was anything worth retrieving, it could be towed by the mech. Better than having her carry injured civilians on her mech - it was doable but not optimal.

Of course, with D.Va in her mech and Zenyatta once again floating over the ground, McCree was actually the only one proceeding “on foot.”

Hana chuckled at his grumbling, as usual. Zenyatta said nothing.

*Something’s bothering our zen master*, McCree thought to himself.

They approached the pile of rubble, and saw what they expected. It looked like someone had dropped a pyramid out of the sky. McCree began circling the rubble to the east, while D.Va and Zenyatta walked to the west. They would meet on the far side, where the life signs had been detected.

McCree walked closer to the stone, and saw a glint of metal. Approaching closer, he saw that the block of stone had actually crushed some sort of machine. The metal device was ruined, but McCree could tell that it didn’t belong in any pyramid he had ever seen.

Zenyatta reported similar finds on their side of the site, which suggested to him that this had been more than one impact. The fact that they knew more about the Egyptian temple was just proof that it had fallen last, and landed on top of the pile.

*Curiouser and curiouser.*

Up ahead, McCree saw one of the survivors. This one, he recognized - they had tangled before.

“I have eyes on one of them, Zen. It’s Junkrat.” McCree knelt down beside the man, scanning for injuries. “Hana, the scanner says that he has pretty bad radiation poisoning, but that he’s ok besides that.” The scanner mentioned an anomalous reading, but McCree chalked that up to, oh, maybe falling through a portal from another dimension?
“I wonder,” she said. “How’d he not get hurt by falling from the sky?”

“No idea, darlin’.” he replied.

McCree saw D.Va’s mech clear the far end of the debris, with Zenyatta alongside. He waved, and heard her acknowledge. Then Zenyatta looked around, probably comparing his view with the aerial photos in his memory. He turned and pointed to a piece of debris about 100 meters from the impact site.

He watched as D.Va approached the second survivor. Zenyatta scanned him for injuries, then helped her turn the man over. McCree heard her reaction over comms.

“No Way.”

He saw that the man was wearing power armor of some sort, with a space helmet and visor. The visor had a skull etched into the reflective surface. McCree looked at Zenyatta, who nodded. Reaching down, McCree slid the visor up into the helmet.

Revealing the unconscious face of Jim Raynor.

Chapter End Notes

For those keeping score at home, this would probably be the end of Act I. I don't plan to keep up the pace I've had these past few weeks, as we move forward - but I did want to find a good stopping point. So, of course, I chose a cliffhanger.

Thanks for sticking with me so far. I'm hopeful that I can make this all worth your time.

Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Recovery

Chapter Summary

The team prepares to take Junkrat and Raynor to Gibraltar. D.Va's head prepares to explode.

---OWSATCOM O837-Delta---

TO: Athena@Overwatch Centcom;
TO: Soldier76@Overwatch Centcom;
TO: AZiegler@Overwatch Centcom

FROM: TZenyatta@Overwatch Field Team Beta

SUBJ: Field Ops, Former Australian Omnium Irradiated Zone - Prelim Report

Field Team Beta has completed an initial survey of the impact site. A detailed report will be filed during our return flight. A brief summary confirms Athena’s analysis - there is no danger, apart from existing background radiation already present.

Two living subjects were retrieved from the impact site.

Subject1: Jameson Fawkes, aka Junkrat. See Overwatch File #071-23894-B. Subject remains unconscious, and suffers from severe radiation poisoning. Detailed medical readings will be forwarded with my report. As is the case with Subject2, the manner of Fawkes’ arrival at the site remains unclear.

Subject2: Unknown Human Male, approximately 35-50 years of age. Subject remains unconscious, though scans indicate no substantial injuries. Symptoms of mild shock are present, however.

Subject2 was found enclosed in an elaborate suit of combat armor. Among other features, the suit was pressurized, indicating the ability to function in harsh environments or even in vacuum. As our readings suggest that the subject can survive outside of the armor, and as the armor appears to be without power, we will attempt to remove the subject from his armor. Once done, we will secure him and depart the impact site.

---OWSATCOM O837-Delta---

TO: Athena@Overwatch Centcom;
TO: Soldier76@Overwatch Centcom;
TO: AZiegler@Overwatch Centcom
At Hana Song’s insistence, I am submitting this addendum to my preliminary report. Hana’s statement follows, verbatim. For your convenience, I have translated her statement into English.

“Zen, tell Jack that this man’s name is Jim Raynor, and that I know this is insane and I’ll explain it all when I get back but he’s a good guy, seriously. And it doesn’t matter that he’s from an old video game, it’s him, it’s really him, I wasn’t dreaming, this is real. Kay Thanks Winky Face.”

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“Alright, Hana, explain it to me again.”

“Only if you hand me that socket.” Hana replied, pointing. McCree sighed and walked over to the makeshift workbench. He lifted the tool and approached the armored stranger.

An unused equipment rack had been converted into something that could accommodate the strange armored man they had found at the impact site. When they had dragged the cargo sled into the plane, Hana had gotten a good look at the armor - and realized that there was no way she could open it from anything other than a standing position. And since the armor was unpowered, they had needed something to hold it up.

So while Zenyatta secured Junkrat in the passenger cabin, McCree and Hana worked in the cargo bay. It took a very busy thirty minutes before they could secure the armor, and even then they had needed the mech to lift it into place.

The man inside remained unconscious. They had opened his visor, so at least he was getting clean air to breathe - but that was about all they could do for him.

Hana impatiently took the tool from McCree’s hand, applying it to a bolt along the man’s side.

“It’s like this,” she began. “When I was 16, I became a pro gamer. And the first major championship I won was in a game called Starcraft.”

McCree watched as she worked. “I’ve heard of that game.”

Hana smiled. “Everyone has heard of that game. It first came out in the 90’s, if you can believe that.” She walked to the other side of the armor, continuing to work. “And it’s been updated ever since. When I was 16, I became the world’s #1 ranked Starcraft player. For the next 3 years, I went undefeated at professional-level play.”

McCree whistled, impressed. “#1 in the world at anything, that averages pretty good I’d say.”

Hana shrugged, still smiling. “What can I say? I play to win.” She held up the socket. McCree raised his hand, and caught the tool as she tossed it to him. “Hand me that power driver, please.”

McCree grabbed the tool and walked it over. “So, Starcraft.”
Hana walked behind the armor, and McCree could hear her working on some of the bolts there.

“Most of the game was multiplayer, you controlling an army against other players doing the same. You have the same resources they do, the same units - so it all comes down to what you can do with them and how quickly you can do it.” She shifted to another bolt. “But the setting was based on a single-player story.”

Now she stopped work, leaning out from behind the armor. Tapping one of the armor’s shoulders, she shook her head. McCree could see that she was still having a hard time believing that this was real.

“One of the main human characters in the game was a marshall from a small, backwater settlement. His people are overrun by aliens, and he has to fight back. And then other aliens show up and it gets weird.”

“The marshall’s name was Jim Raynor.”

McCree looked from her grinning face to the unconscious man in the armor. “You mean to tell me…”

Hana nodded. “This man was in a video game I have played for years.” She pointed to his armor. “And the main soldiers from his faction? They wore armor just like this.”

McCree sighed, looking closely at the man. He certainly looked like someone who had seen more than his share of battles. And now, to find out that he fought aliens on some far off world? Hana was right, it was hard to believe.

A panel on the back of the armor came loose, and Hana set it aside. “OK, let’s see here…”

McCree looked down at the workbench. He reached down and picked up the suit’s visor. Removing the visor had been the first thing Hana did, as she was not entirely sure that the suit’s life support would function without power. McCree had noted that the man had been there for hours before their arrival, and seemed fine, but she wanted to be sure. Now that he knew her history with this person, he understood why.

“If one of my heroes fell from the sky, I’d probably feel the same way.”

He turned the visor over in his hand. The skull design was simple, but effective. Whatever military this man belonged to, McCree doubted that this sort of thing was common issue. Which meant that this Jim Raynor had style.

With a grin, McCree set the visor down. “The man has taste, got to give him that.”

“Glad you approve.”

McCree turned slowly toward the man. Raynor’s eyes were watching him, cautiously. They sized each other up for a moment, before Hana appeared from behind the armor.

To her great credit, she did not jump up and down. She did, however, start speaking very rapidly, in Korean. Raynor’s eyebrows raised, and - despite his situation - McCree saw the beginnings of a smile.

“Slow down, Darlin’” he said. “I don’t follow.”

“Hana says that it is a pleasure to meet you, Marshall Raynor,” said Zenyatta, as he floated into the
cargo bay. “and that she would be honored if you would pose for a selfie with her.”

Raynor watched the Omnic, floating in the air, legs folded in his typical serene pose. “I see. And you are…?”

Zenyatta approached him, and inclined his head in a small bow. “You may call me Zenyatta. My young associate here is Hana Song. And this is Jesse McCree.”

Raynor had turned to Hana, once her name was mentioned. “Hana… you don’t have another code name, do you? Diva or something?”

Her eyes grew wide, and with an excited grin she pointed to the large mech that dominated the far end of the bay. “My codename is D.Va.” Oh my god he knows me he knows me he knows me

“That’s the one. Sarah said I’d like you, and it turns out she was right.”

Hana’s mind came to a screeching halt. “Sarah Kerrigan… likes me?”

Raynor chuckled. “She said you saved her bacon one time in the desert. I was looking forward to getting matched up with you, but things have been a little busy lately.”

“Sounds like it,” McCree remarked. “Your troubles don’t involve dragon women, by any chance, do they?”

Raynor’s eyes snapped over to McCree. “They might. Why?”

Zenyatta took this one. “Alexstrasza, Queen of the Dragons, is safe and healthy in our compound. Once we are secure here, we’ll take you to her.” He inclined his head, continuing. “I was instructed to tell you that she is glad you are well, and that the two of you have much to discuss.”

Raynor closed his eyes. “Good.”

Hana spoke up again. “Speaking of getting secure, um, Jim…” She looked sheepish. “Is there any sort of release for this armor?” She held up her tools. “I don’t really want to disassemble the whole thing.”

Raynor laughed. “Of course, darlin’. There should be a panel behind my left kidney. Open it up, and pull the yellow handle.”

She went to work, and presently the armor’s front panel lifted up and over his head. Raynor started working his way out, before McCree and Zenyatta offered their hands. With his feet on the deck, Raynor stretched his arms, working out the kinks.

“Much obliged,” he said. He wondered why McCree grinned when he said that.

Zenyatta floated closer. “Take a few moments, Marshall. Then we will get you seated in the passenger area. We have a flight of about 9 hours before we reach our headquarters.” He handed Raynor a bottle of water, which he began sipping slowly.

“I should ask,” Raynor began, “Seeing as how there are multiple universes involved… where am I, exactly?” He looked over at McCree, and took another sip of water.

Hana grinned, patting him lightly on the back. “Jim Raynor, welcome to Earth.”

Raynor choked, spitting out his water. “WHAT?”
Arrival

Chapter Summary

Zenyatta brings Raynor and Junkrat to Gibraltar. Hanzo gets worried. Alexstrasza gets mad.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The airfield was swarming with activity when Alexstrasza arrived.

As she watched, one team of mechanics was preparing to service the aircraft, just as they would for any new arrival. Gibraltar had no fixed schedule, and field teams or supplies might arrive at any hour. The fact that it was late evening just meant that there were floodlights to set up as well.

A man with a thick blonde beard was directing another team of mechanics with the skill of an experienced general. They had carts of tools and parts. On the side of one crate, she saw odd letters - Korean, Winston had called it. The words “MEKA” were visible, which meant that this crew was there to service Hana Song’s mech.

Ana Amari and Soldier 76 were waiting near the landing area. Of the sniper, Alexstrasza knew little - even in the nexus they had not had occasion to meet. But Ana was highly respected among the personnel at Gibraltar, and her opinion was one to take seriously.

...Which explained her presence next to Commander Morrison. He had wanted to learn more about the threat posed by the nexus, but Alexstrasza doubted that the Australian incident was what he had in mind as a source of intel.

But intel they had gotten. If anyone had wondered how to answer the unspoken question - “How could it get worse?” - they had their answer. People blinking into and out of the nexus was one thing. Tons of material, falling from the sky, seemingly at random? No, this was another sort of threat altogether. And unlike people disappearing one at a time, this was not a threat that would stay contained for long.

They had been saved from that conversation by the arrival of Zenyatta’s preliminary report. But Alexstrasza knew that there was still discussion to be had.

A medical team was standing to one side of the airfield. The medics had brought along several medkits in addition to two gurneys, though Hanzo had told her that Jim Raynor was awake and mostly healthy. Angela Ziegler stood nearby, speaking quietly with Genji.

“Zenyatta is his Sensei,” said Hanzo, as he walked up to Alexstrasza. “His teacher. They will have much to discuss, on his return.”

Alexstrasza nodded, continuing to watch the pair. Following some comment from Genji, Angela placed her arm around his shoulders. The ninja seemed to be calm, though Alexstrasza knew that the mechanical parts of him made reading his body language almost impossible. She found herself hoping that Zenyatta could help Genji find his peace once more.
“I look forward to meeting him,” she replied to Hanzo.

“I have not had much use for omnics in my time,” he said. “But Zenyatta is unlike any omnic I have encountered.” He paused, searching for the correct words.

“Winston seems to think highly of him,” Alexstrasza prompted. “As does Jack, if he was trusted enough to lead the team in Australia.”

“This is true,” he agreed. “I suppose… it is not so much that Zenyatta is wise, but that he is wisdom. If that makes sense.”

Alexstrasza smiled. “There are many in my world who would love to meet such a one.”

“Perhaps they will have a chance.”

Something in his voice caught her attention, an unspoken ‘or perhaps not’. She leaned closer.

“What worries you about that prospect, archer?”

Hanzo kept his eyes on the airfield. “Is it not cheating to read my emotions with your magic?” The slight smile betrayed his mock scolding, and she smiled in turn.

“I need no magic to tell that something troubles you, Hanzo Shimada.”

“Dōyara.” he replied softly, in his native tongue. *It would seem so.*

Alexstrasza considered the dilemma they faced - how their world had begun to be absorbed into the fold of the nexus, and how the nexus was beginning to influence their world in turn. People entering the nexus and returning was troublesome, but benign on a global scale. Debris, appearing seemingly at random? That was a greater threat. And what if that temple had appeared over a populated area?

Winston spoke of over 9 Billion people in this world. They had no significant source of magic, of course, but their technology more than made up for their lack. How would such a world react to the threat of devastation from another universe?

*Poorly,* she thought.

If that’s true, then what mission could Overwatch possibly have in the Nexus?

“If we find whoever brought your world to the nexus,” Alexstrasza said, “and then we stop him, the portal might be closed for good.” She turned to look Hanzo in the eyes. “That’s it, is it not?”

He returned her gaze. “Hai.” In his eyes, he saw the worry she expected to see, but also determination - the same iron will that had caught her eye in the nexus. What she could not see was what his determination meant.

“Hanzo, I cannot trade my happiness for the safety of 9 Billions.” Gently, she took his hand in hers, squeezing it once. “Nor would you.”

Hanzo said nothing. She felt him squeeze her hand in return.

A warning bell on the control tower sounded, and lights began shining around the landing field. Crewmen with glowing batons began clearing the landing area.

“Nothing is decided, Hanzo. You despair for ashes before the fire has even been set.” Alexstrasza inclined her head toward the landing zone. “They are coming. We should welcome them, together.”
Hanzo nodded, but stood still. “What was it you told me, once, about ashes? Something about a battlefield?”

Alexstrasza smiled. “Many times, entire forests were reduced to ash, in the aftermath of war and rage and death. And I would walk among the corpses of the trees, and breathe upon them, and the forest would grow anew.” She looked once more into his eyes. “I am the life-binder, Hanzo Shimada. I brought hope and renewal to those forests, do you think I would do less for you?”

And with that, she squeezed his hand once more, before releasing it and walking toward the landing zone. Hanzo stood there, watching her go. Then he smiled softly and followed.

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Watching the great jet land had been fascinating for Alexstrasza. The engines it used, with their noise and fire, were far different from any of the flying machines she had known in her homeworld. Even though she had seen spacecraft in the nexus, those too weren’t really comparable.

And when the jet had finally lowered itself to the ground, such was the precision of its pilot that the actual touchdown was as gentle as her own landings. Moreso, perhaps - even with her experience, dragon wings were not engineered for precision.

Once the engines had shut down, the ramp at the rear of the aircraft began lowering. Doctor Ziegler’s medical team was first up, dragging a gurney alongside. Mercy followed close behind. As they entered, Alexstrasza saw a mechanical man floating past them, down the ramp. His garments were simple robes, and his face offered no expression.

This must be Zenyatta, she thought.

To her surprise, she sensed an aura about him - something she had not thought possible when she learned the history of these ‘Omnics’. It was subtle, easy to miss - but unmistakably the aura of life. From every angle, it glowed with silvery tranquility.

The D.Va mech was next down the ramp. Hana Song piloted the walking tank toward the waiting mechanics, and Alexstrasza saw the door to a large equipment bay opening behind them. The blonde man was shouting to her as they walked, and she could see Hana replying. She lost sight of them as they entered the bay, mechanics in tow.

Jim Raynor appeared at the top of the ramp, alongside another man. This one wore a large hat, and Alexstrasza could see small firearms at his sides. He also had a mechanical arm, she noticed. Both men were smoking as they talked, and it was clear that they were getting along.

Raynor saw her in the back of the crowd, and waved. She raised her hand and smiled, glad he was well. I wonder what happened to Kerrigan, she thought. A question for later.

Alexstrasza suddenly found herself filled with dread, but could not explain why. She reached out with her magic, seeking, sensing… Oh. Oh, no. Hanzo sensed the chill run through her, and put a hand on her shoulder. “What…?”

No, she thought. Not here.

She strode forward, walking past Soldier and Ana. Raynor and McCree were just reaching the bottom of the ramp as she stepped onto it.
“Alexstrasza, allow me it introduce…” Raynor’s voice trailed off as he saw the look of rage on her face. Her eyes glowed bright orange, and she had every appearance of being ready for war.

“Where is it?” She demanded.

“Where is what, ma’am?” replied McCree. He still had a hand on his cigar, but Alexstrasza noticed his other hand hovering near his waist.

Hanzo caught up to her at that point, and his presence steadied her. She turned to Raynor, and her voice calmed. But that did not diminish the menace in every word.


Raynor’s face went pale. “What?”

“Our other passenger is human, madame.” The voice sounded like a male Athena, but it came from behind her. Turning, she saw Zenyatta floating nearby. A small orb was hovering in one hand, glowing with a soft purple light.

Alexstrasza met his gaze, though the glowing lights of his eyes gave her no cues. “My magic can sense life.” She pointed to the top of the ramp. “It senses the life of a creature called Zerg in this jet.”

Zenyatta held her gaze. “We saw no such creature. The human we brought on board is known to us. And from Marshall Raynor’s reaction, I suspect he would recognize a zerg.”

“You got that right,” Raynor confirmed.

“So let us calm ourselves and allow Doctor Ziegler to tell us where the truth may be found.”

Zenyatta nodded slightly at the top of the ramp, where Mercy and two medics were wheeling the gurney carrying Junkrat.

Alexstrasza took a step back, and despite every instinct she felt herself calming down. She closed her eyes and let her magic flow over the form on the gurney. If somehow, Abathur had followed Raynor here, or sent one of his mimics, then…

The man was human. Unmistakably. He was ill, and one leg had been lost long ago, but there was no doubt that he was human. Except… she could sense zerg. Just like on Braxis. How is that possible? She thought.

As the medical team approached the bottom of the ramp, Mercy saw the tension on the faces of the group. “What is going on?” she asked.

“Doctor,” said Zenyatta, “when we examined Mr. Fawkes, we found a small anomaly in his readings. Have you done a more detailed scan?”

“Just a brief one. There is a contaminant at his knee, where the prosthetic limb would be attached.”

She handed the scanner to Zenyatta, who glanced at it and then handed it to Raynor.

Raynor looked at the reading, then at Alexstrasza. “Doc, how are you all fixed for isolation?”

“Isolation?”

He handed the scanner to her. “Your contaminant. It’s a zerg parasite.”
I really enjoy writing Zenyatta. It's refreshing to have a character whose superpower is reasonableness.

Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Soldier 76 was standing in the observation room when Alexstrasza entered. The room was darkened, allowing the soft blue light of the isolation suite to wash over the interior. Soldier’s visor, with its red glow, was the only other light.

He did not turn as she entered.

Walking up to the glass, Alexstrasza saw a medic checking on Junkrat. They were wearing some sort of yellow garment that seemed to cover every inch of their body. The helmet was large and angular, with a broad window across the front. She saw tanks and tubes on the medic’s back. The armor was so thick and cumbersome that Alexstrasza could not even tell if the medic was male or female without using her magic.

“Mercy thinks he’ll wake up soon,” Soldier said, without preamble. “Perhaps then we can get some answers.”

“Perhaps,” she agreed.

They watched the medic finish the required checks, and then turn to leave the room. Junkrat continued to lay still, tubes going into his nose and arm. The large display on one wall showed numbers that meant little to Alexstrasza, though the fact that the lines seemed steady was a good sign, apparently. The man was stable.

“I owe you an apology, Commander Morrison.”

Soldier shook his head. “You saw a threat to the safety of this base and this world, and you acted. No one can fault you for that.” He nodded toward the sleeping form in the next room. “And let’s face it, you were right.”

*I don’t like being right,* she thought. *Not about this.*

Soldier continued. “What do I need to know about the zerg?”

“Jim Raynor would be a better person to ask, as the zerg are from his home realm. My experience with them is limited to the nexus.” She sighed. “But from what I know, they are an insect-like race of highly adaptable creatures that consume everything in their path. Including people.”

“Your limited knowledge almost drove you to fight off three of my best operatives, your grace.”

She looked at him, a smile on her face. “You only get one apology today, Commander. But consider how I came to be in your world. I was on a team with Raynor, Hanzo, and two others. One of them was named Abathur. He was a zerg, and he betrayed us at the first opportunity.”
Soldier’s eyebrows rose at this. “So you fought the zerg with a zerg ally?”

Another sigh. “We didn’t know we were going to fight the zerg. And having one zerg ally was acceptable, because our fifth team member was the Queen of the Zerg. Abathur had been obedient to her.”

“And this queen of the zerg… she, you trusted?”

“Raynor trusted her - when she was human, they were close, and that has continued during her time as a zerg.”

One of Soldier’s hands went to the back of his head, an idle fidget that betrayed his growing confusion. “Someday this will all make sense, right Zen?”

“Enough light will dispel the shadow of any doubt, Jack.” the omnic guru replied.

Alexstrasza turned to see Zenyatta floating calmly in the corner. How did I fail to sense him? She wondered. The omnic began approaching them, floating across the room.

“I regret that our meeting yesterday was marred by my conduct, Sensei Zenyatta.” Alexstrasza said.

“You owe me no apology, Alexstrasza.” Zenyatta replied. “Though the term Sensei implies that I am your teacher, which seems… premature, perhaps.”

“Hanzo referred to you by that title, in reference to his brother - I took it as honorific, rather than descriptive.” She smiled at him, offering a slight bow. “Titles are important, in my world. We have no one to tell our stories for us, as Athena does in your world.”

Zenyatta inclined his head slightly at this. “Often the most important title is the one we ourselves choose. You, for instance, have been referred to variously as the Dragon Queen, the Leader of the Red Dragonflight, and Guardian of Azeroth. But the title you give yourself is ‘Life-Binder’.”

Alexstrasza’s hand rose, and a green light began to surround it. “There is no task that can come before the protection of life itself,” She agreed.

“Indeed.” said Zenyatta, watching the life magic dance around her outstretched hand.

The glow receded. “I spoke of this with Hanzo, shortly before you arrived yesterday. I told him that I would not let nine billions suffer under threat of harm, if it is within my power to stop it.” She turned back to the observation window, and gestured at the sleeping Junkrat. “That is part of what set me off, as it turns out. I sensed the zerg presence, and had visions of infestations spreading across your world.”

“We prevented that, at least.” Soldier said. “But now we get to add ‘unstoppable alien infestations’ to the list of world-ending dangers posed by the nexus.”

Neither Alexstrasza nor Zenyatta had a reply to that.

The three of them watched Junkrat in silence for a few minutes, each gathering their thoughts. They turned when the door opened again, the light from the hallway framing the silhouette of Angela Ziegler.

“How’s our patient, Doc?” Soldier asked.

Angela walked over to the observation window, joining the group. “He should not be as healthy as
he is, for the amount of radiation he took. But Jamison has always had an odd reaction to radioactivity, as you know.” She nodded toward the vitals displayed in the next room. “Everything looks good for now. He’s even dreaming, it seems.”

“And the parasite?” asked Alexstrasza.

“Marshall Raynor says that it appears dormant, but he went to great pains to stress that he is not actually any sort of field medic.” Angela replied. “Unfortunately, he is also our resident zerg expert. I left him down in the equipment bay, where I introduced him to Torbjorn. We can get him on comms if we need him.”

“I believe we should have Athena analyze the parasite’s genetic profile.” Zenyatta said.

“She’s already working on it. I wanted to know what we were dealing with, on the off chance that Junkrat was infected somehow.”

Alexstrasza stepped toward the glass, as Soldier and Angela discussed Junkrat’s condition. She had sensed something, just at the edges of her awareness.

“Alexstrasza?” Zenyatta asked, quietly, as he floated beside her.

“I’m not sure,” she replied, just as quietly. Closing her eyes, she reached out with her magic. Being nearby and alone, Junkrat was easy to find.

Mercy had been right, the man was indeed dreaming. His aura was agitated, which is not typical for someone who was unconscious. As she watched, it almost seemed like he had moved. Or, rather, that his head had moved. Could he be....?

“Is there a way to listen in on that room?” she asked. Angela looked at her, then at Junkrat, before touching some controls on her wrist display. The speakers in the ceiling turned on, and at first they could hear only the beeps of medical equipment.

“He’s muttering.” Zenyatta said, after a moment.

Angela continued to work her display, and now the medical devices fell silent. A quiet voice could be heard, though it was impossible to discern anything coherent.

“I’m amplifying that,” Angela answered, before Soldier could ask. He nodded and kept his gaze on the patient.

“.....my leg.....” they heard Junkrat mutter. “Lady, gold lady, bought me my leg....”

———

“You’re funny looking when you stomp your foot, gold lady.”

The man’s attitude was annoying. His accent was annoying. His dancing around was annoying. But his refusal to listen to her?

That was the part that infuriated Chromie the most.
“Junkrat, you need to listen.” she repeated.

The man kicked a soccer ball against the steel gate. Dust trailed behind it as it went, before taking an odd bounce and landing in a wooden cart. Junkrat walked slowly over to the cart, lifting the ball, then drop kicked it with his right foot. She watched him rotate the ankle slowly before he set the foot back down. Then he turned to her.

“I know this is a dream, Crazy. You can’t scam me.” Junkrat ticked off his points on one hand. “First, we’re in Junkertown and no one has tried to kill us. Second, I haven’t had a meat leg on this side in years. And there’s no way you bought me the real thing. And fourth, even if you are trying to trick me, I ain’t gots nothin’ to steal.”

“My name,” Chromie replied, through clenched teeth, “is Chromie.”

“Like I said,” Junkrat laughed. “Crazy. Whatever you’re selling, I ain’t buying.”

“I’m not selling…. this isn’t…” Chromie sputtered, watching Junkrat stroll casually over to the gate to retrieve the soccer ball.

“Yeah, sure.” With light taps, Junkrat maneuvered the ball toward the gnome, before swerving right and passing her. She turned, watching him belt a shot into a window.

Finally, she thought, seeing the ball disappear. Maybe now he’ll… oh.

Junkrat had taken a handful of rocks, then strolled back over to the front gate. Taking aim at the ramshackle “Junkertown” sign over the gate, he began to pelt the sign. She heard a piece of glass shatter, probably a light of some sort.

And he was humming.

That’s it.

A blast of sand struck the sign, shattering whatever intact lights there may have been. The growl that had accompanied the blast startled Junkrat, who turned slowly to the gnome.

Chromie stood still, her anger plain upon her face. An avatar of sand and dust rose behind her, shaped like a great and powerful dragon. As he watched, it let out another snarl of rage, and another gout of sand blasted the sign. The “J” tilted to the side, and the “N” threatened to fall off entirely.

“I am Chronormu, Timewalker of the Bronze Dragonflight, defender of the time stream. And I’m here to save your life and the lives of every person on your homeworld.” As she spoke, she walked slowly forward. The Dragon kept pace, eyeing Junkrat menacingly.

“And you WILL listen to what I have to say, Jamison Fawkes.”

Chapter End Notes

When this is all done, I imagine Alexstrasza telling Chromie to go back in time to leave a message with Junkrat, then snickering to herself after Chromie leaves.
Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Jim Raynor whistled as he followed Torbjorn into the equipment bay. “Swann would love this.”

The cavernous space could have swallowed good old Bay 12 twice over, and still would have had room for dessert. And unlike the makeshift workshop on the Hyperion, this space was purpose-built to someone’s exacting specifications. Even with so much room to work with, Raynor could see that the bay was almost filled to overflowing.

In the corner, he saw Hana’s mech, easily dominating the room. Racks of spare parts were arrayed to the left and right, which was no surprise - from the way Sarah had described the mech’s young pilot, he knew she would be hard on equipment. And here, in this world, replacements wouldn’t magically appear on command.

A large workbench took up the far wall. It was a well-used space, he could tell - shelves overflowed with tools of all types. But if this mechanic was anything like Swann, Raynor knew that the man would be able to find any tool at all in that mess, on command. Where he saw a mess, Torbjorn saw a finely-tuned system - and heaven help whoever moved one of those tools out of its place.

“Over there,” the man shouted, pointing at an empty rack. Raynor turned, watching as four techs maneuvered a cart carrying his power armor. It had taken all four of them to lift the 300-pound suit, and Raynor found himself impressed again at Hana Song’s ingenuity. She had rigged a rack for his armor in less than an hour while monitoring his vitals and having a mild panic attack, using only spare parts from a cargo plane.

_Not bad,_ he thought.

Her anxiety, Zenyatta had explained, came from the fact that she had played a video game that featured, among other things, the events of the last few years of his life. He wasn’t a soldier from another world to her, but a character from a story she had played out for years. So were Sarah, Tassadar, Artanis, and probably others. He had gently changed the subject after that, not wanting to know how accurate the game had been.

If there was a detailed chronology of his life in this world, even in a game… the thought that it might cover events after his present was worrying. And the hell of it was, knowing the future might help him save lives, when (if!) he got home. But could he bet lives on the account of a game from another universe? _No_, he had decided. _Better safe than sorry._

So he had changed the subject, and found that Hana Song was just as eager to talk about herself and her world as she was to talk about his own. She had led an interesting life, despite her age - and her skill at piloting her mech was second to none, according to McCree.

Raynor had known young soldiers, but Hana was different. She had been to war and come out unscathed, to all appearances. Perhaps fighting robotic soldiers - omnis, as they were called here -
had made the difference? Destroying what appeared to be hardware had to be easier than seeing the blood and gore of dead men and women.

Of course, nothing was that simple, as Zenyatta demonstrated. Raynor had not quite known what to make of the omnic guru. He had expected the cold calculation of the adjutants he had worked with over the years, but Zenyatta defied that. Calm he had, in abundance, but he also seemed to possess a blend of wisdom and logic that Raynor could not help but find reassuring.

Jim found himself wondering how a meeting between Zenyatta and some of the other calm and wise residents of the nexus might play out. He would get along with Kharazim, no doubt.

As he watched the techs hoist his armor into a rack, Raynor walked closer. The yellow steel frame was clearly sturdy enough to accommodate the weight of his armor, but the arms holding the chains looked like they had been lowered. Stepping closer, he tried to get a better look.

“How did you build a rack for my armor in just a few hours?” he asked. Torbjorn looked over at him.

“I didn’t.” he replied. “Hana sent us your measurements, and I had Brigitte repurpose a spare rack we already had.”

Raynor frowned. “I didn’t know you used power armor.”

Torbjorn watched as the techs secured the armor to the rack. “I don’t, really.”

“But I do.”

He turned around at the new voice, then craned his neck up. The man towered over Raynor by a foot or more, easily. His grey hair framed a scarred face that had clearly seen its share of battle. It seemed as if he could have carried Raynor’s power armor in one hand, if he had wished to do so.

Torbjorn shook hands with the massive figure, requiring the man to bend down noticeably. Grinning, he turned to Raynor. “Marshall Raynor, may I present Reinhardt Wilhelm. Reinhardt, this is Jim Raynor.”

“Ah, yes,” said Reinhardt, smiling. “Our mysterious soldier from another universe. I have wanted to meet you, Marshall.” He reached out his hand.

Raynor took his hand, worrying that his own would be crushed. “Good to meet you, Reinhardt.”

“So,” Reinhardt said, walked toward the armor rack. “This is your armor.”

Raynor followed, nodding. “This armor has gotten me through a lot of scrapes.

“I can tell. But it’s...” his voice trailed off.

Raynor looked at Reinhardt. “It’s, what?”

“Well...” Reinhardt looked back at Raynor, and now Jim saw the grin on the man’s face. “It’s awfully small, is it not?”

A cough came from behind them, caused both to turn. Torbjorn was smiling as well, but it was the patient smile of a father whose patience was wearing thin. “If you two are finished comparing equipment, I’d like to get some work done, if that’s alright.”

Reinhardt laughed, and Raynor heard in it the laugh of a man who did nothing by half measures.
OK, I like these two, he thought.

“Come here, Marshall Raynor, and I will show you how we do power armor in the Crusaders.”

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When Torbjorn found them, two hours later, it was in Reinhardt’s corner of the bay, sitting on crates next to his Crusader armor. They had mugs in their hands, and for a moment Torbjorn was annoyed that they had began drinking without him - but then he saw that it was just coffee.

Reinhardt caught his brief glare, and chuckled. “No, my friend, we would not do that to you. Jim says that he and McCree were going to get drunk when this is all over, and I told him that they could not do so unless they brought us along.”

Torbjorn dragged over a crate, joining them. “We’ve some work to do, yet. But when this is over, whatever this is, I’ll be there.”

“Good,” said Raynor. “Now if I just knew what this was, exactly.”

“I’ve heard some of the tale,” said Reinhardt. “To learn that there are other universes is no surprise, I think. But now people are being pulled from one universe to the other? And debris, if what Zenyatta reported is true.” He shook his head. “Not the crisis I thought we would be dealing with, that is for certain.”

“It’s not all that much better from the other side of things.” said Raynor. “I went to sleep one night, in a tiny cabin on a starship. I woke up in full armor, laying in a forest, with a centaur asking me if I was there to kill her.” He took a sip of his coffee. “And then it got weird.”

“So you said.” Reinhardt looked at Torbjorn. “One of Jim’s allies was an alien who died years before, yet was pulled into this nexus.”

Torbjorn’s eyebrows raised at that. “So, time travel, eh?”

“Could be. I don’t know.” Raynor shook his head. “Even with what we know about the nexus, we still don’t know how it works or how it will stop working.” Off their glances, he continued, quietly. “Tassadar died saving my life, saving his people. He didn’t disappear off of his command ship hours before the battle. So eventually, he will return from the nexus and go to his death.”

“Would you stop him?” Torbjorn asked, after a moment. “If you could change that history, would you?”

Raynor looked at the engineer. “No. If I change that, how would I know that I’d make it to the nexus to be able to change it?” Another sip of coffee. “Besides, I have it on good authority that messing with time isn’t a great idea. When a time travelling dragon tells you not to destroy time and space, you tend to believe her.

Torbjorn blinked at him. “She time travels too?”

Raynor laughed, seeing the confusion on Torbjorn’s face. “Alexstrasza doesn’t, no. But she isn’t the only dragon who turned into a woman. Her friend Chromie is a time travelling bronze dragon.”
“And when you return to the nexus, she will aid you?” Reinhardt asked.

Raynor nodded. “Tassadar was one of the first ones to notice that a new world had been snagged by the nexus. But it was Chromie who saw that there might be a way to fix it, keep the nexus from messing with your world.”

“So how do you return to the nexus, then?” asked Torbjorn.

“I’m a bit fuzzy on that part of the plan,” he replied. “I’m hoping Alexstrasza is working on it, because I’m out of ideas, ammo, and armor.” He spread his hands out, smiling. “Just a cup of coffee and a pretty face.”

“Well,” began Torbjorn. “We can come up with ideas, surely. Got some just today, fresh stock. But your weapon is easy to modify - we can give you all the ammo you need. And as for power - I think we’ve repaired the damage to your armor. But your power cells are drained. Any idea what sort of power you need?”

The smile on Raynor’s face faded. “I dunno. Do you happen to have any cold fusion power cells laying around?”
Chapter Summary

Tracer has a chat with Alexstrasza. Mercy has a mystery to solve.

“You’re not one for sitting still, are you?” Alexstrasza asked.

Tracer paused, looking over at the dragon queen. “We must not know each other very well in the nexus, your grace.” Then she grinned. “If I’m standing still, it feels like I’m missing something.”

They were again on Hanzo’s balcony, just as they had been three days prior. There was a lighter breeze than before, and the night was warmer. The moon was no longer full, but it was close enough to cast plenty of light on the gathering. Between the moon, the stars, and the soft blue glow of Tracer’s armor, they had all the light they needed.

Tracer had stopped her pacing, and was leaning against the balcony. Alexstrasza turned in her chair to watch. Tracer, seeing that she now had an audience, folded her arms across her chest and attempted to look serious. The illusion did not last long, and both women laughed softly.

“Mercy will be here soon, Lena.” Hanzo said, and as Alexstrasza turned to look across the patio table at him, she could hear the amusement in his voice.

Good, she thought. He needed to relax - the last few days had been stress filled, to say the least.

She took a sip of her tea. Hanzo had opted to brew some tea Mercy had given him, rather than getting out the sake again. Alexstrasza hoped that their conversation at the landing pad the day before had not been part of his reason. As stressful as the past week had been, the next days would prove even more challenging.

*I don’t need him worrying about me*, she thought. *Or us. Not until this is over.*

But then there it was. When this was over, Hanzo’s world might be cut off from the nexus, permanently. The fact that it might be necessary, the fact that it might save lives - that didn’t change the fact that they would be separated, forcefully.

And it would have to be a separation. For just as she could not abandon her world, she could not ask him to abandon his own. But if the alternative was allowing the nexus to leak into this world, then there was no alternative.

*A worry for tomorrow*, Alexstrasza thought.

“....Alexstrasza?”

She looked at Tracer. “Yes?”

“I asked if you knew what Mercy found on Junkrat.” She replied.

“She did not say,” said Hanzo. “Angela just asked where we were, and said she had found something. I told her to come up. Then you arrived.” He smiled softly. “If it involves the nexus, you
Tracer shrugged. “I still don’t have any real memories of the nexus. But I have been having dreams, just like you did, Hanzo.” She rested a hand on her chronal accelerator. “Sometimes, when I’m asleep, my dreams go sideways. It usually means that this thing needs adjusting.”

“So,” said Alexstrasza. “When you started dreaming of other worlds…”

Tracer nodded. “I just figured I needed more rest. We have been busy, these past few months.”

“Genji was worried that he was a different person in the nexus.” Alexstrasza shook her head, sadly. “He wasn’t - the Genji I knew and fought alongside was the same man as the one you know here. But he didn’t know that. How could he?”

Tracer listened intently. “Does that mean… Alexstrasza, did we know each other?”

She nodded. “I fought with you twice, and we got along well. Honestly, we made a good team.”

Tracer grinned at that, but her eyes were still troubled. “I feel like… it’s hard to describe.” She looked at Alexstrasza. “I feel like I remember knowing you, even though I don’t remember you directly. Does that make sense?”

“I assure you, Lena Oxton, that there are many stranger ways to remember the nexus.”

“Well, good, then.” Tracer replied, still smiling. “At least I haven’t gone completely off my nut.”

Alexstrasza saw Hanzo’s smile as he listened to their exchange. He seemed about to comment, when a quiet beep announced Doctor Ziegler. He rose and entered his quarters, to let her in.

As soon as the balcony door closed, Alexstrasza found Tracer leaning against the railing nearest her chair. Even after seeing it in battle, Alexstrasza continued to be amazed at the woman’s speed.

“I’ve seen the way Hanzo looks at you before, you know.”

Alexstrasza’s eyebrows rose. “Oh?” Where was this going?

Tracer nodded, seriously. “In the mirror. Every time I look at my partner, Emily.” She leaned closer. “I don’t know your past, or your history… but be gentle with him, will ya?”

Alexstrasza met Tracer’s eyes. “I will never knowingly hurt Hanzo. That’s the best I can do, in light of the current crisis.”

Tracer smiled at that. “Good. He’s had a rough go of things, but deserves to be happy.” Nodding to the door, as Hanzo and Angela approached. “And he seems happy, to me at least.”

Following her eyes, Alexstrasza watched Hanzo open the door and let Angela Ziegler onto the balcony. “To me, as well.”

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Tracer, for all her impatience, managed to wait until more tea had been served before putting Angela on the spot.
“So, Doctor Ziegler…” she began.

Angela smiled, and pulled out a display. “I wondered why you were here, Lena.”

“A mystery, and you didn’t invite me? I’m wounded.” One hand over her heart, Tracer covered her eyes with the other. “I may never recover.”

Hanzo’s attempt to stifle his laughter ended in a snort, and that brought its own chuckles from the three women.

Even as she continued to work the display, Angela glanced over at Alexstrasza, nodding slightly. *The Doctor had been worried about him, too.*

“Allright,” Angela began. “We had Athena look at the DNA of that zerg parasite you found.” As Alexstrasza watched, images of spirals and helices filled the screen, along with letters and numbers in a readout along the side. “And when we sequenced the genetic code, we couldn’t make heads or tails of it.”

“This might be Winston’s area, more than mine,” said Tracer.

Angela nodded. “And he is working on it as well. But he suggested we get Alexstrasza and Raynor to look at it as well, since you’ve both dealt with the Zerg before. You might see something we miss.”

Alexstrasza continued to study the scrolling numbers, looking for any sort of pattern. She had learned what DNA was from Kerrigan one night, when they had discussed her metamorphosis into the Queen of Blades. The science, she was sure she could learn in time… but it wasn’t something that would aid her much in her homeworld, not being equipped for genetic testing at this level. And in the Nexus, their time for biomedical research was limited, at best.

“I’m sorry, Doctor, but I barely understand what it is I’m even looking at.” She sighed. “Hanzo, does any of this look familiar?”

The archer was giving the display his keen attention, as he did for any adversary. But he shook his head as well. “My education was more… informal than the Doctor’s.” He replied. “Genetics was not something I needed.”

A section of the graphic scrolled past, and a caption caught Alexstrasza’s eye. “What does ‘dead area’ mean?”

Angela stopped the display and scrolled back to that part of the DNA sequence. “Part of the parasite’s dna doesn’t seem to be linked in to anything. It’s disconnected from the rest of the code.”

Alexstrasza looked at her, and waited. The Doctor caught her look, and sighed.

“Allright, DNA is a set of instructions for building a life form. Do this, then do this, then do this, and so on. It is much like a computer code, only vastly more complex. This set of instructions,” she pointed at the display, “aren’t connected to anything. Near as Athena can tell, there is no part of the sequence that would tell you to do what this set of instructions does.”

Tracer was leaning over their shoulders, looking at that sequence. “So it was just dropped into the middle of a genetic sequence, but doesn’t do anything?”

Angela nodded. “Jim said that the zerg were engineered. Maybe this was an attempt at something new.”

Angela’s eyes grew wide, and she began isolating that sequence. “I wonder…” As they watched, the dead area filled the screen. The letters changed to a series of ones and zeroes, all in groups of three. An error message appeared at the bottom of the display.

“It’s not binary, there isn’t any sort of result when we run it through Athena.”

Hanzo looked at Alexstrasza. “Besides, I doubt the zerg would know binary. They don’t use computers.”

“No,” Alexstrasza agreed. “They would not. But this pattern can’t be random.”

Tracer laughed. “It’s not. Don’t you see it, Angela?”

Angela looked at the display, then at Tracer. “I’m sorry, I don’t.”

Tracer pointed at the screen. “Off off off… on on on… on on on…” Angela’s eyes grew wide as she figured it out.

“Morse Code.”

Tracer nodded. “Morse code.”

Alexstrasza watched them. “So each grouping is part of a code?”

“When I was a pilot,” Tracer said, reading the message. “We learned ways to signal for help in an emergency.” Without looking, she tapped her ear. “Communications can go haywire, tech can fail. But if you can get any signal out, a series of long and short beeps can be effective. Morse Code is over two centuries old, but it has the advantage of being known worldwide.”

She had pulled her own display out, and was transcribing the message. Alexstrasza looked at Hanzo, and saw the concern on his face. He caught her gaze, and shrugged.

“I wonder who within the zerg would know morse code, Lena.” He clearly didn’t trust the message.

Alexstrasza made the connection. “The zerg would have no need of such a system. They have a hive mind.” She looked at Hanzo. “But a former human soldier who was absorbed by the zerg?”

The surprise on his face was plain. “Kerrigan.”

She nodded. “Kerrigan.”

Tracer looked at her display, frowning. “Maybe I’m wrong. This first word doesn’t make sense.” She turned the screen so they could see. “This first word is gibberish. I don’t get it.”

Alexstrasza sighed. “Well, at least we know who sent the message.”

The screen had one word. A-B-A-T-H-U-R.
Stop

Chapter Summary

Alexstrasza marvels at the wonders of Hanzo’s world. Tracer and Winston help her interpret Abathur’s message.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for Rape, in that Alexstrasza is a survivor and learns that the architect of that violation is involved in all of this mess. Nothing is depicted or explained, but her reaction to his name alone is strong - and telling. I explain further in the end notes, so this warning applies there as well I suppose.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Alexstrasza found Tracer and Winston hard at work in his lab.

They had not worked through the night, according to Athena. But Winston keeps very odd hours, and when he sent a message to Tracer about the code, she had been awake to receive it. Dawn found them in the lab, eagerly piecing together Abathur’s coded message.

They did not notice as she walked in, so she took a seat at Winston’s desk. A tray of food was sitting there, and she took a pastry for herself. A ‘cross-ant’, Tracer had called it. This one had a delightful filling, some sort of white substance mixed with a red fruit.

The Gibraltar complex housed over a hundred people, including the primary team members and support staff. Mechanics, medics, and so on. They came from all corners of the world, from both military and civilian fields. Feeding them all, and doing so with menus that would appeal to such a diverse group, was a challenge.

To hear Hanzo tell the tale, it was almost as if the cafeteria workers had a harder job than he and his teammates.

She had not been disappointed with the meals, so far - but everything here was new to her. Whenever possible, she had eaten in the main dining area, often with Hanzo but sometimes with Angela or Tracer. Her presence was not exactly a secret, necessarily, but the true nature of her origin was being closely held. Letting the rumor spread that she was an outside operative helping with a project kept questions to a minimum.

And she was not one to routinely travel - back home, she was the Dragon Queen. Just setting foot in a village or town would cause a scene. Here, she was the lady in red with horns and an odd accent. In an organization with mechanical men and a gorilla scientist, she didn’t even stand out. So now, with an opportunity to just relax and see new faces, she was going to make the most of it.

From her conversations with Angela, she got the impression that Hanzo usually ate simple meals in his quarters, alone. He did not deny this, when asked - but told Alexstrasza that he missed the foods
of his homeland.

“I would like to visit Japan with you someday, Hanzo.” She had told him, truthfully.

“We will. Someday.” He had replied, unconvincingly.

Alexstrasza played the conversation back in her mind as she watched Tracer and Winston. Of Tracer’s homeland, she knew little - except that it was one of the few remaining kingdoms on the planet. At one point, it had stood at the head of an empire spanning most of the world. The pictures she had seen reminded her of old Lordaeron, before its fall - ancient-looking castles alongside the gleaming steel towers of this world.

And Winston. Alexstrasza still had trouble believing that anyone could have been born on, or even lived on, a moon. The pictures she had seen just piqued her curiosity. Men in suits of white armor, much like that of Raynor’s world, had walked in a sea of gray desolation. They had planted a flag in the rocky surface of the moon, and then returned home. When she asked why they went at all, Winston had smiled. “Because it was there.”

Such wonders, she thought. If she had months, she could not see them all. After thousands of years, standing vigil over Azeroth, she had seen all that there was to see. And of the horrors of war, she had had her fill.

Then the nexus arrived, and she had explored its secrets with abandon. Surely, she sought to determine if the nexus was a threat, but that turned out not to be the case. No debris rained down upon her world, no attacks were forthcoming. Unlike Hanzo’s world, hers was not threatened.

But that did not mean that she couldn’t take the time to explore a bit, see these pieces of other worlds captured by the nexus. The truth of the matter was that she had gotten bored. It had been a very long time indeed since there was anything new to see in Azeroth. And ever since the Second War, and its harrowing aftermath… well, Alexstrasza welcomed a change of scenery.

She was considering whether to sample another ‘cross-ant’, when Winston finally noticed her. “Your grace, my apologies, I didn’t see you enter.”

She smiled at him. “I know. As punishment, I have requisitioned your breakfast.” She took another croissant and pointed it at him. “Next time I will not be so forgiving.”

As she blinked, Tracer appeared next to her, holding a small plate. “Take this. You’re going to want to see what we found.” Alexstrasza rose, placing her croissant on the plate and taking it from Tracer’s hand.

Walking over to the large wall display, she saw the dots and dashes that Tracer had identified as ‘Morse Code’. From her telling, the sequence of dot and dash could be used to spell any word. There were also common abbreviations and signals mixed into the code, shorthand such as “S.O.S.”, which signaled distress but originally stood for “Save our Ship.”

“The trick,” began Winston, “is that whoever wrote this message didn’t entirely know how to structure its content.” He indicated the first sentence. “It’s almost as if they were writing a message in a language with which they were not fluent.”

“Abathur Sends stop Transmit to Binder of Life stop.” Alexstrasza read. “If this is from Abathur, then some of the odd phrasing is his own. He was part of the zerg hive mind, before he became self aware. Sometimes it seems as if he is learning to speak. His words are often just thoughts strung together, impulsive analysis, and so on.”
“That fits,” said Tracer. “The biggest hurdle we had was this symbol.” She pointed to what had been labeled *stop*. “Once we figured out that he was using that to break up thoughts, the message came together.”

“Of course,” mused Alexstrasza, “the fact that it seems to be from Abathur means that we have to be careful. When we fought the zerg, he betrayed us almost immediately.”

*Realm of Shimada Hanzo is ninth world in nexus stop*

*World nine captured by Psi Emitter technology stop method unknown stop*

“What is a Psi Emitter?” asked Winston.

Alexstrasza kept reading the message. “It is a device from Jim Raynor’s world. It was a weapon his people built to fight the zerg. Normally, the creatures are mindless - the psi emitter attracts them and directs their rage.”

“Like a light drawing in an insect,” he replied.

She nodded. “Yes. The horror of the thing came when a warlord activated one of these devices in a populated area. The swarm attacked, wiping out thousands of civilians.”

“So the psi emitter attracts the zerg…” Tracer began. “So how could it attract our world?”

“I do not know. But see that next line?” Alexstrasza pointed.

*Device at Braxis strengthened tenfold stop*

*Can be adjusted for other nonsentients stop*

“Braxis is where Abathur betrayed us. It’s where Hanzo and I were before we appeared here.” She thought back to that battle, and to Kerrigan’s near-capture by the mental assault of the upgraded emitter. “Sarah Kerrigan was born human, but is integrated into the zerg. She felt the mental assault from the device. I had to use my magic to block it.”

*At Braxis Psi Emitter captured Abathur stop Freed when Braxis collapsed stop*

“So there it is,” Winston said. “He claims to have been under the influence of the device.”

“We have a phrase in this world, Alexstrasza.” Tracer said. “Trust, but verify.” She gestured at the display. “Whatever his motives, leaving this message with Junkrat, and then hoping that he made it back here to us - to you - that took a lot of work.”

She nodded. “I’ve seen what the emitter can do to someone.” She could not just trust Abathur, not yet… but what he had to tell them was worth knowing, regardless. Even lies could provide useful information.
Binder of Life can open path to Nexus stop
Path from a-z-e-r-o-t-h will suffice here stop
Doorways will open soon stop
Open own door when next portal appears stop

“Azeroth,” Winston said, pointing to the word on the display.

“My world,” Alexstrasza replied. “When we learned that our realm had been connected to the nexus, I used magic to travel there voluntarily. It is a simple spell, intended for one. But the connection between my world and the nexus is much different than the connection to your world.”


“If this is true,” Alexstrasza continued, “then I can open a portal from here to the nexus. But only when another portal opens from the nexus here. So we wait for another impact, somewhere, and hope to get there in time?”

“Maybe not,” said Winston. He scrolled to the next statement. “We hadn’t figured this part out yet.”

Five nine five three three four dot eight portside stop
Three zero three zero five one dot eight spinward stop
Timewalker advises bomber five days to prepare stop

“So something happens five days from… when?” Tracer asked. “Junkrat appeared three days ago in Australia, arrived here two days ago, and we just found this code yesterday.”

Alexstrasza shook her head. “This seems to say that Chromie gave the warning to the bomber. That would be Junkrat, from the way Hanzo described him.” Tracer nodded in confirmation. “So when he wakes, perhaps that starts our five days.”

“So that’s when,” said Winston. “Where is the part I’m not clear on, yet. These look like coordinates but I don’t know how to parse them.”

Alexstrasza considered the message. This was all filtered through Kerrigan’s understanding of Morse Code, and her version - the one from her world - was used by space travellers and soldiers. Spinward, too, would be a planetary term. Raynor had mentioned it once. It was easier than figuring out which way was North and which was East. You just figured out the direction of spin for the planet you were on and made that an arbitrary East.

He had explained it as a time saver, and a reminder to stay on their toes - if they were going to be on a strange planet long enough to need a more detailed understanding of its seasons, then someone had screwed up.

Spinward, she thought. “That has to be east. The Port side of a ship is left, and I would think that remains the same for sailing ships and starships. So make that north. Where do those coordinates fall
“Athena?” Winston called. The message display fell to the side, as a world map appeared. It zoomed in on the large continent at the top right. A city on a river appeared, and a small marker highlighted an industrial complex on the outskirts of the city. The label had what appeared to be letters, but they were unfamiliar.

“Volskaya Industries,” Tracer said quietly. Off Alexstrasza’s look, she explained. “When the Omnis fought a war against humanity, Katya Volskaya led the battle in Russia. This complex is her headquarters, and the home of her most advanced manufacturing.”

“If it is destroyed,” Winston began.

“Yep.” replied Tracer. “The war begins all over again.”

“I thought the omnic war had ended?” Alexstrasza asked.

“It did, mostly. But in Russia, it would be more accurate to say that they fought to a standstill.” Winston frowned. “And many have wondered if the omnis - or the Russians, for that matter - are playing some deeper game. But their forces are mostly balanced.” He pointed at the map. “Take the core of their defenses off the field, and all bets are off.”

“So if a portal opens there and dumps tons of debris on that spot,” Alexstrasza continued.

Tracer nodded. “Disaster.”

Winston considered the map. “So we need to have a strike team ready to go into the nexus, and at the same time have a team standing by to mitigate the damage to Volskaya when the portal opens.” He sighed. “Jack’s going to love this.”

Alexstrasza took a bite of her croissant. “So we have a target, then. Was that the entire message?”

Tracer looked at her display. “There isn’t much left, just another two sentences and a list of names.” She pulled up the message. “Force behind plan is unknown stop.”

Winston was putting the message back onto the screen. Alexstrasza saw the next to last line.

“Force is aided by terran ghost and

“I know only one ghost in the nexus.” She said. Tracer raised an eyebrow at that. “In Jim Raynor’s world, a ghost is a term for a type of soldier. They can turn invisible and usually end up scouting the enemy. The one I know is a woman named Nova. A gifted sniper.” She saw the glance between Tracer and Winston at that revelation, and wondered at the story behind it. “Is there more?”

“Just one line.” said Tracer, and the display scrolled. She did not hear Alexstrasza’s gasp, but the plate shattering on the floor startled Winston and her both. Looking at Alexstrasza, Tracer saw her skin pale, highlighted by the glowing fire in her eyes.

“Of course it would be him.”

The voice Tracer heard was not the woman she had become friends with over the past week, but the Dragon Queen, Aspect of the Red Dragon Flight, and Guardian of Life. Her words were tightly
controlled, but each carried the weight of righteous anger. There was murder in her eyes, then, and Tracer felt a surge of pity for whoever had drawn her fury.

*Force is aided by terran ghost and*  
*Orc warlord Guldan stop*

Chapter End Notes

In the absence of firm data, I have placed Volskaya Industries at a location near the IKEA in St. Petersburg, Russia. I mean, they sell everything else, right? Why not high-tech military hardware?

Gul'dan and Alexstrasza have quite a bit of history in the Warcraft universe - he engineered the enslavement of the Red Dragonflight in service to the horde. This included Alexstrasza herself, as well as her children. Not all of them made it out of the second war alive. When next she discusses that history, I plan to treat it as if she were a rape survivor - which she is, in many unique ways. Her reaction is visceral hatred, and it is entirely deserved. Expect a trigger warning for that chapter, when we get to it.

This is, itself, the first time in my writing that a trigger warning was really appropriate - please advise if it can or should be handled in a different way.

Feedback is, as always, welcome.
Awake

Chapter Summary

Junkrat wakes up cranky. McCree wakes up confused. Raynor finds an old familiar face.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Mercy arrived at Junkrat’s secure room, she found Jim Raynor waiting outside.

“Doc,” he said, standing as she approached. “So it’s today, then?”

She nodded, using her wrist computer to access the door. “Probably within a few minutes.”

Raynor nodded. “Good. I have some questions for Mister Junkrat.”

Angela sighed softly. “That’s fine, but remember that he’s been asleep for most of four days. And the nexus is hell on memories - it’s possible he doesn’t remember anything worthwhile.”

“I know, Doc. I’ll be careful.” Raynor slid the small pocket display into his pocket, then followed Mercy into the room.

Seeing a visitor’s chair in one corner, Raynor decided to take a seat and stay out of the Doctor’s way. Whatever else was going on, Junkrat was still her patient.

Of course, the fact that he had possibly interacted with Abathur or lord knows who else before arriving here meant that Jim needed to talk to him. They needed answers, and until Winston and Tracer could figure out that message, this was their best source of intel.

Angela was checking Junkrat’s vitals when he woke up.

“Ugh,” was what she heard first. “Tell me I’m not in Gibraltar.”

“Alright, Jamison, you’re not in Gibraltar.” She replied, watching him.

He opened his eyes, taking in the medical equipment and the large display with his vitals shown for all to see. The sterile walls, the cold steel of the door… “You’re a shitty liar, Mercy.”

“So I am told.” She came around to his left side, retrieving a cup of water with a straw. “How do you feel?”

“I feel like I got in a fight with a train and scored a draw.” he replied, weakly. “How long was I out?”

“Three days.”

“Ugh,” he repeated, putting an arm over his eyes. “And I still feel like rubbish Doc. You need to step up your game.”
Mercy didn’t react to the jab - she was used to Junkrat’s attitude. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Raynor about to come to her defense, and shook her head. *Best to play this slow,* she thought.

“Jamison, what’s the last thing you remember?”

He looked at her. “I’m not saying a word.” he lifted a thin arm and pointed at her. “And you tell Hanzo Shimada that he can go to hell if he thinks I’m going away for anything. You can’t send me to jail for not blowing something up.”

“What of Hanzo’s did you not blow up?”

Junkrat stared. “Don’t mess with me. I was in Japan trying to break into his family’s castle. Then we decided to blast our way in. But we never made it that far…” he trailed off, replaying the events in his head.

“Who’s ‘we’?” As she asked the question, she saw his eyes grow wider as he recalled who his partner had been on that little adventure.

“No one you’d know.”

“If the name doesn’t mean anything, why not tell me?” She moved to his right side, checking his IV. “I’m here as your doctor, I’m not even writing anything down. And the computer can’t record in here unless we tell it to.”

“Yeah, maybe, but Gaz would kill me.”

“Fair enough.” She said, unconvinced. “According to this, you’ll be healthy enough to leave in a few more days.”

“Good.” he replied. Almost as an afterthought, he lifted his right leg. Angela noticed a flash of disappointment when he saw that the leg still ended at his knee. “Stupid gold lady.”

“I wear white, usually.” She replied, a smile on her face.

“Not you. Unless you’re a midget with a pet sand dragon.”

Eyebrows raised, Angela looked over at Raynor. Junkrat hadn’t noticed him, yet. “Not that I’m aware. What was her name?”

Junkrat shook his head. “I don’t remember, Crazy or Chromarmmu or something.”

“Chromie?” asked Angela.

“That’s the one. I had a dream about her, and she threatened me. Crazy sheila, talking about other worlds and space men and a bomb in Russia.”

“And that dream was the last thing you remember? What happened before that?”

Junkrat closed his eyes, thinking. “Before that, I woke up to some asshole kidnapping me. He stole my leg and broke my nose.”

Raynor’s chuckle drew their eyes. Junkrat saw him, but didn’t recognize him at first. Angela sighed, and motioned him over.

“Who the hell are you?” Junkrat asked.
Jim Raynor approached the man’s left side, smiling. “Bill me.”

Now Junkrat’s eyes grew wide. “You!” Then the anger crossed his face. “What’d you do with my leg?”

“Nothing.” Raynor kept smiling. “No hard feelings, kid, but you and I were about to be caught at ground zero of a 500 megaton party. I needed to get you moving and you weren’t exactly cooperative.” He held a hand out to Junkrat. “Sorry about your nose.”

At 500 megatons, Junkrat’s eyebrows had gone up again. He shook Raynor’s hand. “No problem.” Then he smirked. “Just don’t do it again, or I’ll blow you up in your sleep.”

Raynor laughed. “Fair enough.”

Junkrat looked from Mercy to Raynor. “So you’re the space man? The bombs, the aliens, the orcs… it’s all real?”

“Yup.” replied Raynor. “All real. And so is Chromie.”

Junkrat closed his eyes, tiredly. “Then you all need to get to Russia.”

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When Junkrat kicked them out of his room, they obliged. It had been quite a shock, learning that your nightmares about riding a bomb onto monsters, repeatedly, were actually real.

But once he had settled down, he passed along Chromie’s message - or what he remembered of it. Get to Russia. It had said. Bring Winston.

When Raynor asked why, Junkrat had grown quiet. “Look, you and I fell through a portal over the dead zone, right? Well, that’s gonna look like a picnic compared to the second portal in Russia.”

“Second portal?” he had asked.

“You. She said the first one opened six months ago.”

Now they were sitting in Mercy’s office, waiting on Winston to arrive. He was with Tracer and Alexstrasza, finishing up work on the coded message from Abathur.

Raynor took a seat on her couch. “I get that time runs differently in the nexus, but six months is forever, the way these things work. Anything could have come through.”

Angela nodded. “We just became aware of the nexus a few weeks ago, on our end. I understand it has been longer there.”

Raynor nodded. “We started seeing new faces in our battles. Tracer to begin with, with others filtering in over time. But it felt normal, just like new faces from my world or Alex’s.”

“She said that your friend Tassadar detected the problem with our world and the nexus.” Angela said.

“He did. We had just began to look into it when we were ambushed at Braxis, and Alexstrasza and
Hanzo ended up here. But I’m guessing she told you that story.”

“She did indeed.”

“So alright, then.” The door chimed, and Raynor inclined his head to it. “Maybe now we get some answers.” Angela pushed a button on her desk, allowing entry.

When the door opened, it was not Winston. “Are you busy, doc?” asked McCree.

“Not at the moment, Jesse, what can I do for you?”

McCree walked in, then saw Raynor. Smiling, he put a hand to the brim of his hat. “Marshall.” he said.

Jim Raynor waved his hand in a casual salute. “McCree.”

Walking over to Angela, McCree handed a thumb drive over. “I just got this message delivered to me, and I think it’s something you need to see.” Then he looked at Raynor, before adding, “Both of you.”

Angela inserted the drive into her terminal, then rotated the display so that both men could see. McCree took one of the visitor chairs, and Raynor rose to take the other. As they watched, a purple skull appeared on the screen.

“Sombra.” Angela remarked, to herself.

Before Raynor could ask what the hell a Sombra was, a voice came out of the desk. It was a woman’s voice, and Raynor could hear in the playful tone that she enjoyed her work. The skull, the cloak and dagger… *A hacker is a hacker is a hacker,* he thought.

“Jesse, amigo, I enjoyed our night on the town in Baja last christmas, though I’m betting that I remember more of it than you.”

Raynor and Angela’s eyebrows came up in unison, and McCree looked sheepish. “How was I supposed to know that she worked for Talon?”

“I might have looked in on our friend Katya, just to see what she was up to these days. And when I did, I found some serious stuff in the works.” Charts and diagrams began to appear at the edges of the screen. Raynor recognized little of it, though a DNA helix in one frame caught his eye.

“Madame Volskaya is branching out into Biotech. And since the omnics aren’t biological, well… I thought you might want to have a look.”

“How was I supposed to know that she worked for Talon?”

“Why me?” McCree asked himself.

“If you’re asking why I picked you, Jesse McCree, then I’ll tell you.” Raynor could hear the grin as she finished her message. “Next time. Adios, amigo.” The skull faded, along with the images.

Angela was working her terminal. “There are a lot of files here. I can’t tell what they are, but most of the names are in Russian.”

“Athena can probably sort that out quicker than we can,” McCree replied, absenty.

“Probably. But I want to find… Alright, here we are.” She began pulling up files, and the display showed the DNA helix once more. Other medical readouts appeared, though Raynor had no idea what they meant.
“Who’s Katya?” he asked.

“Katya Volskaya is the chairwoman of the largest arms manufacturer in Russia.” McCree answered. “Her company, Volskaya Industries, has almost single-handedly fought the Siberian Omnic to a standstill. If she wanted, they could probably win the war.”

“So this Sombra hacks into Volskaya’s computers, and finds out that they’re looking into biological weapons?” Raynor considered that. “Why would that matter, if there is a war on?”

“Because the omnis are all robotic - they have no biological parts. So the only reason to look into Biologics is if you’re planning something bigger.” Angela frowned. “Katya Volskaya is cautious, almost to a fault. This is not like her.”

A beep came from her terminal, and Angela started opening more files. “Six months ago, they captured a fugitive from some sort of asylum, and began experimenting on him.”

_Six months_, Raynor thought. _Why is that important?_

Angela began reading from one of the reports. “Subject calls himself Vice Admiral, though no record of him appears in any service database. Genetic scan is impossible, for obvious reasons.” She looked at Raynor. “Chromie tells us to get to Russia, and now Sombra finds evidence of a biological weapons operation there?”

“That does sound fishy,” said McCree. “You say Junkrat gave you a message an hour ago?” Off Raynor’s nod, McCree pointed at the thumb drive. “That’s when this arrived.”

“Doc,” Raynor began, “I need the name of that test subject.” Angela looked over, and saw the worry on Raynor’s face. She worked her terminal for a few moments, before finding the name.

“According to this, the man’s name is Alexei Stukov.”

Raynor sighed, and sat back in his chair. “That explains everything, Doc. We need to get to Russia.”

“I agree,” replied Angela. Then she saw the look on Raynor’s face. “Why?”

Raynor pointed at the display. “In my world, Alexei Stukov was an Admiral in an invasion force. He died after being betrayed by one of his own soldiers. But instead of letting him die a soldier’s death, the zerg infested him.” Raynor chuckled at the thought. “He always said he wanted to go home to Mother Russia. Now he has.”

McCree looked from Angela to Raynor. “You mean this guy is an alien? From the nexus?”

Raynor nodded. “He’s half Zerg. And this Volskaya woman is turning him into a weapon.”

Chapter End Notes

McCree and Sombra's night on the town is based on the Overwatch comic "Reflections". Her snooping at Volskaya places these events after the Overwatch short "Infiltration".

He's not tagged, but the idea of Gazlowe and Junkrat getting into shenanigans is too good to ignore.
Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Aircraft arriving at Watchpoint Gibraltar could use one of three landing areas. Two landing pads near the main complex were designed for the VTOL systems that were standard on most modern aircraft. On the west side of the island, a short runway allowed older aircraft to takeoff and land, provided that they were small enough.

A fourth landing area had been proposed, and work had even begun on the expansion, before Overwatch was shut down. Plans had called for additional barracks and support buildings on the south side of the island, with an additional landing pad to support the new facilities. Someday, perhaps the new Overwatch would need the extra buildings - but for now, all that remained at the expansion site were a few empty cargo containers, some seagulls, and a decent view of the ocean.

And, as Hanzo discovered, one Dragon Queen.

Alexstrasza was kneeling at the center of the landing area, her red cloak arranged behind her. Hanzo watched her for a moment, from the edge of the site. He had been kneeling in much the same position when she first met him, so long ago. At the time, he had worried about nothing except defending his family’s honor, and his own. He had already joined Overwatch, but his world consisted of the training floor and his quarters - he had been aloof.

No wonder he found himself in Hanamura, when the nexus took him. In his heart, he had never left.

Where would it put me now? He wondered.

Overwatch had been a temporary home, before the nexus. His time here was time for himself, where he could train in peace and appease his wayward brother’s misplaced faith in him, before moving on. Then he saw how his world was in danger, how the nexus might rain havoc and chaos on his home. Not long before, he would have picked up his pack and his bow and walked into the night, letting others deal with the threat. But standing there, listening to Jim Raynor and Sarah Kerrigan discuss the risk to his world - when the time came, he stepped forward, almost before he realized what he was doing.

Alexstrasza had asked him why he volunteered, that day. He couldn’t really give her a good answer - it had just felt like a thing that needed doing. She had smiled and given him that look of hers, the one
that felt like she could see right through him. And with her magic, she probably could.

Hanzo thought back to the meeting, just ended. After Tracer reviewed the message from Abathur, and McCree had discussed the new intel from Sombra, of all people, it had fallen to Mercy to discuss the message from Chromie, via Junkrat. All three agreed - another portal was going to open in Russia, and the result was potential disaster.

Ana had asked about Abathur - could he be trusted? Jim Raynor answered that question. “Maybe.” He had said. “But even if he’s feeding us garbage, I trust Chromie. And the info from this Sombra matches up.” Then he pointed at the DNA shown on the display. “And she did have zerg dna in with the files she gave us. There’s no way she could fake that.”

Sending a team into the Russian Federation was a big deal. Russia had always eschewed international assistance, preferring to deal with their omnic crisis on their own. And the fact that one of their most beloved leaders might be experimenting with alien DNA and potential bioweapons made the situation even trickier. When the discussion came to a head, Hanzo had been as surprised as anyone to find himself standing first.

“You all have met Alexstrasza, you know her. She has been here a week, now, living here with us and dining with us and learning about our world. Just as we have learned something of her own. And I can tell you this,” He looked around the conference table, seeing the faces of his… friends? Family? The words did not fit, exactly. But they looked to him, and in that moment he saw that they trusted him.

“She will walk into Volskaya and do anything she can to defend our world. A world that isn’t even her own.” Placing his hands on the table, he leaned forward. “And I will be there beside her.”

“Why?” All eyes turned to Genji, standing in the corner. “Why do you go, brother?”

Hanzo’s eyes were steady as he looked at his brother. “I believe it to be the only honorable choice.”

Genji watched him for a moment, and Hanzo could feel his brother’s gaze. Then Genji nodded softly and that was that. “Good hunting, Hanzo.”

Winston looked to Soldier 76. “Chromie told Junkrat that I need to go as well.” It was not a question, and Hanzo could see Jack sigh behind his visor.

“Who else, then?”

“I’ll need some equipment, but not much. And I want Tracer and Hana,” said Winston. “Both have been to the nexus before, according to Jim.” At his glance, both women nodded - they were in. He looked at Mercy, and saw that she was looking at Genji. Before she could answer his unspoken question, Zenyatta spoke.

“I will accompany the team,” he said. “Marshall Raynor’s description of the nexus has done nothing to sate my curiosity. I look forward to seeing it in person.”

“You’ve got top notch people working for you, Commander.” said Raynor. “I’ll be ready to go in a day, armor and all.”

Jack looked around the table. “Approved. Get a list of equipment together, and we’ll have you loaded and ready for wheels up 36 hours from now. Zenyatta is in command.”

“Chairman Volskaya will hate that, Jack.” Ana remarked. The russian oligarch had always been touchy about Omnis in general, and having to interact with one leading an overwatch strike team
might be seen as an insult.

“Don’t care.” He replied. “Zen is senior. Winston will be busy sciencing whatever it is that goes down, and everyone else will be putting out fires.” He looked at Zenyatta. “I need a level head in charge, and you’re the only choice when it comes to that. Listen to Alexstrasza and Marshall Raynor, but use your best judgment, and bring everyone home.”

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Alexstrasza stirred slightly, her cloak shifting as she flexed her shoulders. Her short hair blew in the wind, accented as it was by the golden jewelry she wore on her horns. She turned her head, and Hanzo found her expression unreadable.

“They agreed?” she asked, without preamble.

“We leave in thirty-six hours.” Hanzo replied. He could see her shoulders relax at the news, as some of the tension bled away.

“Good.” She rose now, turning to face him. “Who will be going?”

“You and I, Jim, Lena, Hana, and Winston. Zenyatta has been given command of the mission, and he will be our field support as well.”

Alexstrasza nodded, as she walked slowly over to him. “If the need arises, I can help with that.”

Hanzo smiled softly at her. “I know. And so does he. But we both think you will be too busy to worry much about healing.”

Her eyebrow raised at this.

“Lena told me how you reacted to one of the names in the message. She said she had never seen you so shaken.” Hanzo looked her in the eyes. “I am here if you wish to talk about it.”

She returned his gaze, not sure how to react. Her face paled slightly, and he noticed it immediately. He had seen that look before. Stepping forward, Hanzo spoke softly.

“I know something of revenge, Alexstrasza.” He held her gaze, and watched as she lowered her eyes. “You do not have to carry this burden alone.”

“Hanzo Shimada.” She replied, quietly. “But even this... “ A sigh, and then she looked at him again. “It’s too much.”

Hanzo smiled at her. “And yet here I am.”

Looking around, Alexstrasza saw the steps leading from the main complex. She walked over and sat down. Hanzo followed her. They sat quietly, watching the ocean and the seagulls and the tides. Alexstrasza hooked her arm around his, clasping his hand. Neither of them spoke for several minutes.

Finally, he heard her sigh. “When I first met you, Hanzo, you were convinced that you had somehow failed to defend your family. That they had been lost, that your home had been desecrated. You felt responsible for that.” Her eyes remained on the horizon as she spoke, and Hanzo saw the
faintest hint of orange glowing in them. “None of that was true, of course, just a trick of the nexus. But in your heart, you believed it.”

He nodded. “And then you woke me up, and I saw that my fear had been nothing more than smoke and fog. That my family was safe, my home secure, as it had always been.”

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly. “Years ago, there was a war.” Hanzo watched her as she spoke. She did not turn to him, but kept her gaze to the sea.

“An army came from another world. Orcs and trolls and other creatures, hungry for conquest. They were met with an alliance of humans and elves and dwarves. The fire of war swept across the continent.” Her voice grew quiet as he listened. “And then, one day, the horde decided that they needed an advantage.”

“The alliance, you see, had great birds of prey, large enough to carry a man. Dwarves would train for years to ride into battle atop these winged creatures, and the alliance gained command of the air.” She gestured at the landing field. “Even here, your people know that the high ground is all important.”

“Here, it is called ‘Air Superiority’” Hanzo said. “My people once fought a war of conquest against a larger nation, and lost because they could fly three aircraft for every one of ours.” At her glance, he shook her head. “That was over a century ago. We have never again fought in war, other than to defend our homeland. But the lesson, that we learned well. At great cost.”

“Just so.” she continued, “The Horde learned it as well. But they are not a people who studies and creates. They take, they burn, they destroy.” Alexstrasza’s voice remained quiet and calm, but Hanzo could hear the venom in her every word.

“So when faced with an aerial threat, they countered it with an aerial threat of their own. They brought red dragons into battle.” He looked at her, and saw a tear roll down her cheek. “We were not involved in the war. I had vowed to defend life, all life. I would not enter battle, unless we were attacked directly. When the horde sought our power, we sent them away. I thought that would be the end of it.”

“I was wrong.”

“The orcs, led by a creature named Nekros, used a powerful dragon artifact to enslave the red dragonflight. They captured me and used my magic to control and subjugate the will of my family.” Hanzo reached over and wiped a tear from her face, but said nothing. With his other hand, he gave hers a squeeze. She returned the gesture.

“Our children… Hanzo, they took our babies. Our eggs. And I watched. I was trapped and enslaved but…”

“But you were aware.” Hanzo said, quietly.

“I was aware.” She spat the words. “A twilight dragon, a twisted betrayer named Deathwing, tried to use the red dragonflight to build a new army for himself. When he sought to take our eggs, I escaped.” The fire grew in her eyes, now, and Hanzo gave her hand another squeeze.

“And you blame yourself.”

Now she looked at him, and her eyes were fearsome to behold - a study in rage and sorrow. “I blame Nekros, for his cruelty and hatred. The horde wanted victory, but that one found delight in causing pain. The very first thing I did when I was freed was to eat him whole.” She smiled slightly, but it
was a cold smile. “I crushed the life from him, felt it leave his broken husk, and I felt alive for the first time in years.”

“I blame Deathwing, who sold his soul for power. When he rose again and tried to conquer the world, I led an alliance of my own. And we put him down like the beast he was.”

“But most of all, beyond all others, I blame the orcish warlock known as Gul’Dan. For the Orcs were themselves possessed by a demonic force from another world. Gul’Dan betrayed them, he sold his people for power. He opened the dark portal and brought his armies into Azeroth.”

Alexstrasza reached up, wiping another tear from her cheek. She looked at her hand, at the moisture there. “Gul’Dan was the architect of everything. And when his evil turned on my people, I wasn’t strong enough.”

“You are stronger than anyone I have ever known, Alexstrasza.” Hanzo said, not sure what else to say.

“And yet, when the time came, I wasn’t.” She continued looking at her hand, considering it.

Hanzo followed her gaze. “When was the last time you talked about this?” He asked.

A sad laugh. “With whom would I speak, Hanzo? I am the Queen of the Dragons.” She shook her head. “No, this I have carried alone.”

“For too long, perhaps.” Hanzo remarked. With his free hand, he reached over and took hers.

They sat that way, hands clasped together, watching the ocean. Neither was in a hurry to break the moment, but Hanzo found himself convinced that there was more to say.

“Tell me,” he began. “What happened to Gul’Dan, in your world?”

She smiled. “He died horribly, attempting to win eternal life for himself.”

“And now the nexus brings him back,” Hanzo said. “Just like it brought Tassadar.”

“So it would seem.” She squeezed his hands and released them, before standing and stretching. They had sat together for close to an hour.

“My world is safe from his evil, but now we find him meddling with yours?” She looked at Hanzo, shaking her head. “No. This I will not allow.”

“And when we stop him, the nexus will just bring him back.”

She shrugged. “When he has died once for every dragon who fell at his hand, then perhaps it will be enough.” But she sighed, looking back at Hanzo. “But I will be content if he just leaves your world alone.”

Hanzo rose now. Leaning close, he placed a gentle kiss on her forehead, as she had done for him days before. “He will. I will make sure of it.”

She looked him in the eyes, a smile on her face.

Hanzo waved a hand at the horizon, and the red sun beginning to inch its way toward sunset. “What was it you said this morning, about wanting to fly?”

Alexstrasza followed his gesture. “I haven’t shifted form since I arrived. Usually I try to fly once a
day or so.” She looked back at him. “Didn’t Jack say something about not wanting to reveal the presence of a dragon to the world?”

Hanzo shrugged, keeping his face carefully neutral. “I won’t tell him if you don’t.”

He saw some of the worry fall away from her. Not all, not even most. But for the moment, it would have to do. She grinned at him, stepping back to the landing pad. When she reached the center, a green mist shrouded her.

As he watched, he tapped the communicator in his ear. “Landing Control, this is Hanzo.”

“Good evening, Hanzo, this is Captain Conroy.”

“Are we ready, Captain?”

“We’re all set on this end, sir. You have clear skies and an empty pattern for the next 90 minutes.”

“Thank you, Captain. Tell your boss I am in her debt.”

“Captain Amari is right here, sir, and she says to tell your friend to have a pleasant flight.”

“Hai.” He replied, as a roar came from the landing pad. The green mist cleared, revealing the true form of the dragon queen. Turning, the great dragon eyed Hanzo.

Grinning, he waved her off. “Go! Don’t wait for me!”

Alexstrasza dipped her head at him, then let off another roar. It was filled with her frustration and pain, poured out into the evening sky. But it was also a promise. *I come for you, Gul’Dan. Her great red wings beat once, twice, and then she lifted off into the sky.

And for the first time in a long time, she felt free.

Chapter End Notes

Who else but Pharah would be in charge of flight ops at Gibraltar?

Obviously, it will take a lot more than a kiss to the forehead and an impromptu flight to help Alexstrasza heal. But it is a beginning. I hope I've done justice to her circumstances, which seem more awful every time I go back and read about them. But a lot of who she is stems from the second war, and it can't be set aside easily.

Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Triglav

Chapter Summary

Zarya prepares to run a weapons test for Chairman Volskaya.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If anything could be said of Chairman Katya Volskaya, it would be that she was always on time. Just like her factories, she ran her personal life with clockwork precision. Businessmen and government officials alike quickly learned that if they had not made their point within the first 90 seconds of their presentation, they might as well have not taken the meeting in the first place.

Her meals came at exactly the same time, each day. Her briefings were scheduled to the minute. When her daughter walked into their home after school, the display would already be signaling for their quick mother-daughter chat. And her daughter, too, had followed her mother’s example, for their morning and evening routines were like clockwork as well.

So the fact that Zarya had waited on the chairman for 10 minutes was worthy of comment.

On the other side of the office door, Zarya could hear the chairman speaking, but could make no sense of what was said - fitting, as it would not do for an executive office to allow others to hear what was said. She sighed, and walked to the executive secretary’s desk. The officer there glanced at her, but said nothing as he continued his work.

“Pavel,” she began. “When the chairman is done with her call, please summon me. I need to make a call.” She stepped toward the hallway, but the look on the secretary’s face stopped her.

“Chairman Volskaya is not on a call, Major.” She could hear the slight surprise in his voice, as he too had heard someone talking in the office. He assumed it was a personal call on her own device, rather than something official routed through the foundry’s communications network.

He saw Zarya’s raised eyebrow, and was about to comment further, when the great doors opened. “Major Zaryanova, my apologies.” The Chairman said, walking over to her. “It seems I lost track of time.”

Zarya glanced at Pavel, and saw his look of utter shock. The Chairman did not, as one of his displays blocked her view.

“It is not a problem, Chairman.” Zarya replied.

“Come in, please.” Katya Volskaya gestured into her office, and Zarya followed. The doors closed behind them, and Zarya heard the soft click of the locks.

The Chairman’s office was as lavish as she remembered. One wall opened onto a balcony, where she could view almost every inch of the facility’s proving grounds. Beyond that was the foundry itself, with its arsenal of cutting edge mechs and high-yield weaponry. Across the wall behind her desk was an intricate fresco depicting Russia’s victory during the first Omnic crisis.
On the Chairman’s desk, next to her display terminal and a small purple gemstone, was a picture of her daughter. This one was new, she thought - it showed the girl seated at a large drafting table, working feverishly on what appeared to be a crayon drawing of her and her mother. The wooden table was well-used, with plenty of space for tools and scales and the like. The right corner, just at the edge of the picture, had “Катя” carved into the wood - Katya.

Zarya smiled softly, as she realized that the drafting table had been Chairman Volskaya’s. Though her family’s wealth and influence had helped establish Volskaya Industries, the fact was that her hand-drawn designs, even at the start of her career, had been brilliant and inspired. She didn’t get where she was because she had help, she earned it by being the best engineer Russia could find. When the day came where her homeland needed men and women of talent, Katya Volskaya’s name had been at the top of the list.

Chairman Volskaya followed her gaze, and smiled. “They will have her drawing schematics by year’s end, if she has her way.”

Zarya returned the smile. “I imagine that she has inherited much of her mother’s skill in that arena.”

“Time will tell,” Katya replied. Then she nodded to the balcony. “If the Triglav Protector is successful, then perhaps she will design automobiles rather than tanks.”

Zarya walked over to the chairman, and they looked out over the proving grounds. As they watched, soldiers were crawling over a massive bipedal tank. Volskaya Industries’ proudest achievement, the Triglav Protector incorporated the newest and most powerful weapons systems into a 500 ton mech. Such was its complexity that Volskaya had designed the mech for a two-person crew, a pilot and a gunner.

“Tomorrow’s test will tell the tale, Chairman.” Zarya replied. “Even with just a pilot, the protector was devastating against simulated omnic forces.”

Katya nodded absently. “I want nothing to go wrong tomorrow. Have the preparations been completed, Major?”

Zarya nodded. “All civilians have been cleared from the facility and its vicinity, and the police are keeping unauthorized personnel outside the perimeter.”

“Good.” the Chairman nodded. “And the protector?”

Zarya watched the last of the technicians climb down from the mech. Two small drones lifted a cover into place, protecting the mech from the harsh St. Petersburg weather.

“Everything is in place, Chairman. Tomorrow, the crews will load the protector’s armaments and perform their final checks. The test will begin at 1000 hours.” Zarya looked over at the chairman. “It is not my place, chairman, but now that the preparations are complete…” She hesitated.

Katya Volskaya looked at Zarya. “Major, not only have you served your motherland with distinction, but you have aided me personally on several occasions. Your rank and your command of this test is proof of that, and I think you know that.” She smiled. “You may speak freely here, Zarya.”

Despite herself, Zarya let her pride cross her face - for she was proud of what she had accomplished. “Chairman, the premise of this test is to pit the protector against an unknown threat. It is not proper for me to know anything about that threat - or else it would not be unknown. But now that my team’s preparations are complete, and the pilot and gunner are in lockdown to simulate combat readiness…”
well, since I can reveal nothing…”

Katya grinned. “You want to know who the protector will face tomorrow?”

“I do, Chairman.”

The Chairman kept her grin as she walked to her desk. From a drawer, she removed a crystal bottle of what had to be vodka, and two small glasses. Taking her seat, she indicated that Zarya should be seated as well.

“So would I, Major.” Off Zarya’s glance, Katya chuckled as she poured drinks. “I did not want to bias the results in any way. I know nothing of the challenge the protector will face tomorrow.” She handed a glass to Zarya, then raised the other herself. “Success.”

Zarya returned the toast. “To Russia.” They emptied their glasses, as tradition demanded. She did not question the ritual, as she had done such toasts many times before battle. Zarya had not known the chairman to drink, however.

“All I can tell you, Zarya,” continued the chairman, “is that your opposing force will be well armed and tenacious. A worthy simulant for the hated omnic menace.”

Zarya nodded, absorbing the information. “Do you know their origin, Chairman? Even that would tell me much of what to expect.”

Katya gave her a look, and considered that. “Truth. But… well, let us just say that they are coming from very far away.”

Zarya nodded, but made no further comment. Instead, her eyes were drawn to the small purple gemstone sitting on the chairman’s desk. Something about it… “This is new, Chairman.”

Katya Volskaya’s eyebrows raised in surprise, and she found herself thankful that Zarya was looking at the stone and not her. “Thank you. It was a gift.”

“From whom, if you don’t mind me asking? It is breathtaking.”

Katya rose, and Zarya did the same. “That, Major, is a very long story. Perhaps I will tell it to you, sometime. Unfortunately, I have another appointment in a few minutes.”

"Of course, Chairman Volskaya.” She stood, not quite at attention but more formal than she had been moments before.

“Good hunting tomorrow, Major. I am eager for your success.”

Zarya snapped off a salute. “As am I, Chairman.” And with that, Zarya turned and exited the office. She did not turn around, as she had been dismissed - one does not question Chairman Volskaya after being dismissed.

So it was that she did not see the dull glow of the purple gemstone, as Katya Volskaya rested her hand on its smooth surface. Nor did she hear the woman’s quiet words, spoken in barely a whisper as the doors closed.

Nor did she see the purple glow in the Chairman's eyes.

Chapter End Notes
The Triglav Protector's specs are inferred from in-game scale, with a healthy helping of similar data from Metal Gear REX. Katya's background as an engineer is entirely headcanon, but fits her well I think - and she seems like the sort who would make a show of being a real engineer, when most of her drafting would have been copying Omnic designs. (Not to say she is not brilliant, she is. Just, well, maybe not at engineering.)
Second

Chapter Summary

The Overwatch Strike team arrives in Russia, and learns that the situation at Volskaya has exploded. Alexstrasza and Zenyatta have a meeting of the minds.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alexstrasza really hated flying.

That was what they had called this, at least. But whatever this was, it was emphatically not flying. She should feel the wind across her scales, the warmth of the sun above the clouds across her wings. The thrill of diving from the sky to rain fire on those who threatened life.

Sitting in a metal chair, against a curved metal wall, in a shaking metal room filled with equipment and tools? This was not the flying she longed for.

Hanzo’s gift to her - over an hour to fly around Gibraltar - had been like waking from a dream. He had even thought to ask the Overwatch team to schedule flights for later in the day, and to turn off the satellites overhead, just so she could enjoy uninterrupted flight. Everyone had cooperated, enthusiastically - it was the least they could do for her.

And now, having tasted flight again after so long, being confined to the strike team’s cargo jet was insult and injury rolled into one. She had argued that they might need her abilities in the air, on their arrival in Russia. Jack had not disagreed, but the plan called for two days of recon before they expected the portal to open. Even if they did need her in the air, providing support, they did not need her on their approach.

Ana had brought up another good point - their arrival alone would infuriate the Russian authorities. Their arrival with a magical red dragon? That would qualify as a full blown international incident. Best to keep things as simple as possible, for as long as possible.

So for hours now, Alexstrasza had sat next to Hanzo in jump seats, down in the cargo bay. She had looked at the passenger area, and rejected it immediately. It felt as if the walls in that compartment were closing in on her, and she needed room to pace and stretch out. Hanzo had joined her, to the surprise of exactly no one.

Early in the flight, they had chatted with Hana Song as she performed some final checks on her mech. Alexstrasza was surprised at her enthusiasm - for one so young, she was eager to go to war. But Hana corrected her - she did not wish to harm others with her mech, though she would if she had to, to protect her home or those in need. Her eagerness was entirely focused on getting to the nexus and meeting some of her heroes. Sarah Kerrigan, Tassadar, and others - all were names she had grown up with. To learn that they were real had been a shock, but a welcome one once she got it into her head that it wasn’t a dream.

And then she and Hanzo spent the next hour explaining video games to the dragon queen.
It had been a pleasant interlude, one that took her mind off of the coming trials. But then Hana had yawned and stretched and made her way to the passenger area, to catch some sleep. Their 10 hour flight would put them in St. Petersburg around 8 am, just in time for the local sunrise. Most of the rest of the team was already asleep, above.

Hanzo remained, his eyes closed. She could tell that he was merely meditating, and not actually asleep, but she left him to it all the same. “I’ll be back,” she whispered, before rising. He moved no muscle, but she sensed his aura relax.

She had walked from one end of the cargo bay to the other several times when the communicator in her ear beeped. It took her a moment to remember how to trigger it, but then she reached up and tapped the control. “Alexstrasza here,” she said quietly.

“Your grace, could you join me on the flight deck?” It was the robotic voice of Zenyatta, with its odd sound. Tracer had explained that the omnic had a device implanted directly into his neural network, allowing him to tap directly into their communications channel. The downside was that his voice had no background noise, no breathing or other small, subtle sounds, and nothing that gave it a sense of place. It sounded surreal and otherworldly, over the comm link.

The link also tied him into Athena. If he was injured, she would know almost before he did. It had seemed like overkill at the time, and Zenyatta had almost objected - but then the device saved his life, and he never complained again.

“No course.” She replied. Looking over at Hanzo, she sensed that he was truly asleep now, seated in his chair. Good, she thought. Lifting the cloak from her shoulders, she draped it carefully over the archer. Then she went forward.

Zenyatta was speaking with Captain Conroy when she entered the communications room. The co-pilot, a woman she had not yet had occasion to meet, was up in the cockpit, according to the captain.

“Alexstrasza has arrived, Jack. Go ahead.” Zenyatta nodded to her in greeting. As she approached, she saw the visored face of Soldier 76 on the screen.

“All right,” Soldier began. “Athena, loop Zarya into this call.” As she watched, the screen split in two - Soldier 76 on the left, and a purple-haired woman on the right. She appeared to be wearing some sort of military uniform, or at least this world’s equivalent. The uniform was burned in one spot, torn in another. Alexstrasza saw a large weapon on the woman’s back.

Behind her, there was chaos. Alexstrasza could hear the unmistakable sounds of battle. The woman appeared to be in an office of some sort. The window behind her showed a grey sky - and with it smoke rising into the air. An explosion was heard, and some debris cross the frame.

The purple haired woman was resuming an argument she had been having with Jack.

“Someday, Commander Morrison, you will need to explain to me how it is that you happen to have a team coming to Russia right as we suffer the worst attack since the Omnic Crisis.” She said, angrily. Alexstrasza heard the steel in her voice.

“Agreed. Someday. For now, we’re inbound and ready to assist. Zenyatta is in command of the
strike team. I need you to tell him what you told me.”

Zarya looked at the omnic, her expression unreadable. Then her eyes turned and she seemed to look Alexstrasza over. “Who in hell is this woman?”

Before Alexstrasza could answer, Jack intercepted the question. “This is Alexstrasza. She is Zen’s second in command.” He inclined his head slightly. “You’ll like her, she’s got the same hot temper as you do.”

Zarya’s image seemed to be appraising her, and finding her wanting. But she sighed slightly, as if deciding that this fight wasn’t a worthwhile use of her time.

“Fine. Whatever.” She seemed to turn back to Zenyatta. “The situation is this - we had a weapons test scheduled at Volskaya. A new mech would do battle against an unknown opposing force. But when we showed up to prepare this morning, Chairman Volskaya began the battle early.”

The disgust in Zarya’s voice was plain. “She said it would prepare us for the next war. ‘What next war?’ I had asked.” She shook her head. “The woman looked at me and said ‘The war against the humans, of course.’”

Zarya reached down and worked the controls on the desk in front of her. A video feed appeared in the corner of her picture.

“The opposing force was not soldiers, or mechs or drones, or even reprogrammed omnics.” As they watched, a large and very dangerous mech stood ready to battle whatever exited a bunker. The cargo door on the bunker slid open slowly, warning lights and all.

And then a stone statue marched slowly up the ramp, its mace resting easily over one shoulder.

“It was a statue, at the head of an army of green-skinned monsters.” As the video continued, an army marched into the proving grounds. The Triglav Protector took one step back, as the pilot and gunner tried to figure out how to handle whatever this was.

Another explosion behind her, and Zarya turned to look out the window. “Soldiers keep coming out of the bunker. I think there is a portal of some sort, and they are really coming from somewhere else. If that’s true, I cannot keep this contained.” Zarya looked from one to the other. “We need help. Russia seeks your aid.”

The video feed continued, as the five of them sat silently for a moment. Jack broke the silence.

“Captain?”

Captain Conroy nodded. “We can be on the ground in 20 minutes. Major, I’ll need somewhere to land.”

“That, I can do, Captain. Follow the beacon on Delta-Seven. Come in hot.” Off Jack’s look, Zarya gave a bitter chuckle. “I never really left Overwatch, Commander. But Russia needed me more.” Another explosion. “She needs me still. I’ll be on comms.” And with that, the woman’s face disappeared.

“Alexstrasza?” Jack asked.

“We were right.” she replied, sadly. “Those are Orcs, from my homeworld. If it is Gul’Dan behind this, he has his army. And that statue is called the Dragon Knight. It has its own powerful magic.” She looked at another display, this one with an aerial map of St. Petersburg, with the Volskaya site
marked. “We have to contain this.”

“I concur,” said Zenyatta. “7.6 Million people, in that city alone. And if the portal is active, instead of an impact event as in Australia…”

“Then their force could be unlimited.” Jack finished the thought. “Best speed to Volskaya, Captain Conroy. Stand to.”

The captain looked at Zenyatta, and received a nod in confirmation. “I’ll get us moving, and then go wake up the team.” He exited toward the cockpit.

“We should prepare as well, Jack.” Zenyatta said. Jack nodded on the screen.

“Good luck, old friend. Save lives.” And with that, his picture faded as well.

Alexstrasza watched Zenyatta for a moment, as the omnic reached a hand up to a handhold, steadying himself as the aircraft gained speed.

“Why?” she asked.

Zenyatta regarded her. His featureless eyes gazed into her, and she wondered briefly if this is what it felt like when she read someone’s life force.

“You hate the idea of going to war, but you prepare nonetheless.” He said. “You do not relish the idea of joining battle, but if the battle is to be joined, you fully intend to win decisively. And above all else, you risk yourself and the life of your beloved in an attempt to safeguard the lives of nine billion souls whose world is not your own.”

“But beyond even that,” he continued. “Every single member of this team trusts you, respects your wisdom, and will follow you where you lead them. If I am lost, the burden of leadership will fall to you. But I sense that this is not an unfamiliar position for you.”

“It is not,” she said softly. “You’re sure?”

“About you as my second in command? Absolutely.” Zenyatta continued to look at her. “There is a poem, in our world. It reads thus: ‘You are this season’s people. There are no other people, this season. If you blow it, it’s blown.’”

“You have seen horrors, fought them.” He waved a hand in the direction of the world map on the display. “If everything blows up today, it will do so despite your best efforts, and ours. And in that case, nothing you could have done would prevent such a fate.”

To that, Alexstrasza had no response. She bowed slightly, and smiled when he did the same in return.

“Go, prepare yourself.” And with that, Zenyatta turned to the cockpit.

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Twenty minutes became thirty-three, as Captain Conroy wanted to avoid a squadron of fighter jets approaching Volskaya. The Overwatch jet was stealthed, but the captain was taking no chances.
When they did approach the foundry, they saw a war zone. Orcs clashed with Russian soldiers used to ranged combat. These men had trained to fight omnis, with their ranged energy weapons and easily targeted power supplies. Against an angry troll with throwing axes, such tactics were less than effective.

But for all that, the Russians were making the Orcs pay for every inch. The Proving grounds had been secured and closed off, in preparation for the weapons test. So the battle, at least for the moment, was contained within its walls. But that wasn’t going to last forever. Even if the forces fought to an even result, the orcs had an unlimited supply of troops. Even if the Russian army could reinforce the soldiers in battle, their resources were limited. And when they ran out of nearby troops, the orcs would ravage the city.

And at the center of the proving grounds, in what turned out to be a small arena, they saw a massive Triglav Protector doing battle with the Dragon Knight. The pilot was doing the best they could with the mech, but it was not designed for bare-handed combat. Its weapons were its strength, and many of them had not been activated when the battle began. They continued to put up a valiant effort, but the strike team knew that it would be just a matter of time.

“Hana,” began Zenyatta. “Drop in to the west. Keep them clear of that bunker.” He indicated a large bunker on the opposite end of the grounds, a duplicate of the one spewing orcs at the moment.

“That’s where we secure Winston’s gear. Tracer, Hanzo, safeguard Winston and protect those troops. Marshall,” Zenyatta looked at Raynor. “I want you to go to this building. The Chairman’s office will be there, on the top floor on the North side. Find Chairman Volskaya and see if she can close the portal.”

“Alexstrasza will provide air support, before meeting Marshall Raynor at the headquarters building. We need the portal closed, and we need to find and secure their infested zerg captive. If the battle turns against us, rain fire.” She nodded in agreement.

“One minute,” came Captain Conroy’s voice over the intercom.

Zenyatta looked at the team. Tracer fidgeted with her weapons, ready to take to her feet and go. Winston stood still, watching Zenyatta. He had a crate of sensors and devices strapped to his armor. Jim Raynor held his weapon at the ready - this was not his first rodeo, either. Hanzo straightened his quiver, his other hand holding the steel bow as if it were a lifeline.

Thump Thump, Alexstrasza heard. Turning, she saw Hana Song in her mech, as it made its way to the cargo doors. When the Captain signaled again, Zenyatta gave the signal. The cargo bay doors yawned open, revealing the nightmare they had feared.

Hana said something jubilant in Korean, before the D.Va mech stepped off the ramp. They heard it land seconds later, its guns providing cover fire for a group of pinned down Russians. Alexstrasza looked at Hanzo, as she placed her communicator into her cloak.

“Good luck, Archer.” She said, a grin on her face. Then she leaned over and kissed him. It wasn’t nearly the kiss he expected, nor the one she wanted - but it was a promise, one that he understood loud and clear. Stay safe.

His eyes remained wide as she stepped back, falling from the cargo ramp.

Winston leaped forward, making as if to try and catch her. Hanzo’s hand shot out and stopped him cold. “Wait for it.” the archer said.

“What do you…?” Winston’s voice trailed off as he heard the roar. “Oh.”
Alexstrasza, the Queen of the Red Dragonflight, flew past the open cargo bay, roaring to announce her arrival.

The battle had been joined.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again to everyone who has (and will) leave comments. I hope that you all are enjoying reading this as much as I am writing it.

Zenyatta's quote is by Stephen Gaskin.

Next up: The Battle of Volskaya Proving Grounds.

Feedback, as always, is welcome.
The Battle of Volskaya Proving Grounds

Chapter Summary

The Overwatch Team arrives to find that the war began without them. Zarya confronts a friend. Alexstrasza confronts an old enemy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Zarya returned to the chairman’s office, she found that Katya Volskaya - or whomever had taken control of her - had not moved from the balcony.

“Are your friends coming, Major?” Katya did not turn as she spoke, but the sneer was audible in her voice. “Gibraltar is hours away. The City will be ours by the time overwatch can arrive.”

Zarya said nothing, instead choosing to approach the window. She had to buy time.

“You’ve spent years building this, from nothing.” She began, waving over the foundry-turned-battleground. “Why would you let it burn?”

Katya laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh, and Zarya heard in it the indulgence of a parent whose child has said something endearingly stupid.

“Major, your world revels in its enlightenment, even as you make war against superior beings. You pride yourself on your equality, even as you grind your people to dust against the omnic war machine. You build towers reaching to the sky, gleaming works of glass and steel, mortared with the bones of your children.” She looked at Zarya. “Only from the ashes of such a world can we build the throne.”

“Whose throne, Katya?” Zarya wanted her to keep talking. The strike team could not be far now.

“You know,” Katya continued, ignoring her. “I always thought that the cycle was unique to my realm. Build and grow and combine, then make war and rot. The disease burns itself out, and becomes its own cure.” Her eyes flared with purple light, and Zarya noticed the stone on her desk flared as well. “I thought to break the pattern with the tools available to me, but this…” She gestured out at the proving grounds, and the city beyond. “This is much better.”

“Why do the hard work,” a voice said from the doorway, “when you can just start over in someone else’s world? Is that it?” Zarya turned, and saw a man in black power armor.

The design was sleek and functional, and the helmet almost looked like it would stand up to a vacuum. His rifle was powerful-looking, and she could see it had been modified extensively. The man’s accent was American, with hints of something else she could not easily identify. She looked into his eyes, and saw the cool calm of a soldier used to command.

Katya’s eyes grew wide as she took the man in. “How did a Confederate Marine get here?” she asked. Zarya saw the man’s eyebrows raise at that. His rifle was not aimed at them, exactly, but she saw that he could bring it to bear in an instant.
“Darlin’,” he replied cautiously. “It’s been a very long time since someone called me a Confederate anything.”

Now the sneer returned, and Katya Volskaya took a step toward the marine. “It matters not. Soon you will be ash, this world will be ash, and then, when everyone you love has burned, we will--” Zarya’s fist stopped her cold, connecting solidly with her face. Stunned, Katya fell to her knees.

“Nyet,” said Zarya. She pointed to the desk, where the gemstone was now a brilliant purple. “The stone is controlling her somehow.”

“Yeah, I kinda figured that.” Raynor lifted his weapon and aimed.

“Wait, what if destroying it hurts her? Should we not--?”

“Ma’am,” Raynor said, tiredly. “Seems like my entire life is nothing but shooting at glowing shit. It usually works itself out.” He made eye contact with her. “And we’re out of time.”

Zarya returned his gaze, then nodded. Raynor sighted down his rifle and opened fire. The rounds struck home, and the gemstone fractured. The energy within broke free, shattering the stone and knocking them both to the floor. A purple cloud of energy swirled around the room, before escaping out the window. Later, when asked, Raynor would swear that he could hear a man’s scream as it happened.

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“Proceed down the ramp, please.” Zenyatta said, in perfect Russian. This squad was the third they had rescued, and the soldiers were exhausted and in need of ammo and medical care. But they were alive, and that was a beginning. Such was the insanity of their situation that none of the soldiers notice that they were accepting instructions from a polite omnic floating above the ground in monk’s robes.

The bunker was spacious, and easily defensible. Winston had set up his equipment in a side room at the base of the ramp, to better get signal from the battle. The injured were moved further back, while able-bodied and rested soldiers were moving back up the ramp to help defend the position.

Winston heard Tracer blink into the room, and turned to look at her. “Did it work?” he asked. She handed him a small scanner.

“Here you go, big guy.” Her task done, she disappeared.

Winston hooked the scanner into his computer, and his eyes moved rapidly as they saw the results. “Alright.” He said to himself.

He looked up as Hanzo walked into the room. Without thinking, Winston tossed a bottle of water to the archer, who caught it effortlessly. Hanzo set his empty quiver down in the corner, taking a drink. Then he reached down and pulled a new quiver from the storage crate.

Winston saw the exchange, then looked back at his display. “Usually you retrieve more arrows than that, Hanzo.”

“Usually, you’re right.” Hanzo replied, taking another drink. “But every time I shoot someone, they
flee. Taking my arrows with them. Cowards.”

The scientist chuckled at this. A beep from his display drew his attention, and he frowned. “That can’t be right.” He said, as he continued to manipulate the data. Hanzo watched him as he rested, taking the moment to gather his strength. He stilled as he saw the movement at the rear doorway.

A green hand reached into the room, a stone axe at the ready. As the creature entered, it ignored him - its focus was on Winston, whose back was to the door. The thing had long black hair, tattoos across its green skin, and what appeared to be tusks.

Grumbling, Winston continued to work on the data Tracer had provided.

Hanzo slowly brought up his bow, sliding an arrow from the quiver. Aiming his shot, he saw the creature move silently toward Winston. In a moment, he would clear that storage crate, and then…

The arrow took the invader in the wrist, and Winston’s first hint that something was wrong was when the stone axe clattered to the steel floor. Turning, he saw the creature’s hand pinned to the bunker’s wall. It did not cry out in pain, however, only rage at its failure. Winston bounded over to the troll, slamming its torso against the wall. Hanzo had seen Winston angry, but this was something different - the troll was nothing more than data, a piece to the puzzle.

“I wonder…” Winston asked. Then, to Hanzo’s horror, Winston took his powerful right arm and struck the troll in the throat. From across the room, Hanzo could hear the neck snap, and the troll’s eyes dulled as the life left them.

Hanzo rushed over. “That was unnecessary, Winston.” He said.

“Maybe, maybe not.” Winston replied. He pointed down at the corpse, still pinned to the wall by Hanzo’s arrow. “Look.”

As they watched, the body dissolved - not into biological residue, or dust, or any similar substance, but in the manner of an image fading from view. The troll was there, and then he was not. Hanzo leaned into the wall, where the impact from his arrow could still be seen - but the arrow itself, as well as its victim, were gone.

“No wonder you lost so many arrows, Hanzo.” said Winston. Hanzo looked at the place where the troll had been, and then at Winston.

“Tracer scanned one of the orcs, but the scanner didn’t work properly.” Winston was tapping away at his display. “She scanned the atmosphere as well. Both had electrochemical markers that suggested…” He trailed off at Hanzo’s blank stare. Taking a deep breath, Winston refocused. “Alright, atoms from our universe are measurably different than atoms from, say, Alexstrasza’s universe. I can detect those differences with my equipment.”

Hanzo nodded. “Alright?” He didn’t understand, yet.

“The air and the orc matched, you see?” Pointing at the display, Winston continued, excitedly. “The air is from the same world as the orc.” He turned and looked at Hanzo. “If it were near the portal, I’d say it was cross contamination of some sort - air blowing through the portal, or being pushed through by the people passing into our world from the nexus. Exhalations, that sort of thing. And even then, we’d see a mix, our air and theirs.” He tapped the display. “That isn’t what we found.”

“This isn’t an army from the Nexus invading our world. The Nexus itself is invading.” He sighed, looking at the doorway. “This entire complex is in the Nexus. That’s why the Troll disappeared - we’re playing by different rules, now.”
Zarya opened her eyes to see the armored man looking down at her. “You alright?” He asked. His hand was extended to her.

She muttered something in Russian, but took his hand. He hoisted her to a sitting position, and watched as she shook her head. Then he saw her look over at Chairman Volskaya, and at the blood covering her face and suit.

“Is she…?” Zarya did not complete the question, but Raynor understood.

“Just a broken nose.” He replied. “Remind me never to piss you off.”

“Roger that,” she said, off hand. Rising to her feet, she looked out on the proving grounds. The Triglav Protector was standing still, inert but otherwise intact. The cockpit had blown out, but with the other damage it looked more like an ejection than an explosion. The stone warrior was ignoring the protector, and as she watched it sent a spray of fire at a group of fleeing soldiers.

A roar came from overhead, and Zarya saw a massive dragon strafe the battlefield. It shot forth balls of green fire, bombarding clusters of Russian soldiers with its attacks. Reaching down, Zarya picked up her weapon. “First a statue, now a dragon tries to burn us. What is happening?”

“I still don’t know,” Raynor said. “But the dragon’s a friend of mine. She’s on our side.”

Zarya pointed angrily at the battlefield. “She’s trying to burn my men!”

“Yep. With balls of green healing fire.” Now he pointed. “See? The statue set them ablaze, and she put them out and healed them.” As they watched, a unit was standing up and brushing itself off, then rushing to the west, putting as much distance as possible between the dragon knight and themselves.

Here eyes were drawn to the statue again, as it howled in rage. “We need to defeat that one.”

“No argument here. Think that machine still works?” He nodded toward the protector.

Zarya armed her particle rifle. “One way to find out.” At that moment, the building shuddered, and an explosion rocked them. The balcony collapsed, creating a ramp down to a pile of rubble. As Zarya looked out the window, she saw that the damage was worse at the other end of the structure.

She looked at Raynor. “We should go.”

Another explosion to their left swallowed his reply. They ran to the balcony, then down the now partially collapsed structure and onto the ground.

-----

Alexstrasza sent another blast of fire at the Dragon Knight. It staggered, as it had before. Then it screamed in rage at her, spitting fire impotently into the air.
Good, she thought. *Let it focus on me and ignore the others.*

An explosion rocked the headquarters building, and Alexstrasza wondered briefly if Raynor was alright. Her thoughts went to the rest of her team, then, before settling on Hanzo. He was not in the open, that she could see - which probably meant that he was under cover and out of harm’s way. The alternative was not worth considering. Being off comms just made it worse.

She looped around for another pass at the knight, flying over the headquarters building. Two figures were making their way to the proving grounds. The one in black armor was clearly Raynor. And the formidable woman with him, with her enormous rifle and pink hair, had to be the one Zenyatta had called Zarya. As she watched, they climbed onto a small structure overlooking the proving grounds, pointing at the dragon knight. Then Zarya put her hand to her ear, and Alexstrasza realized that she was on their communications channel. Raynor and Zarya looked at each other, and then Raynor started working the controls on his arm.

She heard the effect before she saw the result, and the sound startled her. She had heard it many times before, both when it was used on her and when it was used on others. It was the sound of something teleporting within the nexus. In front of her, and slightly lower to the ground, two drones appeared. They were powerful aircraft from Raynor's homeworld, and periodically he could summon them in the nexus.

*In the nexus...* she thought. *We’re in the nexus.*

The drones buzzed the face of the dragon knight, and it turned to attack them. Its back now stood exposed to Zarya, who fired her weapon at the creature. Her attack was not an energy weapon, but instead a small grenade, glowing with dark blues and purples. It struck home, right at the small of the dragon knight’s back.

And then she heard a howl of rage, as a graviton field emerged from the grenade. The physical stress, coupled with the other damage to the statue, was too much to sustain, and with a mighty crack the dragon knight fractured. As its parts fell to the ground, they turned to dust, before vanishing entirely.

All that remained was a lone orc, clad in robes and arcane medallions.

Alexstrasza flew to the west end of the battleground, opposite the warrior. The green glow had only begun to take her when she dropped out of the sky. When she landed, she was once more clad in her red armor, cloak billowing behind her in the early morning wind. She placed her communicator in her ear.

“...strasza can confirm,” Winston was saying.

“I’m here, Winston. Yes, that’s him.” Her eyes blazed with fire as she began walking forward.

“We’re not fighting Gul’Dan’s army. We’re fighting Gul’Dan himself.”

The Orc shouted at her, angrily. She understood the languages of the horde, but could not make out what he was saying. His meaning became clear when he raised a glowing hand at her. She rolled to her left, dodging the fel fire. A fireball of her own caused him to dodge in turn.

“Where is your cage, whelp?” Gul’Dan shouted at her, and his voice was bleeding with rage and violence.

“I watched you die, Gul’Dan Stormreaver.” She said simply. He sent another attack at her, and she used her magic to deflect it. “I celebrated with all of Azeroth while they dragged your rotting corpse
through the streets. Your head is a trophy in a hovel in the middle of a swamp.”

A sneer crossed his sickly green visage. “You think death can contain me? I have seen what lies beyond, little one.” He sent another blast of magic, but it was incoherent and unfocused. Her shields dissipated it easily. “I have seen our fate. Everything will fall to the inky black. Even you and your allies.”

*The inky black? That’s a new one,* thought Alexstrasza.

“This world shall be his throne,” Gul’Dan continued. “The Nexus, his citadel.”

Over her communicator, she heard Winston. “If we can set off an EMP near the east bunker, that should close the portal. The blast would travel through to the nexus side, destroying the emitter.”

“The Triglav Protector has an EMP.” replied Zarya. “I doubt it has been expended, what good would it do against a stone foe?”

Alexstrasza looked to her right, and saw Zarya and Raynor standing on the roof of some unknown structure. Her slow walk toward Gul’Dan had carried her almost alongside them, now. They could not cross over to the protector without becoming targets for Gul’Dan, however. Unless…

“Get her ready, Jim. Bend your knees.” She said. Above her, Raynor looked down at her. When she reached out her hand to him, his eyes grew wide, and he began frantically explaining what would happen to Zarya.

Alexstrasza sent another fireball at Gul’Dan, and then reached out with her magic. Raynor and Zarya felt themselves lifting into the air, floating gently over the battlefield. On comms, Alexstrasza could hear Jim telling Zarya to calm down, which she ignored in favor of what had to be a steady stream of Russian swearing.

Gul’Dan saw her move, and grinned. If she stopped her telekinesis to shield herself, Raynor and Zarya would fall. If she did not, then she would fall. *Does he know about the EMP?* Alexstrasza wondered. Would Gul’Dan see the threat?

Power began flowing into his hands. This would be a massive blast, he would make sure of that.

A small purple orb began circling him, and Alexstrasza thought she could see an energy field around it, draining Gul’Dan. Another ball struck at him, and he sidestepped it - before a third struck his leg. He continued charging his magic, looking at her in cold rage.

Gul’Dan saw her move, and grinned. If she stopped her telekinesis to shield herself, Raynor and Zarya would fall. If she did not, then she would fall. *Does he know about the EMP?* Alexstrasza wondered. Would Gul’Dan see the threat?

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Zarya and Raynor were halfway to the protector. At this point, Alexstrasza could kick them into the air like a javelin, and hope that they landed well, or that Raynor caught Zarya and took the impact on his armor. But she could not communicate that to them, not without breaking her concentration.

*Not enough time,* she thought. Gul’Dan laughed, and it was a cold, sinister laugh. “I win again, child.” And he unleashed a blast of dark magic.

“Embrace Tranquility” said Zenyatta over comms. Alexstrasza sighed, wondering what he meant with the poorly timed phrase - then she felt it. Zenyatta floated in front of her, arms and legs in ritual pose, an otherworldly light emanating from him. The magic blast approached him, struck him, and… did nothing.

Her senses could detect the omnic, faintly, if she listened to them. He had an aura of peace and calm, whenever she had sought it out. Now that faint aura glowed with brilliance she had not seen in many centuries. It was life. It was peace. It was harmony. It was like a bright sun at the end of a summer
It was saving her life. Her eyes went to Zarya and Raynor, almost to the Protector. With a final exertion, she lifted them up, effectively lobbing them into the cockpit of the mech.

Zenyatta’s glow faded, but he remained in front of her, firing small orbs at Gul’Dan. “It is well,” he said, “that magic travels at less than the speed of light.”

Gul’Dan screamed in rage, firing a shot at the omnic. He floated effortlessly out of the way.

Hanzo’s voice came over comms. “We have more orcs coming out of the far bunker. Hana and I are containing them but there are more of them than us.” His voice was calm and assured, but the stress of battle was evident.

She looked at Gul’Dan, and saw him chasing Zenyatta with his magic. For the moment, his attention had wandered away from her.

“We don’t have time to walk the weapon over to the portal.” she said, simply. “I’m going to open my portal here and drop the protector through it. My portal will home in on his portal, and they should annihilate each other.” She looked up at the protector, and saw Zarya in the cockpit, looking at her. “Can you set the EMP to detonate on its own?”

The woman nodded, and Alexstrasza saw her hand on her ear. “Da, this I can do.”

“Do it and get clear.” Gul’Dan began preparing another blast, as Zenyatta continued to pelt him with projectiles.

“How do we get through, then?” asked Raynor. “We have business in the nexus, you know.”

“I know,” replied Alexstrasza. “But he can bring unlimited soldiers through his portal. We can’t deal with that forever. And if we fall here, so falls the city. What then, Jim?” She shook her head, and began gathering her magic. “No. Not today.”

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“Do it.” said Zenyatta, simply. Gul’Dan looked at the omnic, then at Alexstrasza. A howl of rage followed.

“You think yourself powerful?” He asked, incredulously. His magic continued to build. “You do not deserve to stand among the Gods!”

“Thirty seconds!” Shouted Zarya, as she and Raynor scrambled down the mech. For a fleeting instant, Alexstrasza hoped that her seconds and this world’s seconds matched. It’s the details that matter, she mused.

“I do not walk among Gods, Gul’Dan Stormreaver.” She said, stepping forward again. “I walk with life.”

“When we are finished,” Gul’Dan spat at her. “You will walk among the black expanse. And it will devour your soul, whelping.”

“If that is my fate,” she agreed. “But not today.”

“Clear!” Shouted Raynor. Alexstrasza unleashed her magic, a bright red blast of power that sailed toward Gul’Dan, before arcing above him and back to the Protector. He had shielded himself, before realizing that the blast was not an attack. Screaming in rage, he lashed out at her, his blast flying through the air - slower than her own, but aimed true.
A great hole opened up beneath the protector, and it slid in. Its massive cannon caught the edge of the portal, causing the mech to topple at the last second. Alexstrasza wondered if that would change anything. Too late now.

Over comms, she heard a phrase in Japanese, a phrase she had heard only once before. As Hanzo shouted, a glow appeared behind Gul’Dan. The orc turned, and saw two blue dragons spiraling toward him. They struck him, and he screamed in pain. His magic blast dissipated, before it could strike Alexstrasza.

“Detonation in three,” said Zarya. “Two… One…”

And then the world went white.

Chapter End Notes

End of Act II.

Thank you again for your feedback. Please, keep it coming.
TO: Commander@Overwatch Centcom  
FROM: SNovikov@Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian Federation  
SUBJ: Official Communiqué, St. Petersburg Incident

Commander Morrison,

I have been instructed to transmit our official protest against the so-called Overwatch team’s illegal and dangerous actions in the St. Petersburg incident of the 21st of this month. Your team, and I must emphasize this point, has absolutely no legal authority to act within or on behalf of the Russian Federation. Though you have appropriated the name and identity of Overwatch, and even made use of that organization’s tactics and facilities, you are not an authorized international peacekeeping force.

Some call you misfits and freaks. Others call you mercenaries and assassins. Reports from the scene suggested that you deployed highly advanced bio-weapons in addition to experimental directed-energy devices, and that you did so in an urban setting less than 3 Kilometers from a major population center.

Overwatch once served the public good. Do they still? When my president spoke with me regarding this incident, he noted that the seven brave Russian soldiers still missing from Volskaya have not had the chance to weigh in on the question. What would their answer be, Commander Morrison?

Officially, we have taken no notice of your activities to date, as your team’s conduct has shown no indication of action against the interests of the Russian Federation. That forbearance is at an end.

In the interests of international cooperation and good will, we will not - at this time - be lodging a protest with the United Nations regarding this incident. It is our hope that your future conduct does not cause us to revisit this decision.

Respectfully,

Adm. Sergei Novikov (Ret.)
Sergei,

Thank you for the kind note. Please, by all means - tell me how you really feel?

Also, Bioweapons? Really?

Jack

---RFMFA Unofficial via SATCOM MERIDIAN 21---

TO: Commander@Overwatch Centcom

FROM: SergeiN@Moscow Center

SUBJ: Re: St. Petersburg Incident

Jack,

School is out, and children are in bed. So I will sit back with a drink and tell you a story.

Our official response is as I said it. The President is angry that we needed outside help to contain the situation. The British are angry because their unofficial support of your team, and their looking the other way as you occupy their island, just got turned into an official international incident. The Koreans are angry because someone in an apartment a mile away got footage of one of their MEKA tanks dropping from the sky.

And the only reason our “official” response was sent via back channels is that Mayor Stanislav Novikov of St. Petersburg personally advocated on your behalf all the way to the President’s office. He and Chairman Volskaya have never seen eye to eye, and when she does... well, whatever the hell it is that she did? Of course he was going to take the opportunity to point it out.

It was a situation of our own making, made worse by overly cautious security. And it blew up in our faces. But Stas is correct when he says that Overwatch’s presence saved millions of lives. And for that he - and I - thank you.
When the dust settles, Stas wants to personally meet with your team. If I can’t talk him out of it, he will probably give them medals or some similar honor. Obviously, such a meeting would be kept secret - but it would mean much to him. And to the team, perhaps?

But that is the extent of our official response - just bluster. Because the truth of it is, there is no evidence of anything that occurred. Some soldiers reported being rescued by your team, others report being set on fire and then rescued and healed by some means, but beyond that? There was no working video feed anywhere on the property. Not in the bunkers, not in the proving grounds. Odd, when so much analysis goes into those testing videos, yes?

That’s why we mentioned bio weapons. Tell me - did you really have a dragon at Volskaya? Some soldiers seemed to think so. Others are not sure. They claim to have fought monsters, but none were found - no corpses, no blood, no discarded weapons, nothing.

In short, Jack, we can’t lodge any sort of public protest, because we don’t know what we are protesting. So while we will privately complain to you about your unwarranted saving-our-asses, that is all.

Of course, if you happen to figure out what did actually happen… well, let me just say that there would be no quicker way to get back into the president’s good graces.

Thank you again, Jack. Please convey my thanks to your team, if and when.

Your friend,

Sergei

---OWSATCOM via RF MFA Unofficial---

TO: SergeiN@Moscow Center

FROM: Commander@Overwatch Centcom

SUBJ: Re: St. Petersburg Incident

I will, of course, pass along your thoughts and thanks. And Mayor Novikov’s, as well. Seems that you raised him right, Sergei.

Our team is missing, though that was expected and planned for. I’m not prepared to discuss where they are at this time, as I am not in a position to communicate with them or otherwise confirm their location. It is possible that they are all ash, and their mission failed. Or they are just busy and incommunicado.

One phrase may be relevant, both to their current mission and the origin of your mysterious opposing force - Extradimensional Travel. Did you see that strange earthquake in Australia two weeks ago? Look closer, and you’ll have some idea of what may have happened at Volskaya. Except with an army instead of debris.

That bio-weapon you mentioned is a soldier from the other side of these portals - and she has been instrumental in developing a solution to the problem. If we find out more information, I’ll keep you in the loop - especially if it looks like there will be another incursion in Russia. But our team’s mission was to close the doors, so to speak, and then bolt them shut.
Glad to hear you’re doing well. I hope this incident didn’t hurt your standing with the president too badly. All my love to Natalya.

Jack

---RFMFA Unofficial via SATCOM MERIDIAN 21---

TO: Commander@Overwatch Centcom

FROM: SergeiN@Moscow Center

SUBJ: Re: St. Petersburg Incident

Jack,

Only you are mad enough to have a dragon on the payroll.

Major Zaryanova is one of the missing - so, perhaps she is with your people, working the problem from the other side of… whatever this is. If so, then their success is assured. Your team is good, Jack, but Zarya is the best. As we both know.

If this becomes a threat to Russia - again - please give me some warning next time.

Good luck,

Sergei

Chapter End Notes

Take a moment, when you get the time, and look up the story of Lt. Colonel Stanislav Petrov (1939-2017), of the Soviet Air Defense Forces. For a Russian Foreign Minister to name his new headquarters (and his son) after such a man - well, that tells you pretty much all you need to know about Admiral Novikov, and by extension what he thinks about Overwatch in general and their actions here in particular.

The fact that he and Soldier 76 are good friends from back in the day doesn't hurt, either.

I also relish the idea of Alexstrasza returning home, and having to explain where she got a Russian Medal of Valor.

Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Interlude - Waking Up

Chapter Summary

Three Russians wake up to the aftermath of battle.

Katya Volskaya woke to her secretary shaking her arm. Didn’t he know that she wanted to sleep? What was he doing?

She looked around, and found that she was laying on a couch in her office, or what was left of it. Her secretary was hovering over her, a look of concern on his face.

“What… What happened?”

“The battle is over, Chairman.” he reported. “The opposing forces, as well as the Overwatch team that stopped them, have vanished.”

“Battle?” Katya sat up, a throbbing in her head. It felt like something was missing, that there should be something there. It wasn’t there, perhaps she had misplaced it. Perhaps she didn’t need it. But it had been so long…

The soldier steadied her as she rose. “Chairman, you were injured, please rest.” She ignored him, pushing past him to look out over the proving grounds.

The structures all seemed to be damaged, but mostly intact. One of the bunkers was open, and dazed Russian soldiers were wandering out into the open. The other was a crater. Her balcony was rubble, and she could see damage to the headquarters building. Turning back to her office, she finally caught sight of her desk… or what remained of it. Something had blasted it into pieces.

Walking to the desk, slowly, she bent over. The picture frame itself was undamaged, but the glass was broken. Shaking out the broken fragments, Katya Volskaya looked at her daughter’s picture for a long moment. A tear fell, mixing with the blood on her face and landing on her hand. She regarded it, quietly.

“Chairman?” Pavel asked. “Are you alright?”

“No.”

-----

Corporal Nikolai Leonov woke up with a headache, covered in dust and with the taste of blood in his mouth.

There was movement, somewhere nearby. A scratching noise. “Anatoliy?” He said.

“I’m here.” was the reply. “The building collapsed when the protector exploded, I think. I don’t
know what else could have caused it.”

He tried to clear his head, but the pain was making that difficult. And the parts of the battle he did remember made no sense. “What happened?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Overwatch was here, or at least some of them. The girl with the mech, at least - she fought off some of the green monsters, so we could escape.”

Now it started coming together. “And then we hid here,” said Nikolai. “and saw a dragon turn into a woman.”

“You saw, maybe. I was out cold by that point.” In the distance, he could hear birds - which meant they were not far from the surface. He didn’t consider that there were not many birds that lingered near the test ranges - the weapons fire usually scared them off.

Nikolai tried to stretch out, and found that he could do little more than sit up. A pain in his left leg demanded his attention, now. No way he would be able to put weight on it.

“When the chairman goes all out for a weapons test, she really goes all out.” Nikolai remarked, chuckling to himself.

“She does indeed.” He could hear Anatoliy trying to move around. “I don’t have any sunlight here, do you see a way out?”

“No.” He listened carefully, and heard a scraping sound above and to the left. “Hey, down here!”

The scraping continued, and Nikolai thought it might be someone moving stone and steel. Could a search be underway already?

Anatoliy started a coughing fit, and Nikolai realized how bad the dust must be down here. Shifting the debris could cause it to collapse in on them, if their potential rescuers didn’t know where they were.

Again he shouted. “Hey, down here! Help us!”

The scraping stopped, and then he heard a muttered curse. “Be quiet, comrades, I hear you.” The voice was deep, with a sound of annoyance and... something else. It was almost as if the man had not expected anyone to be here.

Nikolai relaxed, even as his gut told him to worry. “They are coming, Anatoliy.”

The scraping continued, until a needle of sunlight broke through the rubble. “Stay still, lads.” The voice said. This close, there was definitely an undertone of menace in the man’s words, and the voice sounded... different.

A hissing sound drew Nikolai’s attention. Looking up, he saw slithering purple tentacles of some sort. They slid around the largest piece of debris, gripping it as if they were fingers of some monstrous hand. Then, rather than tilting the stone fragment aside so that they could crawl out, the tentacles lifted the stone out of the way entirely.

Nikolai shielded his eyes from the bright sunlight. He saw the silhouette of their rescuer. The man seemed to wear the longcoat of an officer, and his insignia placed him as some sort of Admiral, though Nikolai realized that the design was different, somehow. He wore his cover, and his face was in shadow. But as Nikolai reached up, the man’s eyes glowed with a sickly orange.
As his eyes adjusted, Nikolai saw that the purple tentacles were not some alien thing, but the man’s left arm. When the man reached a hand down to help him up, Nikolai was relieved that the human hand was offered.

“You’re going to be alright, corporal.” Said the alien man thing, in precise Russian. “Alexei Stukov, at your service.”

Nikolai climbed out of the rubble, grunting as the pain in his leg grew worse. When he was safe on the grass, he took a moment to look around. They were in the middle of a forest, though several buildings from Volskaya were apparent. Every structure he saw was a ruin.

“Admiral,” he began, not knowing how else to address this… person. “Where are we?”

A sharp laugh, as Stukov climbed down to help Anatoliy. “Here?” He paused, looking back up. “Corporal, welcome to the Nexus.”

-----

Major Aleksandra Zaryanova woke to the sound of bells.

She was laying face down, on grass. A warm breeze blew past her, carrying with it the smell of flowers and a tinkling of bells. Opening her eyes slightly, she could see sunlight on her left hand.

Where am I? She wondered.

“You’re gonna want to move, miss.” A voice said. Lifting herself up, she cautiously scanned the forest around her. She saw no one.

She rolled her head to the side, and the satisfying crack of her neck helped steady her nerves. Looking down, she saw her particle cannon. The display showed a full charge. Zarya lifted the weapon, taking a closer look at the ammo readout.

She heard a cough, and looked up. In one of the branches of a tree sat a man. He was in some sort of uniform, obviously military - but not Russian. He wore a dark red beret, and the only memorable feature on his dark-skinned face was a thin goatee. He seemed… young, maybe? The word her mind came up with was unfinished. As she looked at him, he pointed behind her.

Again she heard the bells, and when she turned around, she saw why. Three creatures were running toward her. She lunged to the right, and they passed by. They ignored her completely, except for the annoyed look on the face of the one at the rear of the group.

Each of the creatures had been women, with lavender skin and green flowing hair. There must have been bells woven into their hair somehow, but Zarya had not seen where. Their delicate arms had held fearsome spears, jagged and menacing. Where their hips would have been, there they were like deer, with soft brown fur and hooves and four legs and the whole bit. Zarya stared at them as they passed, their white tails bouncing in rhythm with their steps.

“Dryads,” the man said, before grasping the branch and dropping down to the ground. His movements were precise, and though he did not have a weapon in his hand, the long rifle on his back was impressive. Zarya could sense the danger from him, the controlled violence of a professional
soldier. She still couldn’t place his accent, though.

“I must be a long way from home,” Zarya said, as calmly as she could.

The man laughed. “That’s how it works around here. My unit just formed a week ago, not even setting up a forward base until last night. I sat around a fire, talking to Ange, trading stories.”

He walked casually toward her, almost strolling. “And then I woke up here. And a little man who called himself a dwarf told me that this was another universe.” He shook his head, still smiling. “What did he call it? The…hm.” He looked thoughtful.

“The Nexus,” she said, and there was both relief and defeat in her voice. The good news, of course, was that she had survived the explosion, and the portal was (hopefully) closed. The bad news was that she ended up on the wrong side of it.

“That’s it,” he confirmed, snapping his fingers at the revelation. “The Nexus.”

“I was with a man, before we came here.” She said. “About my height, a marine.”

The soldier looked at her. Reaching up, he took a fruit from a nearby branch. Then he paused, offering it to her. Zarya shook her head, causing the man to shrug. He pulled out a knife, and started to cut the pear-like growth.

“Lots of marines in the nexus. That dwarf said he had seen one from a place called America.” He popped a slice of fruit into his mouth. Looking at her, he seemed to come to a decision. “But I’m betting this marine wasn’t born in your world, was he?”

Zarya realized how little she knew about the man with whom she had gone into battle. That his style meshed well with hers had been obvious, and his armor clearly came from another world. But which one?

“He had power armor.” She said, carefully. Would that even narrow it down, in this place?

“Aha,” the man said. “He was my kind of marine, it sounds like.” Tossing the remains of his lunch behind him, the man started walking. “Come with me, then.”

They walked a few hundred feet, to the edge of the forest. On the other side of an open field, there was a rock face - and at the top of it, a domed metal structure.

“There were some marines up there, I think. That’s a Terran Command Center. If your friend landed nearby, he’ll be there.” The soldier pointed at the far end of the rock face, and as she looked closer Zarya saw that there was a rugged path cut into the stone.

“It’s steep, but you can walk up that way. There’s a fountain a little ways up, if you need water.” He said, continuing to smile at her, while cleaning his knife on his pants leg. “Even if he’s not there, they’ll know where to find him.”

Zarya judged the distance, then looked at the sun. She should be able to make it before dark. Turning to the soldier, she nodded in his direction. “I am in your debt, um…”


She took his hand in a firm handshake. “Thank you very much, Lieutenant Samir Duran.” And with that, she slung her cannon on her back and began walking to the command center.
Duran watched her go, leaning against a tree. “No, Major. Thank you.”
“Let the dragon consume my foes!” He had shouted.

The Orc had turned toward him, thinking his shout a desperate ploy to distract him. And he had been half right. The power was flowing through him now, and the dragons leapt forward. As they spiralled through the air, the orc’s laughter faded. For the briefest instant, Hanzo saw the creature’s eyes widen in actual fear.

The dragons tore through him, and the orc’s scream of pain pierced the din of the battlefield. Hanzo nocked another arrow, as the Russian woman’s voice sounded in his ear. “Detonation in three… two…”

And then…

His eyes opened, just enough to confirm that he was indeed still in his bed. With only the starlight from an open window, the ceiling looked as it always had - dim shadows played across its wooden surface. Hanzo did not sleep with a candle, nor was there any other light, even from the hallway. He preferred it this way, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

It was warmer than he thought it would be, however. He normally kept the window in his room open, especially in the summer. Even his pillow was warm, underneath him. He rolled to his left side, and his right arm wrapped itself around Alexstrasza’s waist. Her hand reached up, clasping his. It was so much nicer when she did not have her metal gauntlets, he thought.

It took him a moment. Then his eyes snapped open.

His head rested on Alexstrasza’s shoulder, and she was laying in his bed with him. Her cloak, he could see on the back of a chair, and the large metallic pieces of her armor were missing, leaving just the form-fitting red body armor underneath. Her eyes were closed, and her breathing was even. Hanzo saw a soft smile on her lips, and wondered if she were dreaming or just comfortable.

Hanzo smiled softly to himself. Then he reached down and pulled the light blanket up to cover them both.
“I’m glad you two made it.”

Hanzo blinked, the cup of tea halfway to his lips. The cafeteria had been empty a moment ago, he was sure. Then Chromie walked around the table, taking the seat opposite his own. Grinning at him, the gnome reached over and stole a croissant from his plate.

“Allie told me that these were a treat.” She said. “Remind me to try one, the next time I visit your world.”

Hanzo set his tea down. “Where are we?”

Chromie looked at him. “Isn’t this your home?” She took a tentative bite of the croissant, then smiled.

He looked around again. Sure enough, this was the cafeteria at Watchpoint Gibraltar. He was sitting in his usual spot, as far from the bank of displays as possible. But there was no one else in sight, and even the clattering noises of a functioning kitchen were silent. For all that, he was certain that he could smell what must be breakfast cooking, and his plate had to have come from somewhere.

Then he looked at Chromie, again. “I’m dreaming.”

She nodded. “It’s always easier to communicate via dreams, especially with the nexus in chaos, like it is now.” She took another bite. “And dreamers don’t have a firm place in time stream, unlike those who are awake.”

Hanzo stared at her, giving her much the look he gave Winston on a routine basis. She chuckled at this, before continuing.

“Why do you think people disappear into the nexus in their sleep?” She tilted her head at him, considering how best to explain. “Your mind is untethered from reality, when you are dreaming during a restful sleep. It travels wherever it wills. People dream of places they have yet to see, and then visit those places and call the feeling Deja Vu. But it's really their mind browsing their own time stream.”

Hanzo sighed, sipping his tea. It certainly tasted real, and the temperature was just right. “So,” he replied. “You’re sending a message from my future.”

She nodded.

“But,” he continued. “That means you know how this resolves itself.”

Again, she nodded. “Two for two.”

He considered her. “What is the word Winston would have used? Paradox?”

She rolled her eyes. “A paradox just means that you don’t know enough about what is happening. If your solution is impossible, then it’s not a solution.” She met his gaze, continuing. “Time travel is simultaneously messy and precise. It has to be, or else it wouldn’t work.”

She plucked an orange from his plate, and until that instant he had not known the orange was there. “Say I wanted this fruit, but you didn’t pick it up when you got your breakfast. So I go back in time to an hour ago and stop by your quarters and ask you to grab one of those orange fruits for me.”

Hanzo looked amused. “It actually is called an orange.”
The delight was plain on Chromie’s face. “Perfect! ‘Go forth, and get me an orange, Hanzo Shimada’ and you nod and accept your quest with all the responsibility that that entails, and so on and so forth. And then you bring me an orange.” She holds up the fruit, keeping her eyes on him. “So now I have an orange.”

Hanzo waited. “Why did you need me to get you an orange?”

“Because the time stream depended on it, perhaps. Maybe they just look yummy. Maybe I’ll ask you for nine more before I leave you alone about it. I don’t know. But if I have an orange, and again she held the orange up. “Then why did I go back in time to ask for one?”

Hanzo stared at her. She smiled softly, and set the orange down. A faint yellow light left her hand, piercing the top of the orange, then dissipating. The orange fell into eight perfect slices, and Chromie picked one up.

“It’s much easier if I tell you in a dream that, if given the opportunity, you should have an orange ready for Chromie.” She took a bite, nodding approvingly. “These are pretty good.”

“Why in a dream, though? Why not sneak a note into my room, or a message on my display?”

Chromie made a visible effort to keep from rolling her eyes, and was mostly successful. “Because in a dream, the message is subconscious. When you awaken, and remember the message, it’s as if it is your own mind making the suggestion. If the time stream is in play, then you doing something and not understanding your own reasoning is a lot safer than knowingly doing something you don’t understand on orders from your future self.”

Hanzo considered that. “So you tell me something that I should remember, but when I wake up I only think that I dreamed something, but I take it seriously because it was in a dream.”

She chuckled at that, taking another piece of orange. “You know, you’re right, it does sound odd when you put it that way.” Then she shrugged. “But it works.”

“How can you be sure?” he asked.

Her eyebrow raised, and she watched him.

Hanzo got her point. “Right, the future.”

She nodded.

“So, what dire warnings do you bring my dreams this night, Chromie?”

She kept smiling, looking down at his plate. “Oh, nothing much, really. Don’t travel until midday, but I figure you would know that one.”

Hanzo hadn’t, but he nodded and said nothing.

“You’re going to meet a Russian Admiral named Alexei Stukov. You can trust him. Jim Raynor already does, and so does Sarah Kerrigan.”

Hanzo nodded again. “Jim spoke well of this man on the plane to Volskaya. We were going to try to rescue him, when everything began exploding.”

“He’s fine. Don’t worry about him.” Chromie’s expression lost some of its amusement, and she looked once more into Hanzo’s eyes. “And you should trust Alexstrasza, Hanzo.”
“I do,” he replied, automatically.

“I know. And she trusts you.” Chromie held his gaze. “So when she says not to worry about a thing, you can trust that it is not a thing worth worrying about.”

Hanzo leaned back. “We have enough to worry about, between us.”

“I know you do. Just trust her, and listen to her. And… well, the rest can wait.”

*Can it?* He thought. Hanzo’s face must have reacted to that last comment, for Chromie’s expression became serious. Her eyes looked… *old.* For the first time, he saw the wisdom of her thousands of years.

“Hanzo Shimada. Do not worry about tomorrow when you have your arms around today.” Her smile returned. “Tomorrow is my job.”

“My arms around…” Then he remembered where he was, and where *she* was, and before he could even think of a response, Hanzo Shimada blushed.

Later, the last thing Hanzo would remember from that dream was how Chromie’s laugh sounded like music.

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Alexstrasza’s right arm, the one underneath him, was wrapped around him when he began stirring. It was a comfortable feeling, in a time when true comfort had been in short supply. He found that, despite everything ahead of them, he did not want to move.

When he had lived at Shimada Castle, the real one, he would have been awake before everyone in the household. On those rare days when Genji beat him to the courtyard, Hanzo had considered it a personal failure. His exercises on those days were all the more rigorous as a result, often to Genji’s amusement.

He knew that this wasn’t his real bed, nor was it his real room. But *she* was real. Her warmth was real. And Hanzo didn’t want to get up.

He felt her shift underneath his head, then felt her lips brush against his head in a light kiss. He turned his head slightly, placing a kiss of his own on her shoulder.

“We made it,” she whispered, tiredly.

“We did.” he replied. “How do you feel?”

Another kiss found its way to the top of his head. “We won, together, and made it back to the nexus.” He felt her yawn. “I’m absolutely exhausted.”

“We’re in my home.” he remarked.

“I thought we might be,” she answered. “Good.”

He tilted his head up, to look at her face - and found her leaning forward. Without thinking, he leaned forward himself, and their lips met.
Her right arm held him closer, and the fingers of her left hand intertwined with his own. He felt her eyebrows raise, as one of them brushed his ear. But she responded to the kiss, returning its warmth.

Their brief kiss before the battle had surprised him, and even with everything happening at once - the battle, the chaos - it had felt as if time stopped for an instant.

This kiss was the opposite - it felt as if years went into their kiss, their embrace. Hanzo had known her for such a short span, compared with her life, but she kissed him as if she had been waiting for him for a long, long time. She held him as if he would vanish if she let go.

She felt Hanzo’s steely control slip, for the first time. He had worried for days about what would happen if the door to his world closed. The first time the subject came up, they had almost argued about it - and the incident had left Alexstrasza so unnerved that she almost fought Jim Raynor and Zenyatta. Now, well - now she felt him let go. She felt him embrace today, and she needed no magic to sense it.

It was a moment they would cherish. But both of them were exhausted from battle and worry and interdimensional travel, and worse - both knew it.

Their lips parted, finally, and their eyes met. Hers were full of joy, as if he had convinced her (finally) that yes, this was real. His were resolved - because it was.

“There you are,” she said. She almost rolled her eyes at the phrase, but the words had come of their own accord. Smooth, she thought.

“Here we are,” he replied. “A wise woman told me that I should not worry about ashes before the fire was set.” he smiled. “So I decided I would give it a try.”

Alexstrasza planted another kiss on his forehead. “She must be wise indeed, Hanzo Shimada.”

He chuckled. “Modest, too.”

A soft laugh escaped Alexstrasza. It turned into a yawn before she could stop it.

He watched her yawn, then braced himself. Her eyes had turned back to him just in time to watch him yawn in turn.

“We need to get moving at sunrise,” she said. “Rest now.”

“Midday,” he whispered, already half asleep. “It’s not safe before midday.”

Looking at Hanzo in her arms, she smiled. “Midday, then.” Another yawn came. “Get some rest, Hanzo.”

It was close to a minute before he responded. “You sleep too, your grace.”

Alexstrasza did not reply, having already drifted off.

Chapter End Notes

Note that Chromie leaves suggestions in people's subconscious. The morality of such a thing is iffy - if it is Chromie leaving instructions and impulses and whatnot in people's
minds of her own accord. If it concerns you, you may safely assume that at some point, Hanzo thanked Chromie for reassuring him about how things would work out, and she then went back in time to reassure him about how things would work out.

To borrow a phrase - "Wibbly Wobbly, Timey Wimey."

For the curious - I've always pictured Alexstrasza in some combination of her Dragon Aspect armor from HotS (A red suit of full body armor) and her normal outfit (The metal accents). It hasn't been strictly relevant, as such, until now. I just figured she would keep it clean via magic, as one does. And there wasn't really a good spot to explain why she did or didn't change clothes.

Feedback, as always, is welcome.
“There have to be more than this,” Jim Raynor said to himself.

Shortly after the detonation, Kerrigan had found him face down on the floor, still in his armor. Its power system had been fried, again, probably due in no small part to the massive EMP they had detonated. As she had pulled him out of the suit, he had teased her that using telekinesis was cheating.

She had smiled and offered to put him back in.

Once he had had a chance to rest, they compared notes. Kerrigan had made it back to the main part of the nexus without trouble, after their encounter with Junkrat at Warhead Junction. Near as they could tell, the detonation was what disrupted the portal. The magic that controlled the nexus was still a mystery, but in some ways it ran like a well programmed adjutant, which meant that it had failsafes. If a portal collapsed, the nexus tried to send travellers to the nearest safe destination - which explained both his trip to Australia and Alexstrasza’s arrival at Gibraltar.

Raynor suppressed a chill when he thought of jumping into a portal without safety features. Then he realized that he was placing his trust in a system of failsafes reliant on magic.

*You’re a long way from Mar Sara, Jimmy,* he thought.

Kerrigan had helped him rig a beacon using the communications device Overwatch had given him. Not only would the overwatch team be tied into the usual comms setup that worked in the nexus, but they could use the signal to home in on the command center.

The beacon had seemed to be enough of a guide for Tracer, who had arrived mid-morning. But when the woman sat down, Sarah had quickly realized that she hadn’t even noticed the beacon - she had made her way in by memory. When the portal reversed itself and dragged the team into the nexus, it had also broken whatever blocks had been on Tracer’s memory - so what had been bits and pieces of half-remembered dreams now became full experiences.

On a basic level, Lena had known that the nexus was combat, and that she had been there and fought alongside Alexstrasza, Raynor, and the others. But that knowledge doesn’t compare to waking up and having real, visceral memories of fighting, of killing.

Of dying.

Lena had taken a bottle of water and laid down quietly in the corner, collecting herself. For now, she was resting. But the experience had shaken her, and Raynor couldn’t really blame her for needing a sit-down.
The portal that brought them back to the nexus had also scattered debris from Volskaya across the valley. In many ways, it resembled what had happened in Australia, only reversed. Entire buildings appeared intact, before dropping to the ground. They had seen the remains of at least one bunker, and Raynor’s scans seemed to show that subfloors and underground structures had been brought alongside the above-ground debris.

Their radar had not yet located the remains of the protector. The EMP would not have destroyed the mech, so it had to be out there somewhere. Kerrigan suggested that it would probably be near the remains of the emitter - which meant that whoever was behind the attempt to conquer the overwatch world now had a massive walking weapons platform. One they had located their team, or however much of it remained, finding the emitter was their first priority.

Around noon, their radio setup had its first catch - Alexstrasza checked in via the overwatch comms. She and Hanzo had appeared together, and were uninjured. Their position was a good distance away, so she was going to attempt to convince Hanzo to let her fly them back to the command center. Raynor didn’t want to guess how she’d manage that - he had a hard time picturing the cool and reserved archer clinging for dear life to the back of a dragon in flight.

*Then again, if she’s the one asking?* He chuckled. *Who knows?* He wished the dragon queen a pleasant flight, and asked the pair to keep their eyes open for missing team members on their approach.

The biggest surprise, so far, had been the Russian soldiers that had made it to the nexus alongside the overwatch team. Two had wandered up the hillside that morning, and recognized Jim. Unfortunately, his Russian was limited to “Nyet,” so he gave them some water and some rations and pointed out a shade tree where they could get some rest. Raynor figured, correctly, that the men must have taken cover in one of the bunkers at Volskaya, before the nexus took their shelter - and them with it.

But with Tracer resting and Kerrigan out searching, his board was clear. Nothing else showed up on radar - no additional communicators, no rescue beacons, nothing. Hanzo and Alexstrasza were not yet on the map, which made sense given the distance they had to travel. Of Hana and Winston and Zenyatta, there had been no sign. *Nor Zarya*, he added to himself.

Nor had they seen any evidence of Gul’Dan, which was fine by Raynor. If he had escaped once they arrived in the nexus, then he would resurface eventually. And if he had appeared at or near the emitter itself, then they’d find him there. Either way, he would not have the opportunity to threaten another world.

*Of course, that assumes the portal took him.* Raynor didn’t want to continue that train of thought - especially as there was little he could do about it, if it were the case.

With a sigh, Raynor stood and grabbed a pack of cigarettes. “I’ll be right outside,” he said to Tracer. She did not acknowledge him, which hopefully meant that she was asleep. Opening the hatch, he walked outside into the sunlight.

*At least the weather is still nice,* he mused, lighting his smoke.

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Raynor was sitting on the steps of the command center, finishing a pack of field rations, when one of the Russians ran past. His eyes followed the soldier to the hilltop path, where a pink-haired woman
Zarya looked tired, but far from exhausted. Raynor tossed her some water as she walked up to the command center. She sat down on the steps next to him, taking a long drink of water. The soldier had gone to tell his comrade that Major Zaryanova had returned.

“We’ve got food if you’re hungry,” Raynor said. “And there is plenty of room inside if you want some rack time.”

Zarya nodded. “Thank you.” She looked thoughtful, taking in the view of the valley below. “Who else?”

“Tracer and Hanzo, from your world.” Raynor said. “And Alexstrasza from hers.”

“Alexstrasza, the dragon woman?”

“I’m told that she prefers Dragon Queen,” he corrected, “But yes, her. She and Hanzo are flying in from another part of the nexus.”

“I know, I saw them.” Zarya said, taking another drink.

Raynor looked at her, then at his watch. “I didn’t think she flew that fast. They aren’t due for another two hours.”

Zarya shrugged. “I saw the shadow over the path. It looked like a dragon to me.” She smiled, amused at how ridiculous the statement sounded coming from her lips. “Though we are not experts on dragons in Russia, you understand.”

Raynor smiled back, but kept his eyes on the sky. He only knew one other dragon in the nexus. But while Alexstrasza changed form routinely, and was comfortable either way, Chromie almost never left her gnomish guise. The timewalker preferred to use her dragon as an avatar, creating its form using sand and dust. Where Alexstrasza attacked with fire and force, Chromie’s attacks were sand blasts and whirlpools of quicksand and the like.

Raynor saw the distant form of the golden dragon long before it approached their base. It was flying oddly, as if it were carrying something.

Raynor stood, surprising Zarya. *Or someone.*

“Jim?” She asked.

“Something’s wrong.” he replied, before walking around the command center.

The hilltop site had plenty of room for landing aircraft - or dragons - without any trouble. The nearest landing area was a few hundred meters from the command center. As Raynor watched, the golden dragon angled toward its landing. He still could not see what the dragon was carrying.

Raynor could feel the wind as the dragon beat its wings, slowing its speed and hovering slightly before setting down gently on the ground. It stood on all four legs, looking at him. There was a cloak across its back, concealing… something… but Jim could not tell what.

Raynor heard Zarya’s footsteps behind him, just as the wind began to pick up. As they watched, the dragon began to dissolve into fine sand, as if from an hourglass. The sand and dust was carried away on the wind, until the dragon was summoned once more. The cloud of dust grew thicker, until at last the dragon had gone.
Leaving only Chromie. And whatever the dragon had been carrying. Chromie had one hand out, holding the parcel suspended in the air. Gently, she lowered it to the ground, and as it lay there Jim Raynor realized that the shrouded form looked uncomfortably like a body.

“Marshall Raynor,” Chromie began, in a tone that was at once pleasant and full of sorrow. She twisted her hand in the air, and the shroud unraveled itself, revealing its contents.

“No,” said Zarya, softly. Raynor walked forward, before kneeling next to the body.

“What happened in their world?” She gestured at the body. “And who is this?”

Zarya answered her. “His name is Tekhartha Zenyatta,” she said, sadly. “And he was a hero.”

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They had laid Zenyatta’s inert form on one of the bunks, not knowing what else to do.

Raynor was not a mechanic - Swann would barely let him maintain his own armor, back home. To that, he added the fact that the Omnic technology that had created Zenyatta was both hundreds of years old (by his reckoning) and far more advanced than AI in his world. Even if he knew what to try, he would worry about making things worse, or breaking something that could not be fixed in the nexus.

And spare parts were a universe away.

“He doesn’t seem broken at all, though.” Raynor said softly, as if the omnic were just sleeping and might awake at any moment.

Zarya’s expression was unreadable. “He saved our lives, Marshall.” She said, just as softly. Raynor heard the waver in her voice, and looked at her. She seemed to be wearing her command face - the expression one might wear when trying to stay strong for your troops. But her eyes told the tale.

“Zarya, you didn’t do this.”

Zarya turned to him, speaking urgently. “Do you know why we built a weapon like the protector? To win a war. Decisively and for all time.” She stabbed a finger at his body. “Against his people.”

She sighed. “The EMP we installed in the protector was designed for omnics. It was designed to kill them, and keep them killed.” She wiped a tear from her eye. “Zenyatta saved Alexstrasza, so that she could get us to the weapon that killed him.”

“And if she fell,” Raynor said. “Zarya, we were easily sixty feet in the air. We would have fallen. I might have survived. Might have.” He shook his head. “You? Nyet.” She opened her mouth to protest, but he cut her off. “I know, you are a soldier. And if dying would save the mission, you’d do it.”

“Without question.”

“I figured. So if you and I died there, and Alexstrasza fell, then what would that orc have done to the rest of the team? To the soldiers in the complex?” His eyes found hers. “To the city?”

Zarya said nothing.
Raynor looked back at Zenyatta’s still form. “He knew what the stakes were. He knew what the EMP was, what it would do.” Raynor continued, quieter. “You were on comms when he gave the order.”

He put a hand on the woman’s shoulder, then took a quiet step back. “Seems to me, Major, that sacrifice you were ready to make? He had already made it.” With that, he turned and walked back to the control room.

Zarya remained, for a while, lost in her thoughts. She took a chair and sat in it, as if to sit vigil over Zenyatta.

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When Zarya entered the control room, Chromie and Raynor turned to look at her.

“We didn’t get a chance to meet earlier,” the gnome said, holding up a hand. “I’m Chromie.”

Zarya shook her hand. “Major Aleksandra Zaryanova, of the Russian Defense Forces.” Her expression was puzzled. “And I feel like I know you already.”

Chromie shrugged. “I get that a lot, actually.” She leaned forward in her chair, and whispered conspiratorially. “I’m a time traveller.”

Zarya didn’t really have a good response to that. She was saved when one of the Russian soldiers walked in. Yevgeny, she thought.

The Sergeant handed her one of his radios, and as she took it she heard a stream of curses in Russian. “Identify yourself, soldier.” She said crisply.

“Who the hell is this now?” A man’s voice replied. Such was Zarya’s annoyance, that she didn’t notice Raynor chuckling in the background.

“This is Major Zaryanova, I was in operational command at Volskaya, and whoever this is I know for fact that I outrank you.” Her voice lowered, but the menace tripled. Every word was a drumbeat. “Identify. Yourself. Now.”

She had prepared herself for some shell-shocked corporal to realize his error, steady down, and report. She did not expect the response she got, however.

“This is Vice Admiral Alexei Stukov, Executive Officer of the United Earth Expeditionary Force, and as of late highest ranking naval officer in the entirety of the Zerg swarm.”

Zarya’s look of shock held for a good 10 seconds, before Jim Raynor’s laughter broke the spell.

“Is that Jim Raynor I hear, Major?” Stukov asked, in English.

Zarya tossed the radio over to Raynor, who grinned as he spoke. “Your signal is coming in broken and stupid, Admiral, say again?”

Stukov replied with a Russian word that Raynor did not understand and Zarya chose not to translate. The Sergeant, having listened to the exchange, failed to stifle his snort of laughter.
“Major,” Stukov continued, “I seem to have found two of your missing men. They - and I - would like to meet up with you.” Zarya looked at Raynor. It was his base, after all.

“You remember that big old hilltop site we used a while back, Alexei?” Jim replied.

“Da, I do.”

“Come on up. We have food and water and warm beds.”

“We will do that, Marshall. Nikolai here has a bad leg, but we should make it to your camp by sundown.” He spoke to one of the soldiers, then continued. “Anatoliy says he can see a dome on a cliff.”

“That’s us,” Raynor answered. “I’ll tell the chef to prepare your usual.” That earned him another curse, before Stukov signed off to get moving.

Raynor held up the radio to Zarya. “Do you have another one of these? I’d like to wire this one into our comms array, so that the computer can monitor your soldiers’ channel.” He pointed at the map, unchanged from before her arrival. “If we find anyone else, they’ll show up there and we can go get them.”

Zarya nodded. “Go ahead.”

Raynor got to work, while she walked over to the map.

“It really is beautiful,” Chromie said as she approached. “When it’s not trying to kill you, I mean.”

“So it would seem.” She replied. As she watched the map, a red indicator began flashing. It was labelled Winston.

“Good,” said Chromie. “That’s not far away at all, he should be here before long.”

“So we are just missing Hana, then.” said Zarya. “I wonder where she ended up?”

Chromie shook her head. “I have no idea.”

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_Breathe, Hana_, she thought to herself. Everything inside her wanted to believe that this was just a dream. But she knew in her heart that this was real. She was really here.

After hours and hours spent here, in this room, between matches - of all the places, in all the worlds of the nexus, she appears _here_?

“No one’s gonna believe this,” she whispered to herself. She shivered slightly, as a cold blast of air struck her back. Without thinking, she reached behind her and pressed the oaken door shut.

The noise attracted attention. “Oh, Welcome!”

As she watched, the red-haired dwarf turned to her. “Come, warm your frozen boots by the fire.” To her amazement, he really did have what sounded like a Scottish accent.
She walked toward the fireplace, as the man rose from his chair. There were not many people in the tavern at this hour, which surprised her for some reason. If this was the real thing, part of her had expected it to be overflowing.

The dwarf indicated a comfortable armchair, and Hana sat down. The fire’s warmth was soothing to her nerves. Her benefactor took the matching chair opposite. He signaled for a drink, and then leaned forward and smiled at her.

“Harth Stonebrew, at your service.” the man said. “Welcome to my inn, Hana Song.”

She looked at him, and her amazement must have been obvious. Harth laughed. A green, fizzy drink appeared in front of her, and she took it from the server. She could see chunks of ice floating in the mug. *It couldn’t be…* She took a single, tentative sip.

It was Mountain Dew.

She raised the mug in toast, then took another drink. “You were expecting me.”

Harth laughed. “Of course we were!” A server brought a mug of ale for the innkeeper.

She stared at him. He caught her look, and smiled.

“Chromie said you had been through a lot, and that you needed some time to rest.” He waved a hand at the inn. “No better place for that in all of Azeroth.”

“You mean the nexus, right?” She took another sip of her drink. Someone had done their homework, for her drink could have easily been imported from home. *Magic,* she thought.

Harth was staring at her. “What’s the nexus?”

Chapter End Notes

A longer chapter. Before you get angry, note carefully that "Major Character Death" isn't tagged. Yes, the nexus influences that, but don't worry too much. The point isn't to up the body count, but to explore how Zarya deals with her regret - and over a 'hated omnic', no less.

Meanwhile, I look over my outline and realize that Warcraft, despite some heavy emotional stuff, has been getting the short end of the plot stick. I don't want to shoehorn a dozen chapters of warcraft in, just to say that I did, but a quick sojourn is no problem - and of the cast, Hana is the one who would appreciate it the most. So, enjoy. (And be prepared for an extended stay later on, perhaps in another work? After this one, maybe?)

Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Fieldwork

Chapter Summary

Winston wakes up in the nexus, and decides to work the problem the science way. Auriel decides to help.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Winston had never missed Athena more than he did at that moment. But Athena was a universe away, so he would have to come up with his own analysis of the situation. And that presented an issue or three.

He had found himself in a normal looking forest. The sun placed the time at mid morning, give or take, and its motion seemed normal as compared to the standards he was used to. So far, so good, he had thought.

His armored suit was intact, though its power cells had been discharged - probably by the EMP. He rigged the solar cells on his back, and set them to charge. Of course, most of what he needed power for (other than his weapon) were his instruments, which were probably still in Volskaya, and his data link with Overwatch’s constellation of satellites, which were just as far away.

But it was something he could do, and it felt like progress.

He got no response on comms. The fact did not surprise him, as that system ran through the same satellites, if no relay was nearby. Perhaps he would try again later.

His stomach growled, just enough to get his attention. He had a few protein bars, but they weren’t exactly designed for someone of his stature. Once his suit had some power, at least he’d be able to scan the trees for edible fruit.

But wandering a forest was not a good long-term plan. He needed, at a minimum, a high vantage point or good field of vision. He needed to start mapping.

Sitting at the base of a tree, he considered a strategy while he ate. If he was on Earth, he would have at least detected something on comms. So he wasn’t on Earth. Was he in the nexus, then? Or Alexstrasza’s world? Raynor’s?

He had no way to tell whether this was the nexus or somewhere else - just that it wasn’t his. So he started with what he knew. He opened the display on his wrist and began entering data.

--World Two--

Climate: Temperate

Viable Forests, growth suggests adequate rainfall or groundwater sources for plant life

Multiple avian species present, land animals not observed yet
Looking at the grass around him, he saw a small rock. Lifting it, he tested its weight. Then he tossed it gently in front of him, watching its flight.

*Gravity: No discernable difference from 1g, without more precise equipment or known mass*

He considered the rock for a few moments more, then stood. The sun had moved enough to be noticeable, and Winston began doing calculations in his head as to what that meant. Then he picked up the rock, stashing it in a compartment on his armor. It wasn’t a laboratory control, but it would have to do.

“Here goes nothing,” he said to himself, straightening his glasses. Then he began walking North.

-----

Winston revised his initial assessment in his head, as he ran.

--World Two--

*Climate: Temperate*

*Multiple avian species present*

*Land animals large and angry and easily provoked*

From the noise behind him, the bear was getting closer.

He had noticed the snoring, of course. And he had been as quiet as possible, hoping to avoid whatever creature was doing the snoring. But then his display had beeped, quietly - and that otherworldly noise had been enough to enrage what had to be the largest bear he had ever seen.

Detailed measurements were not available, of course, but this bear would top 9 feet easily, if it stood still. Winston would have liked that very much, just then. Because when it gave chase, the bear was fast, too.

Winston saw a stone structure in a clearing, up ahead. It looked like a small shrine or altar or the like, with the remains of stone steps that had long since crumbled away. How high was it? Judging by his speed, Winston watched it grow in his vision.

*High enough,* he decided. He saw a low branch on a nearby tree, and judged that it was just out of reach. There was no way to make that jump, not in this gravity, and so he could not use the branch to leap onto the structure.

Another growl from behind him forced him to reevaluate - for the bear had closed the distance between them rapidly. Winston triggered his armor and used its boost to leap up toward the branch.
And caught it.

His momentum carried him forward, and he kicked his feet out to get more height. The branch held his weight - barely - as he swung toward the structure. Letting go, he arced through the air, landing just at the edge of the stone plateau.

The bear arrived at the altar, and growled at him. It circled the base of the structure, but did not see a way to climb up. Then it reared onto its back legs, trying to snap at him that way. But he was high enough to make that impossible.

After what seemed like forever, the bear turned and stalked off, hopefully to find easier prey.

Winston sat down, catching his breath. “That’s better,” he said to himself.

The structure wasn’t very high - but as Winston looked from the ground to the tree to the ground, he began doing calculations. Then he took out the small stone he had found earlier. Again he tested its weight, and again he tossed it. It followed the same arc through the air, landing as it had before, near his feet.

And it took longer to land than it had before.

“Gravity changed?” Winston asked himself, out loud. “How is that possible?”

“In a large enough universe, all things are possible.” A woman’s voice said. Winston looked ahead, at the low branches of the trees - and the soft glow they seemed to have developed.

“You wouldn’t happen to know where I am,” He said as he turned. “Would you?”

He was not sure what he expected to see when he looked back, but a glowing being floating in the air would not have been high on the list. Her armor shone with its own light, accented by her glowing... wings? Winston wasn’t sure, but she was floating somehow. Her face was concealed by a white hood, and he could not see even a hint of her features. She held no weapon, and her hands were open and welcoming.

She had the appearance of an angel, as if from an old renaissance painting. And when she spoke, it was as if she spoke as a chorus.

“You are in the Nexus, Winston of Overwatch.” She replied. Her head tilted slightly, as she regarded him. “Tell me, how did you know that gravity had changed?”

Winston smiled at her. “I grew up in microgravity. We had to use machines to force gravity to work as it did on Earth, or else our bones would weaken and break over time.” He lifted the rock. “Had we not, this rock there would have weighed the same as six of this rock would weigh here.”

“I would not have thought of that,” she said. The way she looked at him, and the way she floated there, just off the edge of the structure, gave Winston the impression that she was evaluating him - just as he was learning everything he could about her.

“I spoke with a woman who came from another world,” Winston continued. “Her people had never left the surface of their world. I imagine it was the same with your people, then?”

“We have not. Not in the way you mean, at any rate. But I meant that I had not thought about bones and the weight they carry.” He could hear amusement in her voice as she continued. “I have no bones, you see.”
To that, Winston had no response.

“I am the archangel Auriel.”

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They had travelled together for half an hour, now. And yet Winston still half expected to hear her footsteps beside him. Winston was not being subtle about pumping Auriel for information. The archangel, for her part, was indulging him with otherworldly patience.

“If the nexus formed on its own,” he said, “Then I wonder why our worlds, and not others, were integrated into its structure.”

“We do not know.” she replied. “When we first arrived here, there were already warriors and places from other worlds.”

“And those warriors, they are not randomly chosen.” He replied.

“No,” she replied, and for the first time a hint of sorrow entered her voice. “They have, all of them, done great things. Some of these were done for the greater glory, or for their fellow beings. With others, their deeds were so terrible as to ignite wars and destroy thousands.”

“Gul’Dan.”

“He is one such, yes. There are some from my realm as well, demons who lack both the capacity and desire for anything but their own greed.”

Winston did not ask about the existence of demons, just as he had not quizzed her about the existence of angels. It was just another piece of data, filed away for later. Instead, he turned back to their original subject.

“So the nexus chooses its own warriors…” He paused. “How?”

“Magic,” was Auriel’s answer. She looked at him, sensing his unease. “I know of no better term for the forces that bind this world, Winston. In my home, we rely on faith in the divine to sustain us. Here, and in Azeroth, that force manifests as simple magic.”

“In my world, we do not know of magic.” Winston said. “We rely more on technology, devices we can build with our hands and design with our minds.”

“Go back a thousand years, Winston, and show your technology to the men you find in your world.” Auriel said. “I suspect they would call it magic.”

Now he stopped walking and looked at her. “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

She nodded. “As I said.”

He chuckled, and began walking again. “I was quoting a wise man from our world. Remarkable that you have a similar saying.”

“Wisdom,” she replied, “is more universal than magic or technology or greed.”
“Greed,” he said, quietly. “Gul’Dan tried to bring his armies into my world. We stopped him, for now, but I wonder what his plan was.”

Now it was Auriel who stopped their trek. She turned to him, and under her hood Winston imagined a look of concern to match that of her quiet words.

“The plan was not Gul’Dan’s, Winston. He served another.”

Winston considered this. “I suppose it’s too much to hope that you already know where they are and how we can stop them, right?”

She chuckled. “As I said, some things are universal.” She held out her hand to him. “Alone? You will be able to do nothing.” He looked in her hand and saw his overwatch communicator, a tiny red light blinking. “Only together will you have any hope to prevail.”

Chapter End Notes

Winston quotes Arthur C Clarke when he speaks about technology being mistaken for magic. As this story - and this universe - involve so much interaction between magic and tech, I find myself thinking about that quote as I write.

Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Machina

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Winston sat quietly in the bunkroom, working on his display.

He had no instruments to speak of - any of his equipment that had made it to the nexus was effectively lost, scattered with the debris of Volskaya. He had no data link, no access to resources and information about his task. He could not reach Athena, whose guidance would have been invaluable. All he had was whatever he could salvage from Marshall Raynor’s command center, some basic diagnostic tools he had rigged together from spare parts, and his wits.

In almost any other battle, he would set his mind against any odds. But this was not just any battle. Zarya’s body remained on the bunk, as if the omnic were asleep. That had been Zarya’s decision, Raynor had said - which surprised him, given her history. He had said that she felt responsible, due to the fact that the EMP was likely the cause of…. well, whatever this was.

Raynor had taken a quick look at Zenyatta’s body, to see if there was physical damage that he could repair. The technology was too different than that of his world, however, and he did not make the attempt - not wanting to make things worse. Winston had thanked him for the effort, and then gone to work himself.

And found nothing.

There was no physical injury of any sort, beyond superficial damage consistent with falling through an interdimensional portal and landing in a tree. But even that impact had done little. Zenyatta’s power system had been drained, but his mind and memories were encoded on media that could withstand a loss of power. That should not have been fatal.

Later, Winston planned to rig a converter so that Zenyatta (and he) could draw power from the command center. For now, though, a connection to his armor’s batteries would do the trick. His journey to the base had given his solar panels enough time to gather a full charge - plenty to get Zenyatta moving again.

Even with power, Winston could do nothing. Zenyatta was not waking up, as every diagnostic said that he should. Again, Winston found himself wishing that he could speak to Athena - she would know what to do. For his part, Winston was at a complete loss.

“I just need a big enough lever,” he sighed.

“Why?” Winston turned to the voice, and saw Alexstrasza standing in the doorway. He had not heard her enter, nor had she arrived when he began working on Zenyatta. He sighed, offering her a chair. She walked over and quietly sat down, looking at the tools and instruments scattered across the
“Zarya said you were down here,” she continued, her gaze falling to Zenyatta. “You think a lever would help? Jim might be able to…” She stopped when she saw the pain on Winston’s face.

“It’s not that. It was just a saying from home.” She watched him, and he frowned. “There was a man of science, thousands of years ago, named Archimedes. He said that if you gave him a big enough lever, and a stable place to stand, he could move the entire world on his own.” He waved a hand at Zenyatta. “This is beyond my skill. I can do nothing.” The frustration was evident in his voice, and Alexstrasza heard it inching toward anger.

“I don’t have a big enough lever.” He finished.

Alexstrasza looked at him. “No one can question that you have done all you could.”

He shook his head. “That doesn’t matter. If I could figure out what to do, but lacked the ability or the resources? I could live with that.” As Alexstrasza watched, he seemed to deflate, his shoulders slumped down. “I can’t even do that much.”

She smiled at him, a sad, sorrowful smile. “When I sensed Zenyatta’s spirit, it was like sun on a still pond. It was tranquility itself. He would not want…” she trailed off. “When I sensed…”

Winston noticed the change in her voice, and looked to see her lose herself in thought. He knew that expression - he ought to, having worn it often enough.

Her eyes lit up. “Winston, I could sense him. As if he were alive.”

“He was.” Winston replied.

“I know, but I mean… In my home, we have mechanical devices and the like, but nothing as complex as your omnis. Nothing that could be called alive. Certainly nothing that was self-aware, not like this.” She looked back at Zenyatta. “But I was able to feel him, using magic that should only have detected life.”

“Alright,” He said, cautiously. “What does that tell us?”

She considered what she knew of Zenyatta, and what she knew of her magic. Could it be that simple? Could it not be that simple?

“Winston, I’m going to try something.” She rose, walking closer to Zenyatta’s body. Winston followed her, watching closely. At the center of the room, she stopped. Taking a deep breath, Alexstrasza closed her eyes and reached out.

She felt Winston first, as expected. His life force was awash in defeat, but there was his ever-present curiosity. He was always learning, always seeking knowledge, and that was so integral to who he was that it showed here, bright as day.

She reached further. She sensed Raynor and Chromie in the command center, as well as the alien life forces of Kerrigan and Stukov. She felt the blend of human and zerg as a contradiction, like a discordant note that spoiled a chorus. Except that these notes fit into a melody of their own, and however abhorrent or distasteful the merging had been at first, for these two it seemed to work.

The next life she sensed was Tracer, who was eating a late meal just outside the structure. She had calmed down, following her realization that the nexus was real - and that she had killed and died there many times over. Later, she would have much to discuss, probably with… Alexstrasza saw
streaks of red, like fallen leaves, in Tracer’s aura, and wondered whose they were.

The bright purple aura further out belonged to Zarya. She seemed to have recovered well from the battle, and from unexpectedly finding herself in the nexus. Alexstrasza also saw concern for the four soldiers who had followed her here. Zarya leaned into her duty as their commander, and it showed in her emotions. As with Tracer, she would have a lot to talk about as she dealt with the experience - and the betrayal of Katya Volskaya, which still weighed on her.

Those soldiers sat near her, spending their evening talking in the tradition of soldiers of every world. Zarya’s presence helped them just as much as they helped her - for it gave them a focus, someone who they knew would get them home if it was a thing that could be done. As long as Zarya was on their side, these men knew that the odds were in their favor.

At the cliff’s edge was Hanzo. She paused, watching him as he quietly meditated. His spirit still had its steely calm, despite the excitement of his flight from Hanamura clinging to her back. But she could also see something else, something more…

“Is it working?” Winston asked.

Alexstrasza turned her head toward the voice, keeping her eyes closed and her focus on the magic. “Why, what happened?”

Winston sighed. “You were smiling. I thought maybe you found something.”

She suppressed the urge to grin, before replying. “I did, but not in the way you mean.”

“Oh.” And there was defeat in his voice again. The smile on her face faded.

“My magic detects life, all life. I am looking at the life around us, to establish what I should be sensing. Then I’m going to use more magic to focus that on Zenyatta.” She could sense Winston’s lack of comprehension, so she explained it another way. “Winston, my magic can restore life, but it uses other life to do so. If a tree burns down, I can restore it - by using the life of the forest around it to reinforce the life I breathe into the new tree.”

“So the forest is drained slightly to give life to the tree?” he asked, considering the notion. “It makes sense, to use a small amount of life from many entities to power one.”

She shook her head. “No, the effect is cumulative.” How to explain? “The sunlight that falls on the leaves of a tree does not diminish the sun. So, what about a thousand trees? A thousand thousands?”

She smiled again, as she began to pull on the threads of life surrounding her. “So it is with life.”

The gentle flow of power began to grow, becoming a drip, and then a trickle, and then a steady stream of energy. Her hands directed it, her mind gave it power, and sent it toward Zenyatta. The force circled the omnic, but had nowhere to go. The door had not yet opened.

“Are you supposed to be glowing?” Winston asked, quietly. She could hear the awe in his voice, and knew that the light was seeping into the room. She would need to do something with this power soon, or it would dissipate.

“She is, Winston.” Auriel, Alexstrasza realized. She sensed a soft light around Zenyatta, growing slowly as an early sunrise, but just as intense. Auriel was opening the door.

In her mind, Alexstrasza felt the click, and then the life poured in. She must have made a noise, for she felt Winston’s hand on her shoulder, the concern obvious. “I’m fine.” she whispered. “I’m fine.”
The tear rolled down her cheek, as she whispered again. “I’m fine.”

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“I apologize for startling you, Alexstrasza.” Auriel, polite as ever, floated over.

Alexstrasza was sitting near the cliff’s edge, not far from where Hanzo had been. He was inside now, speaking with Winston and Zenyatta - while she sat here, collecting herself.

“I had forgotten, you know.” She began. “Why is it, Auriel, that I cannot sense your kind?”

Auriel lowered herself toward the ground, and Alexstrasza smiled when she saw it. The archangel had crossed her legs, in a pose that inadvertently looked almost like that of Zenyatta. The similarity only became more pronounced when Alexstrasza realized that Auriel, too, was floating above the ground.

“You are life, Alexstrasza. You stand with the living as one among many. My kind stands apart.”

“Yet you are so aloof that you come among us and help heal a mechanical man from another universe.” Alexstrasza almost laughed. “You know, in my world I stood apart for a long time, watching the world turn around me.”

“And now?”

Alexstrasza looked at Auriel. “And now I’m learning that some things are worth fighting for.”

“You know well the power of hope, Life-Binder.” She could hear the satisfaction in Auriel’s voice.

“I do indeed.” She replied, nodding. “Thank you for your aid.”

Auriel looked at her, now. “It is my honor. But I did not come to bring hope to you, Alexstrasza.” The angel inclined her head toward the command center, where Hanzo was speaking with Zarya. “That task fell to another.”

Chapter End Notes

Back at it. Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Chapter Summary

The team prepares itself for the coming battle - if they can find it. Alexstrasza reflects on her past, and her future.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Another tremor is incoming, Marshall,” said Alexei Stukov.

He was leaning in a chair, his feet on the edge of a console, giving every appearance of an officer on watch, kibitzing with subordinates. He had even taken his hat off, something that Kerrigan and Raynor had never seen him do. His eyes were closed, and his human arm was tucked behind his head. The massive Zerg arm was actually planted on the deck, like a small tree - supporting him and keeping him from toppling.

Kerrigan had known that the admiral was awake, of course - her link to the swarm accounted for that. It was that link that had let her sense the weak tremors that had begun to shake the nexus over the past hour. When he arrived at the command center and asked about them, she had realized that he could detect them as well - and it evolved quickly into a game.

Thinking him asleep, she assumed she had won - but he outfoxed her.

Raynor looked at his display, nodding. “A light one, further away.” He frowned. “But they’re starting to come quicker, now. And we still don’t know what’s going on.”

Kerrigan was standing nearby, and Raynor could see the concern underneath her outward calm. To the world, she was the Queen of Blades - but Jim Raynor had known her longer than anyone here. He could read between the lines - this bothered her.

“It must be the emitter,” she said. “We closed one door so they are trying to break down another.”

Stukov opened his glowing eyes and looked at her. “So that’s what they did. I wondered.”

“They snared another world for the nexus, and tried to use an emitter to break through.” Jim replied. “We stopped them, but I kinda figured they’d try again.”

“I will go with you when you confront them.” Stukov said. He remained relaxed, but his tone was hard. “They captured me and put me in a dark room in another universe. I would be there when they fail.”

“You don’t have to rush into battle, Alexei. Not if you aren’t 100%.”

“If Jim won’t take you,” Kerrigan said, “Then I will.” She was looking at Raynor as she spoke, and he saw in her eyes what she meant. *They betrayed him and experimented on him. He deserves payback.*

He shrugged. “Join the party.”
Stukov nodded, then closed his eyes again.

At the far end of the command center, Winston worked quietly.

He did not understand everything that the technology from Raynor’s world could accomplish, nor was he familiar with its workings. But when the tremors had grown noticeable, he decided to try and learn something about the nexus itself.

Fortunately for him, seismographs were pretty much universal. And Raynor had found enough spare parts to assemble several.

The command center itself had one, and he had placed another at the edge of the landing field. Zarya had seen him working on the third, and offered to place it along the rocky path that led to the valley.

Once they detected a tremor, Winston could use the data from the sensors to learn about the nexus. He wanted to know how the land masses fit together, even with different laws of physics. He wanted to know if they rubbed against each other, like fault lines back home.

And most importantly, he wanted to know who and what was causing the tremors in the first place. Stukov was right, Winston knew - whoever had sent Gul’Dan would try again. And this time, there might not be a door to close.

Winston felt the movement of someone approaching him, but did not turn around. “A few more of these,” he began, “and we’ll have an approximate location.”

“Good,” said Tassadar, as he leaned in for a closer look. “You have done well, Winston.”

He glanced over at the Protoss, nodding in thanks. Just another Tuesday, sitting in an alternate dimension, chatting with an alien… Winston thought.

The console beeped at them, and Winston brought up the new data. As he had expected, the possible locations for the emitter had narrowed. A red circle appeared, containing parts of three separate worlds.

“If we find the emitter,” Winston began, “what then?”

Tassadar had considered that question. “It will depend upon the nature of the connection between your world and the nexus.” His glowing eyes turned to Winston. “If the nexus was connected to your world naturally, as with the others, then there will be a tenuous connection that the emitter is attempting to reinforce.”

“So if we destroy the emitter, that connection remains.” Winston looked at the map. “We get to go home.”

“Yes. But if the emitter was used to connect to your world in the first place, then the emitter itself holds the portal open. Destroy the emitter, and you break the link.”

Winston shook his head. “No good. If there is an existing connection, then whoever comes next can just build another emitter.”

Tassadar nodded slowly, and the human gesture seemed odd on him. “It is a concern.”

Winston had already taken the thought to its next logical step. “And what of the next world they
find? If we somehow discourage this being from attacking our world, then what stops them from choosing another?” He waved his hand, indicating the room. “Abathur said there were nine universes already part of the nexus, including mine. What of the tenth? The twentieth?”

Tassadar said nothing.

Winston looked back at the map. The farthest sensor was sending additional data, and the computer was chewing on it. “This is moving too fast.”

“On that, Winston of Overwatch, we are in agreement.” Tassadar folded his arms across his chest, giving every appearance of a commander whose mind had been made up. “But our enemy will not wait for us. Even now they prepare another assault on your world.”

“I know.” He smiled, sadly. “But that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“We cannot close a door that had been kicked in,” Alexei Stukov said, from his seat across the room. His eyes remained closed, and his feet never left the console. But he shared Tassadar’s resolve, it seemed. “Better, I think, to prevent the breach than contain it afterwards, yes?”

“All we need is a target, boys.” Raynor agreed. He hadn’t heard the beeping coming from Winston’s console. The look of surprise on the scientist’s face was unmistakable, however.

“Ask, and ye shall receive.” Winston brought the map up on the large wall display. The red indicator left no doubt as to their destination. “There’s your emitter, Marshall.”

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The distant rumble faded, leaving only a scattering of frightened birds as evidence of its passing.

Alexstrasza had not chosen to join the others in the command center. She knew they were planning for the battle to come, studying the emitter’s energy to hunt down their prey. Soon Winston and Tassadar would tell them where to go. A portal would open, and they would go to war. They did not need her counsel, in this - when the time came, she would fight. On that, there would be no discussion.

Hanzo had kept to himself as well, preferring meditation to the discussions of their teammates. Without trying, she could feel his calming presence. His electric blue aura seemed to reach toward her, wrapping around her own life force. Just having him nearby was calming to her.

It had been a very long time since she had felt that comfort. Years, certainly. She looked out over the nexus, stretching into the distance. The midday sun shone from a bright blue sky. To all appearances, the valley was peaceful.

But for the tremors, the threatened annihilation of Hanzo’s world, and the unnamed evil that awaited them, it was beautiful. Like a dream, she thought with a smile.

The thought brought her mind to her long lost sister, the former Aspect of Dreams. Ysera, you would have loved exploring this place, Alexstrasza thought sadly. Though this is like no dream you ever knew.

She closed her eyes, letting Hanzo’s calm again wash over her. She also felt resolve, and
determination. Neither was out of place, coming from Hanzo, but Alexstrasza knew in her heart that there could be only one task for which he would need that resolve. In battle, his training and precision would serve. And he needed no incentive to defend others - that desire, to do better, had brought him to overwatch before she had ever laid eyes upon him.

No, the only thing that he was steeling himself against was his fate. That they would close the door to his world, he had no doubt. But what of him? Either he loses his world, or he loses her.

The very choice she had been avoiding.

She sighed, and in her mind she heard the roar of a mighty red dragon. Of course, she thought, and her mind recalled his face, his words.

Krasus, she thought. She could hear his voice, like a whisper in her mind.

“Beloved,” he said. It was not the soft voice of her mate that she heard, though. The word was as she had heard it in a vision of his last moments, whispered an instant before his sacrifice.

He had guarded the dragonflights that day, giving his life. Now, she was asked to sacrifice far less. She recalled her words to Thrall, when she had learned of Krasus’ ultimate fate.

“I am who I am,” she whispered to herself. “Whether in joy or in pain. I am who I am.”

The change in Hanzo was immediate, and she realized with a start that he had kept his communicator on. He was standing when she opened her eyes, watching her.

“It’s time,” he said simply. He reached out a hand.

“Good.” she replied, taking his hand in hers, and letting him help her up. “Where?”

“Where else?” Hanzo said, grinning. “The place is called Dragon Shire.”

Chapter End Notes

Alexstrasza has a lot of pain in her past. See the excellent novel Twilight of the Aspects for more on Krasus’ fate. Needless to say, it still weighs on her, even years later. Her quote is from that novel as well.

This should be the tail end of the putting-pieces-in-place phase of the tale. Next: Dragon Shire.

Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Reconnaissance

Chapter Summary

The team arrives at Dragon Shire, and finds an old friend. Their enemy's plan is revealed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Is everybody ready?”

Alexstrasza heard the energy in Raynor’s voice. They had spent two days at his command center, gathering their forces and searching for a target. It had been a productive two days, certainly, and the time to rest had been sorely needed. But now his armor was fully powered up and ready to go - and so was he.

The rest of the team was just as eager. For Kerrigan and Tassadar, this was routine - just another battle in the nexus. The fact that there was an emitter involved had caused some concern on Kerrigan’s part, until Alexstrasza used some of her magic to prepare a shield against the device’s effects. The protection would last for several hours, which should be plenty. As Raynor put it, if they needed shielding beyond that point, they had screwed up. This was intended to be a raid, not a siege - in and out before their enemy could react.

She offered a similar shield to Admiral Stukov, who gratefully accepted. The emitter had been no small part of his initial capture, so many months ago.

Winston carried his weapon in one hand, while the other pulled a large crate of equipment. He did not know what tools he would need to disable the emitter, only that they would not be able to simply blow it up. The EMP from Volskaya had had devastating effects on this side of the portal, and that had only disabled the device. No telling what would happen if they just blasted the thing. So Winston was treating it like a bomb to be defused, rather than a weapon to be annihilated.

Tracer helped him with his gear. She was back to her usual cheer, Alexstrasza saw. Her task would be to scout out the location of the emitter, then help Winston as he worked. The two had known each other for a long time, and worked well together - and if Tracer did have any lingering moments of doubt about the battle, Winston would be there to help.

Auriel and Zenyatta were floating apart from the group, speaking in hushed tones. Alexstrasza smiled at the sight of the omnic, seemingly back from the grave. And to think of the philosophical debates those two could have - a tireless angel matched with the omnic who needed neither sleep nor rest? Even my patience would falter eventually, she thought.

Zarya, meanwhile, was speaking with Hanzo as she finished a final check of her weapon. Last night, she and Raynor had stayed up late, talking about weapon designs and other things. Soldiers, it seemed, shared much the same language no matter the universe, and the two had bonded. They had even had a go at upgrading her weapon’s power cells, in the hopes of replicating their success at Volskaya. Her graviton field had been critical to defeating the dragon knight, and they fully expected to have another shot at the creature once they arrived in Dragon Shire, its home turf.
“I’d wish you luck,” Chromie said as she approached. “But you don’t need it.”

Alexstrasza smiled at her. “I have not yet thanked you for joining us in this fight, Chromie.”

The gnome looked up at her. “I will happily open the portal to Dragon Shire, but I can’t go with you. Not this time.”

“Why not?” Alexstrasza turned and faced Chromie. “If we fail here, the entire nexus could come crashing down - and Hanzo’s world will suffer the worst of it.”

Chromie shrugged. “I know that. But it won’t. It doesn’t.” Her eyes met Alexstrasza’s. “Because it didn’t.”

_Aha._ “You’re looped again.”

Now the timewalker chuckled. “When am I not looped, Allie? But no, this time I just know how you described your trip to Dragon Shire, and who went with you. And I was not a member of your party. Not this time.”

“So the reason you can’t join us today…”

Chromie nodded. “I can’t be there because I wasn’t there.” Then she looked thoughtful. “Or, at least, you didn’t notice me there. And I’m certain you would have told me if you had.”

Alexstrasza nodded. Knowing that she survives the battle was something, at least - for she could not describe its outcome to Chromie afterwards, if that were not the case. But that didn’t mean that she made it through unscathed. As they walked toward the others, one fact remained foremost in Alexstrasza’s mind, amplifying her worry and hope alike.

Chromie had never lied to her, not once. But she was a master timewalker, experienced in knowing what she could and could not reveal to those in her past. Often, she would not even reveal her origin, past or future. Alexstrasza thought back to the dream in Wyrmrest, where Chromie warned her that she would wake in Hanzo’s world, and where she enlisted Winston’s aid. Had Chromie known what would happen, even then?

She looked at the gnome, her old friend. After this was all done, they would have to sit down and clear the air. But for now, there were more important concerns occupying her.

And the crux of the matter was this - of Hanzo, Chromie had said nothing at all.

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Dragon Shire was one of the arena-like places that littered the space around the Nexus. In many ways, it was a floating island, complete with its own gravity and atmosphere. Despite its height - they could see the bulk of the nexus, far below - the altitude did not thin the air or cool its temperature. Two portals were built at either end of the landmass, each constructed of ancient-looking stone and powerful magic. This was the well of storms.

The group emerged from the well at one end of the shire, and found an empty base camp. Its normal defenses were already broken, and the core that normally powered them was a pile of debris. No soldiers were in evidence, neither allied nor opposing forces.
They began to fan out, away from the well. As soon as Stukov stepped off of the stone, he grunted in pain. Kerrigan’s blades fanned out immediately, but then she saw Alexstrasza’s look of concern.

“Admiral?” Alexstrasza asked.

Stukov looked back at her. “I am fine, my lady. But I can already feel their assault.” He tipped his cover at her. “Your shields are holding admirably.”

Kerrigan cautiously followed him, and she too felt the emitter once she cleared the area around the well. With a hiss, her eyes afire in anger, she looked about for a threat that was not there.

Alexstrasza had expected her to feel some discomfort, but her emotions now were bleeding rage and imminent violence, so much so that she could feel it. What does she sense?

Slowly, Kerrigan walked forward, as if she were hunting. Raynor walked slowly behind her, ready to back her play. Tracer moved off to their right, preparing to flank. Kerrigan looked at Raynor, then pointed at her eyes with two fingers, before pointing at a nearby bush.

Immediately, Zarya readied her weapon, followed a moment later by Winston. Tassadar faded from view. Hanzo readied an arrow, but waited for Kerrigan. Stukov braced himself, his enormous zerg arm poised to tunnel toward whatever - or whoever - Kerrigan had found.

With a growl, Kerrigan’s blades shot into the ground at her feet. They emerged from the bush, ripping away its branches - and glistening with green blood of some sort. There were tatters of a sickly green membrane, and as she watched more of the green fluid spilled out onto the grass.

Two thin arms parted the bush, and a deep voice spoke.

“Your alliance. Enhanced.” The remaining branches fell away, and Abathur’s purple eyes seemed to pierce her calm. “Poor essence.”

Kerrigan screamed at him, and energy began to fill her hand. Raynor, his weapon still at the ready, walked to her. “His eyes, look at his eyes.”

Tassadar lifted his cloaking field, appearing closer to the trapped zerg. One of Abathur’s tiny arms took a swing at him, but the protoss was out of range and ignored the attack. “The emitter must have him.” He said.

Alexstrasza walked forward, reaching out with her magic. The bitter taste of the zerg hive mind was ever present, even in Abathur’s weakened state. But there - she saw the force of the emitter, drilling into him. Green light swirled in her hands, and she let it pour over his soul. Just as she had for Kerrigan and Stukov, she had now blocked the emitter.

“Binder of Life,” he said, turning his purple gaze to her. “Your essence, above theirs.” Alexstrasza did not know if the zerg could even sneer, but she heard it in his voice. “Once absorbed, power overwhelming.”

Alexstrasza ignored him, continuing her search. She saw the emitter, pulsing like a laser directly at him. As she expanded her reach, she saw the emitter beams lancing toward Kerrigan and Stukov as well, as if the device had targeted the zerg. Interesting...

There - she saw a purple mist, sliding within the grass, snaking up to Abathur. This must be what controls him now, she thought. Was it magic? Her shield did nothing to block the force.

“There’s something else,” she began. “I cannot block it.”
“Can you trace it?” Zenyatta asked. She felt him nearby, on her right - and found that his presence helped her concentrate.

Alexstrasza reached as far as she dared, before closing her eyes and silencing her magic. “The other portal.”

“Good,” replied Raynor. “Anyone want to render Captain Essence here unconscious?”

Alexstrasza felt the warmth float past her, as Auriel approached. “That will not be necessary, Marshall Raynor.” A faint glow left the angel’s hands, arcing slowly toward Abathur. For his part, the zerg seemed to have suddenly become terrified.

“This one’s mind is clouded with that of another.” Auriel spoke calmly, and Alexstrasza could almost hear the gentle smile in her words. “He just needs to awaken his true self.”

The glow struck the ground below Abathur, and a blast of light shot upwards - an eerie mirror to the blades that still held him. As they watched, the purple mist - now visible to all - flowed away from the light. The last wisps of it dissipated rapidly, and Alexstrasza saw Abathur’s eyes turn green again.

“You may release him now,” Auriel said. “He is himself again, and remains shielded against further intrusion.”

“Can we be certain of that?” Winston sounded unconvinced. “From what Raynor told us, Abathur is not someone we want on our flank if he’s going to betray us again.”

“Who do you serve, Abathur?” Kerrigan asked, and in her voice was none of the rage she had felt moments ago. It was the voice of command, and Alexstrasza heard alien overtones within the sound. Her words were pitched for zerg hearing, she realized. It was not Kerrigan who spoke, but the Queen of Blades.

“Served overmind. Then served Queen of Blades. Then Sarah Kerrigan. Now, serve the Queen of Blades once more.” There was no fealty, no devotion in his voice - yet Alexstrasza could hear the absolute conviction in every word. As if he described not his allegiance, but the natural state of the world. As he spoke, Alexstrasza sensed Kerrigan listening intently, both to his words and through their connection to the zerg hive mind. Abruptly, the spikes holding him in place withdrew.

“Good enough.” She replied. “Auriel, watch him closely.” The angel nodded in agreement, remaining close to the newly freed zerg.

“Katya,” said Zarya, quietly. Raynor’s head whipped around at her word. Zarya looked at him, voice even. “The purple glow. It was just like Katya Volskaya.”

Raynor nodded. “Sounds like we’re close to our answers, folks.” He readied his weapon. “The other portal, you said?”

Alexstrasza nodded. “The emitter is somewhere near the center of the arena.” she replied. “But whoever controlled Abathur, that one is at the well.”

“Let’s go, then. I kinda want to shoot something now.”

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Raynor stood, watching the dragon knight, his annoyance plain to all who looked at his frown. Zarya chuckled. “Still want to shoot him, Marshall?”

The creature had ignored them entirely. Two beams of magical energy were flowing into the knight, shielding him from harm. And also, to Alexstrasza’s annoyance, from magic. She had hoped to sense who was controlling the dragon knight, but the field blocked even her most intrusive magic. Instead of attacking them, the knight was pounding on the well of storms. Its great axe struck a glowing white force field, over and over again.

“Each strike weakens the shield.” said Tassadar. “Once the shield is breached, the power of the emitter will trigger the portal, and the well will open.”

“And then?” asked Stukov.

“Without the field to hold the well in place, its structure will be pulled into the well. Then the surrounding land. Then eventually this entire arena.” Tassadar’s glowing eyes surveyed the team. “And the portal itself would enlarge to accommodate that mass.”

“A rip of that size, between worlds…” said Winston, almost in awe of the prospect, “That level of damage would almost be…”

Tassadar nodded. “Irreparable.”

Alexstrasza watched the knight swing the mighty axe once more. “Three teams.” she began. “Tracer, you said there were two shrines at the other end of those beams?”

Right.” Tracer replied. She had scouted the area quicker than anyone else could have, even Alexstrasza from the air. Finding the emitter and the twin power sources had been trivial.

“Zenyatta, take Auriel and Abathur to the shrine in that direction,” she said, pointing at one beam of light. “Jim, Kerrigan, go to the other one.” Stukov grumbled at this, and she continued. “Admiral, if you want to join them, feel free.” He looked surprised, as if he had not expected her to hear him. Then he nodded, and Raynor clapped him on the shoulder.

“Lena, take Winston and Tassadar and go to the emitter. Let them science us a way to shut it down safely.” Tracer nodded, and Winston looked to Tassadar, as if he had dozens of ideas ready to go.

“What of Hanzo and I?” Zarya asked. Hanzo, for his part, said nothing. His gaze was on her, his expression guarded as ever.

“The three of us will remain here,” she replied, nodding toward the dragon knight. “When the shield drops, we find out how quickly we can kill a monster.”

Chapter End Notes

I never realized how clean and simple teams of five can be, in Heroes of the Storm, until I attempted to credibly manage a team of twelve, here.
If you're wondering where D.va ended up, have a look at the side story I've added to this series, entitled "Coin Flip". In addition to being fun to write, so far, it also seems to be the first Hearthstone work listed here - unless, of course, Hearthstone got eaten by Warcraft, which is possible I suppose.

Feedback, as always, is welcome.
**Impetus**

Chapter Summary

The Dragon Knight falls, revealing the force behind the breaking down of barriers between the world of Overwatch and the Nexus. Winston makes a horrifying discovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kerrigan could see the source of the energy beam. The stone moon glowed with power, shining a soft light on the clearing.

And on Gul'Dan, who seemed to be in some sort of stasis.

“If we get too close, I’ll bet he wakes up pretty quick.” said Raynor.

Kerrigan nodded, looking for some path around the orc. He stood far enough away from the shrine, perhaps they could sneak around?

Stukov had other ideas. He flexed his zerg arm, as if it were eager to strike. “Jim, can you fire a grenade at his feet?”

Raynor looked at him, nodding. “I could. Why would I?”

Stukov pointed at the stone wall behind the shrine. “Because we are at the edge of the arena.”

Raynor looked at the wall, then at the Russian. Then he grinned. “Get lined up.”

Kerrigan watched as they got into position. Off Stukov’s nod, Raynor fired an explosive shot at Gul’dan’s feet. As expected, the orc began moving as soon as the shot was in the air, but he was not quick enough. The explosion kicked him into the air, just high enough.

With a shout, Stukov’s zerg arm shot out, impacting Gul’Dan in mid-air and sending him flying. Such was his height that he cleared the wall and went sailing out into the nexus.

“Even if he survives that fall.” Stukov chuckled, “He will not be back for some time.”

Kerrigan watched up to the shrine, examining it. A glowing stone, roughly shoulder height, drew her attention. She put a hand to her ear. “Moon Shrine is ready.”

A few moments later, she heard Zenyatta’s calm voice. “Sun Shrine is ready.”

When the command came, it was not Alexstrasza that gave the order. Instead, Hanzo’s voice came over their communicators like the steel arrows he carried.

“Go.”

Kerrigan placed her hand on the shrine, and watched as its light dimmed. After a few moments, the beam of energy faltered, and then ended. They heard a thunderous howl of rage from the direction of the well. After a few moments, an explosion shook the ground. Stukov and Raynor looked at each
other.

“She works fast, doesn’t she?” Stukov remarked.

Raynor grinned. “You should get to know her, she’s one of the best soldiers I’ve met in the nexus.”

Kerrigan’s eyebrow raised. “I’ve heard Alexstrasza called many things, but a soldier isn’t usually one of them.”

Raynor laughed at that. “You’re right. But I was talking about Zarya.” He started walking toward the well. “It sounds very much like she is two for two in blowing up dragon knights.”

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“Essence unclear. Polluted strains.” Abathur’s voice sounded disappointed, as he inspected the still creature from afar. “Bad essence.”

Auriel and Zenyatta looked at the creature. It glowed with a sickly blue light, despite the fact that it was clearly in some sort of stasis. Zenyatta floated an orb over to the creature, which did not stir.

“An attack would likely wake this being,” He said. “I believe it would also wake if we approach the shrine from behind.”

Auriel examined the creature, and Zenyatta could hear the unease in the angel’s voice. “This feels like a protoss, but it clearly is not.”

“Moon Shrine is ready,” they heard on their communicators. Auriel and Zenyatta looked at each other.

Auriel raised her hands, aiming them at the creature. “Prepare yourself.”

Zenyatta looked back at her. “I walk in harmony, as always.” Then he nodded, and began to float toward the shrine. The creature woke instantly, howling in anger - a guttural, primal cry that echoed in their minds. As the creature began to step toward Zenyatta, Auriel unleashed a wave of energy. As she watched, the creature was encased in a crystalline prison.

“Stability of prison?” asked Abathur. Auriel did not look back at him, as she replied.

“Long enough,” she said.

Zenyatta approached the shrine, and saw a glowing stone on its surface. “Sun Shrine is ready.”

“Go.” Hanzo’s voice was calm as could be, but Zenyatta could detect the undertones of worry he must have felt. The fact that he gave the order, rather than Alexstrasza, meant that battle was well and truly joined. Zenyatta reached out and touched the stone.

As they looked on, the shrine’s glow faded. The beam of energy sputtered and died. Almost immediately, they heard the dragon knight’s shout of anger, and knew that the shield had been disabled.
They did not feel the ground shake. If Abathur did, he neglected to mention the fact. He had already begun to tunnel toward the well when Zenyatta and Auriel heard another voice on comms.

“Marshall Raynor, please bring your team to me - we need your help.” It was Winston.

-----

Alexstrasza had completed her transformation when Zenyatta signaled that his team was ready. Hanzo saw her look back at him, and gave a nod. The dragon roared, and started stalking toward the well, where the dragon knight continued its work.

“Go,” he said. Moments later, the energy beams faltered. “Get ready,” he told Zarya. She had already prepared her weapon, aiming carefully at the dragon knight’s feet.

The trick was this - she knew how to destroy the creature. But if they used her graviton surge near the well, they might collapse the already weakened forces holding the portal together. So Alexstrasza planned to bait the knight away from the well, where Zarya would then go to work.

The beams faded, and the shield around the knight shimmered and collapsed. The knight looked up, before howling in rage. Alexstrasza met the thing’s howl with one of her own - this time punctuated with a blast of fire.

The dragon knight rose, hefting its axe menacingly. Slowly, it began to stalk toward her.

As soon as it left the stone, Zarya fired - pinning its feet with the force of a graviton field. Alexstrasza drew in her breath, before unleashing a mighty blast of fire. Then she beat her wings in a buffeting motion. The fire blast had weakened the knight, but the force of her wings broke him. With a massive crash, the dragon knight crumbled once more.

\textit{That was too easy}, Hanzo thought, lowering his bow. \textit{Perhaps it was still weakened from Volskaya.}

Alexstrasza beat her wings again, clearing much of the dust and debris from the remains. She needed to know who had caused all of this. Hanzo approached carefully, alongside Zarya.

When they came to the base of the stone steps, they saw a human male. He was face down, buried in debris. He wore nondescript clothing, too covered in dust and filth to be identifiable. Hanzo very carefully turned him over with his foot, keeping both hands on his bow.

On seeing the man’s face, Zarya cursed.

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Tracer returned to the emitter site, to find that Winston had not moved. He was staring intently at his display, reading through the files he had found in the emitter’s memory.

“Any luck?” She asked.

From his place on the other side of the emitter, Tassadar took the reply. “We are close to learning
who brought the emitter to the nexus. But of their modifications, we have learned nothing.”

“I think I found their plan, however.” He read from the display. “Whoever did this, they used the processor here as a secret storage space. They kept notes.”

“Notes?” Tracer asked. “Like you keep notes?”

Winston nodded. “This person was beginning some sort of research project.” He scrolled through the files. “Quite a bit of DNA in here, it looks like some sort of biological weapon.”

“Few terrans would have needed to study such devices, Winston.” said Tassadar. “The various factions in the Terran sectors would have ample access to enough deadly bioweapons to wipe out entire worlds.”

Winston shrugged. “I can’t decipher some of these files, but the images are definitely genetic code.”

Tracer looked closely at the emitter. Its power source was internal, a cold fusion power cell much like the one that powered Raynor’s armor. There were no markings on the hardware, nothing that might hint at an origin.

“Winston,” she began. “See if the operating system has anything about a manufacture date.”

He looked at her, then grinned. “I should have thought of that.”

“Why do you think you keep me around, big guy?” She laughed. “I’m going to check the area again.” And with a flash of light, she ran into the forest.

“Do we really believe the force behind this plot would leave notes detailing their plans?” Tassadar sounded skeptical.

Winston shrugged again, then looked at the Protoss. “Either they didn’t think we would have a chance to look at these files, or they knew that it wouldn’t matter if we did.” He continued working his display, listening as the teams at the Sun and Moon Shrines checked in.

“Go.” He heard, over the communicator. Tassadar watched as the beams of light faded, then died entirely. A great roar punctuated the moment, and he heard the answering cry of Alexstrasza’s dragon form.

“Today I begin the task that will herald my master’s return.” Winston read, without preamble. Off Tassadar’s look, he indicated the display. “He kept a journal.” Winston worked his display, and continued reading. “This new unit will suit my needs nicely, as so many have done before. I even know of an uncharted moon, from which I will usher in a new era of darkness.”

“This one’s madness is obvious,” said Tassadar. Winston did not reply, and Tassadar looked at him. The look of shock on his face was jarring. Then he saw Winston activate his communicator.

“Marshall Raynor, please bring your team to me - we need your help.”

“What is it?” asked Raynor.

“Don’t tell him,” a small voice said, behind him. Turning, Winston saw Chromie standing next to Tassadar. The Protoss was as surprised as he was, for he turned quickly at the sound. Neither had heard her appear.

“Why not?” asked Winston.
“Jim and Alexei both know him,” she said urgently. “But he comes from a time before he knew who
ey they are.” She sighed, and waved her hand at the display, which promptly brought up a schematic.
“And he is the only hope you have to close the portal for good.”

Winston studied the drawings. “I could figure it out.” Then he looked at Chromie. “But you’re right,
we need him.”

“Why should Admiral Stukov not know who is responsible for all of this?” asked Tassadar.

Chromie turned to him, and spoke softly. Her voice was tinged with sadness.

“Who do you think made Alexei into the creature he is today?”

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Hanzo nocked an arrow when he heard Zarya’s muttered curse. “You know this man?”

“We met once,” she replied. “Here, in the nexus.” As they watched, the man groaned, waking up.
He raised himself up on his elbows, then pulled himself to a sitting position.

“Enough,” Hanzo said. The man looked up at him, dark eyes flashing from his face to the arrow
threatening his life. “Who are you?”

“ What are you?” Hanzo heard Alexstrasza’s voice behind him, her boots crunching through the
debris.

The man looked from archer to soldier to dragon, before grinning. Only Hanzo’s bow kept him from
offering a handshake, such was his easy manner. His charm had disarmed Zarya once, in very
different circumstances.

“Samir Duran, at your service.”

Chapter End Notes

For those who worry that the encounters with Gul’Dan and the proto-hybrid were too
simple, you’re right. But keep reading.

I plan to delve deep enough into the lore to explain Samir Duran’s particular brand of
shenanigans for anyone who isn't familiar with him from Starcraft. Some of our
characters have a history with him that he hasn't lived, yet - as before, Wibbly Wobbly,
Timey Wimey.

Also of note - Duran is one of those characters who always seems to find their way onto
wishlists for future additions to the nexus. I simply jumped the gun - eventually, he'll be
there.
Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Alexstrasza watched as Samir Duran brushed dust off of his uniform. He remained sitting, surrounded by the rubble of the statue, mainly because she had blocked the nerves of his lower spine and frozen his legs in place.

Immobilizing the man was simple - for despite her uncertainty about his origins, Alexstrasza could tell that biologically, he was human. His life force, on the other hand… Ancient had been the word that came to her mind, as she had reached out and sensed his presence. It was as if a being of immense power and knowledge had somehow been fit into the comparatively tiny shell of the man before them. He didn’t fit, exactly - but that was only obvious to her, as a result of her magical abilities.

To the others, Samir Duran just seemed off-putting, his involvement in a coordinated assault on their world notwithstanding, of course. Now that she was watching him closely, Zarya could see the rough edges in his manner. It reminded her of an impersonation, except that the one doing the impersonating did not know the culture he was meant to fit into. Like visiting a place without knowing the local customs.

Hanzo had kept his bow ready. He was taking no chances, even with the man immobilized. Controlling an ancient warrior spirit like the dragon knight was no mean feat - what other magic was this one capable of?

“How did you come to be in the nexus, Lieutenant Samir Duran?” Zarya began. Alexstrasza watched Duran closely, curious as she was about his origins - but also to see if he would lie, even now.

Duran smiled. “I told you this, Major. I was in the Confederate Revolutionary Forces in my home universe. Before that, I served as a sharpshooter in Alpha Squadron, before the Confederacy was conquered by a tinpot dictator named Arcturus Mengsk. When our Colonel informed us of our new loyalty, A few of my brothers in arms and I decided that our loyalty was not for sale.” Now his smile became a hunter’s grin, and Alexstrasza could feel the joy of the kill emanating from Duran. “So I introduced him to my knife, after which he graciously gave us access to a dropship and all the weapons we could carry.”

“You said you had been with them a week,” Zarya prompted him.

He nodded. “We landed on a remote moon, and had set up camp. Three other units were aligned with us, philosophically, and chose to join up. After they arrived, we would have had close to 500 men and women, ready to take back what was ours.”
“Would have had?” asked Hanzo.

“A week after I arrived, I went to bed on a plastic cot in a ramshackle tent. I woke up in the grass, staring up at trees. The nexus had taken me, it seemed.” His smile faded. “I had to start over.”

“You recognized a command center - was that because it came from your world?” Zarya was unsure which answer would be better - but if he came from Raynor’s world, at least someone would know what to do with him.

Duran nodded. “That technology is commonplace among my people.”

“As is the Psi Emitter?” Alexstrasza asked. So far, the man had not lied, though there were volumes that he was not yet sharing.

Duran glared at her. “How would I bring that here? When I did not know I would be coming here?” Then he relaxed. “But when I found it, it was programmed by none other than Emperor Mengsk and his cronies.” The venom behind that name told its own story. “So why wouldn’t I use it to get home? Have I not earned that?”

“All who come here,” Hanzo began, “wish to return home. But you did not try to return home, did you?”

Duran’s face was unreadable as his gaze fell to Hanzo. Alexstrasza could see him re-evaluating the archer.

“It’s like this - I just started a military unit by betraying my commanders, and inciting hundreds to do the same. And then I disappear? After a week?” Duran shook his head. “If I had a subordinate who disappeared after so short a time, I would pack up and run - because we will have surely been betrayed. And if I show my face in that universe, anywhere in the old Confederacy - well, put it this way. Either the Dominion finds me and executes me as a traitor, or my unit finds me and executes me as a traitor.”

Duran sighed, sitting back as best he could. “No, thank you.”

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Winston looked through the files again, comparing dates to the internal clock on the emitter. Obviously, time meant little here, and they could not know how a date from Tassadar’s universe would match up to whatever date they found in the emitter’s software, but it was more data to evaluate. The newest files seemed to interface with some sort of constant-signal biometric sensor, but others were readable text and research logs. Seeing a newer file, he opened the text.

“My home universe is closed to me, at least for now.” he read. “Of the worlds available to me, none will welcome this identity - I am a traitor once more. And while the tides of war may afford another opportunity to start over in a new guise, I do not have years to wait.” Winston eyed Chromie, who was listening intently. “I have not stood watch for these millenia, only to be thwarted at the beginning of the end.”

Tassadar, too, listened with interest. “There is something about these words…” He could not place the feeling, but there was something familiar. The words were in the Terran language most common to the worlds of the Dominion, but their tone did not fit.
Winston looked to him. “It’s almost as if the one who wrote this wasn’t a native speaker.”

“Perhaps,” replied Tassadar, though it was clear the Protoss was unconvinced.

“Such is the rightness of my master’s will, however,” Winston continued reading, “for providence brings me to the Nexus, and worlds abound beyond its borders. There are nine worlds to which I can travel, if the means present themselves. One is my own, to which I will return only at the head of an army.” Winston felt a chill reading those words - the sinister intent was clear, even in glowing text. Whoever this was would kill without hesitation. “The portals to four of these worlds reveal nothing but open space - though one had debris from some sort of spacecraft. Another took me to a useless, empty jungle.”

Winston looked to Chromie, who shrugged. She didn’t know that world, either. He continued reading. “Perhaps there are resources that could be made to service an army, if needed. But in that world there is no army to be had. For now. There is a world of warriors and magic, but it has been invaded many times before by armies marching from portals. They would be ready for me, I think - and besides, they have none of the technology I need.”

Adjusting his glasses, Winston looked at his companions. Chromie had a serious look on her face, though she had relaxed slightly when she learned that her world had been spared this creature’s attack. Tassadar’s expression was unreadable, though his manner hinted at agitation - rare in the stoic protoss.

The final paragraph was brief, and Winston read it twice before speaking. “The same is true of the eighth world, a literal hellscape, torn in battle between angels and demons. As familiar as it felt, there is nothing for me there, either. But the newest world, connected only tenuously to this place - that world is ripe for conquest. A divided world, with hundreds of little fiefdoms competing for dominance. Mechanical armies and advanced artificial intelligence, along with ample resources?

Winston looked Chromie in the eyes, his anger barely controlled. “I could do much with such a world.” he finished.

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“So you tried to enter their world.” said Alexstrasza, in a neutral tone. Duran had not yet lied, but he continued to volunteer as little as possible. She could see him hiding the truth behind his plans, but would not probe his mind for them - not yet, and not until there was no other option.

“There are other worlds in the nexus, of course. But none would be welcoming of a former soldier from the future, would they?” He looked from Hanzo to Zarya. “Only your world would let me live out my life in some measure of comfort, with technology much like that of my home.”

“Right,” said Hanzo. A glance at Zarya told the same tale - neither was convinced. Good, thought Alexstrasza.

“So why did you need the emitter?” Alexstrasza asked.

Duran looked at her, as if she were a child who had said something stupid. “Their world is new in the nexus, its connection is weak and intermittent. The door was tiny - I needed the emitter to widen it enough to pass through easily.” He shrugged, as if what he said was obvious. “If it’s not your world, to pass through and survive, you need either a broad portal and lots of power, or you need a
strong connection to that world. I lacked one, so I built the other.”

“Your broad portal could have killed someone!” Hanzo snarled. “The one in Russia undoubtedly did.”

Duran looked at him, and his eyes were carefully neutral. “And?” Hanzo’s own eyes widened at the cold-blooded tone. Duran had revealed himself, at last - he would allow nothing to stand in his way.

“And,” said Alexstrasza, “This ends today. Your scheme is broken, your path to their world is sundered. Today we close the door.”

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“Kerrigan’s team is approaching,” said Tracer, over the radio. Winston continued to look at Chromie. The moment stretched out, before he felt that he could ask the question.

“You said, long ago, that we would learn who did this and how it was done. Then we would learn the why.” Winston’s eyes narrowed. “What’s really going on, Chromie?”

“The why was what I could not figure out. He would have returned to his world at the exact instant he left, had he but been patient. And if he were a true soldier, that’s what would have happened.” She sighed, her gaze dropping to the ground. “His disguise is too good, too well crafted. And too invisible to magic, as it turns out, for he was able to fool even the nexus.”

“If the nexus had known his plans,” Tassadar began.

Chromie nodded, looking at him. “It never would have brought him here.”

“Who is he?” Winston asked.

Chromie considered her answer for a moment. When she heard the crunch of armored footsteps behind her, she answered softly. Not softly enough, thought Winston. The instant the name had left her lips, three voices in unison shouted back at her.

“DURAN?”

She turned, and saw the team frozen in their tracks. Kerrigan’s blades had flared out, of their own accord, and on her face was rage and anger and pain. Raynor’s expression was the tired look of an experienced soldier - to Winston, it said “Not this shit again.” Stukov’s expression was unreadable, but that was partly because he was already turning to go confront Duran.

Chromie waved her hands, and Stukov froze in place.

“Release me, woman.” he said, in tightly controlled words - whether because of his own decorum, or respect for Chromie, or because he was almost entirely frozen, Winston could not tell.

“Where do you go, Admiral?” She asked in reply.

“Killing that son of a bitch is my job,” he said. “I already did it once - practice makes perfect, yes?”

“You will listen to me first.” Chromie said, in a voice that demanded to be heard.
Stukov’s eyes blazed with anger, but he gave a slight nod. “I will listen, I do not promise to obey.”

Kerrigan ignored Chromie, addressing Stukov. “If you kill him, he’ll just come back. Over and over. This is the nexus.”

“Excellent!” Stukov chuckled sourly. “My lucky day.”

“Chromie,” Raynor began. “Can we kill him permanently?”

Tassadar had had enough. “What crime has this person committed, that you would execute him? You obviously know of this man, even before his crimes against Winston’s world.” Floating forward, Tassadar’s glowing eyes met Raynor’s. “Explain yourself, James Raynor.”

Raynor looked at Kerrigan, then at Stukov. Then he sighed, tiredly. Of all the conversations he had expected to have with Tassadar, this had never been among them.

“Samir Duran was a human who sided with the invasion fleet from Earth, after… well, after Aiur.” Raynor hated mentioning the world of Tassadar’s death - the future from Tassadar’s perspective and the past from Raynor’s. “He tried to combine Protoss and Zerg into a single creature that he could control for his master. Later he captured Alexei and experimented on a hybrid between Zerg and humans. He tried to make another Kerrigan.”

“And he failed,” said Stukov. “Yet rather than put me down he kept me around as a plaything.” Chromie could hear the bitter anger in the man’s voice - and was glad she did not know more about his torture at Duran’s hands.

“Why does this matter?” Tassadar asked. “Who is Samir Duran?”

“Samir Duran,” said Kerrigan, “Is an identity used by the Xel’naga known as Narud.” She watched the look of utter shock spread across Tassadar’s face.

“A Xel’naga?” Winston asked.

“Big aliens who exist outside of time.” Raynor replied. He nodded to the still shocked Tassadar. “They helped create the Protoss, long ago. In his time, they had not been seen in millennia.”

“This one,” Chromie said, picking up the thread, “will eventually return to his world, without his memory. The nexus will ensure that.” She looked at Stukov. “I’m sorry Alexei, but we can’t use the nexus to change your timeline. That’s part of why death is temporary here, I think - it won’t let us create paradoxes.”

Winston turned and saw Tracer examining the control panel on the emitter. She hadn’t been there a moment ago.

Stukov shrugged. “Back home? He dies, his plan fails. I can live with his fate in my world.” He looked at Winston and Tracer. “But as long as he remains here, in the nexus, he remains a threat to your world.”

“Maybe not,” Tracer said, as she examined the sensor panel. “I think I know how to stop him for good.”

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“I told you,” Duran said, angrily. “The device is linked to my bio-readings. If I die, it blasts your world and reduces it to ash. How many deaths will be on your conscience, Major?” He sneered at her. “And all so that I can walk out of that portal a minute later, fresh and renewed.”

They had gone around and around with him. Part of Alexstrasza wanted the man to get angry and let something slip - anything might help at this point. But most of her thinking was that they needed more time to figure out the emitter. She was not accustomed to stalling, but she was giving it a shot.

“Death, in the service of the greater good, brings no regret.” replied Zenyatta. “I believe Major Zaryanova is prepared to sacrifice a great deal to safeguard our world.” He floated near the still immobilized Duran. “I suspect you know something of such sacrifices.”

Duran nodded, but said nothing.

Auriel and Alexstrasza watched him. He seemed utterly confident, completely assured of his imminent victory. Either he was justified, or he was not. Time would tell, and soon.

“Raynor’s team is en route to your location,” said Tracer over comms. “Abathur is here.” The zerg had obeyed some unspoken command from Kerrigan, and diverted to the emitter. Auriel and Zenyatta had not known why, but she confirmed it without explanation when asked over the radio.

“They know something,” said Alexstrasza. Auriel’s hood nodded in agreement. The five of them stood watch, observing Duran try to figure out which one to speak to, in hopes of securing his release. He had rapidly run out of options, however - no one there would listen to him any longer. Sitting back, he waited - an avenue would present itself and he would escape, somehow.

The gate to the inner base opened, and in strode a human in confederate armor, a man in an Earth uniform with a zerg arm, and…. Duran’s eyes grew wide. There was no recognition there, for he came from a point in time before the arrival of Stukov's fleet, before his battles with Raynor, and well before Kerrigan's ascension to command the swarm. But he recognized the fact that she was both zerg and terran, and - perhaps most importantly - he recognized the sheer rage on her face, the fire in her eyes.

“What is that thing doing here?” He asked, surprise and alarm in his shrieking tone.

“What she must.” Kerrigan replied. Closing the distance rapidly, no one reacted in time to stop her. Her blades flashed out, along with a cry of rage.

And Samir Duran’s head toppled from his shoulders.

Chapter End Notes

We have nine worlds in this version of the nexus. Here's the list, for those of you playing at home.

World One: Empty Space/Unknown
World Two: Empty Space/Unknown
World Three: Empty Space/Unknown
World Four: Empty Space/Debris - Lost Vikings
World Five: Jungle - Blackthorne (Blizzard 1994)
World Six: Warcraft
World Seven: Starcraft (Duran: "Nope")
World Eight: Diablo
World Nine: Overwatch

Some are empty, which just means that Duran hadn't found any worlds with life yet. One of these had debris - perhaps from some great big alien ship blown up by three vikings? Another was a jungle, which tracks well with the SNES/Sega 32X Classic platformer Blackthorne, published by Blizzard in 1994, added to HotS whenever the devs get desperate for something different.

As always, feedback is welcome.
Tracer had just finished her explanation when a small beep from his armor drew Jim Raynor’s attention. Stukov noticed as well, from the look of consternation on the Admiral’s face. Seeing their reactions, Winston began checking his display, connected by wires leading into the exposed panel on the emitter.

“Seismic warning,” said Raynor, reading from his HUD. “Did that thing just power up?”

Winston looked up at him, and if the scientist could have turned pale he would have. “Power output has begun to ramp up. In 5 minutes, the emitter alone will have enough power to break through the portal’s shielding.”

Tassadar approached Tracer, as she worked on the panel nearest her. She looked at him, then pointed at another section of the emitter and its exposed circuitry. The tech was undoubtedly from the future, but she saw how the energy was routed through the mechanism. The emitter had not been designed as an elegant weapon, nor was it protected against intrusion - it was assumed that any humans working on it would be friendlies.

“5 minutes,” said Kerrigan. “We’d better move then.”

“Make sure Auriel is there before you strike,” said Winston. “We just need a trigger. If he reappears, we lose control of the situation.”

“Right,” said Stukov. His dislike of the plan was clear in his voice, but he followed Raynor and Kerrigan all the same.

Abathur watched them go. “Time constraints restrictive,” he said.

“I know,” said Tracer, simply. Winston caught the hint of worry in her voice, and then realized that she was not cracking a joke or a quip. Her hands were almost a blur as they rerouted circuitry.

“There is a great deal of duplicate hardware, Lena Oxton,” said Tassadar.

“Can’t be helped,” replied Tracer. “The sensor will trigger a blast at full power - which will be enough to breach the shield. We need to reroute that sensor, so that it triggers nothing.”

Winston watched them work. The hardware was highly advanced, but at its core it was merely a device for creating a specific type of energy and directing it at targets in a specific area. That energy was drilling a tunnel into their universe, but in an uncontrolled way. The result would not be a stable portal like the one to Chromie’s world, but a rip in the fabric of the universe itself. There would be no way to control who passed through, nor could there be a limit on how much mass could transition between the universes. So Duran and his army could attack with impunity, until their unlimited
resources (thanks to the nexus) eventually wore down Earth’s resistance.

But it worked both ways as well. If an Earth government got it in their heads to invade the nexus, consuming its resources and far future tech from Tassadar’s world? That might almost be a worse outcome, for could any of his world’s powers be trusted with technology from three centuries in the future?

“Is there any other way to shut it down?” asked Chromie.

Winston shook his head. “If we had gotten here sooner, perhaps. But it’s rigged to discharge the built up energy if it’s forcibly shut down - and there’s enough energy here to finish the job. What we have to do is tie the sensor to the controls so that the emitter tells itself to shut down. Then it’s not tampering, and doesn’t trigger the failsafes.”

“So if you kill Duran, this sensor will send a signal that turns the emitter off?”

“Here’s hoping,” said Tracer. “I almost have it.”

The Emitter began humming, and the air started to crackle with the power buildup. “No,” whispered Tracer, even as she continued to work as fast as she could. Tassadar kept up with her, and as his armor began to glow - he had charged his force field, just in case.

As they watched, a blast of white light shot out of the emitter, aimed directly toward the portal. Winston saw the beam, and knew that it carried destruction and death in its wake. He closed his eyes. Too late, he thought. The rumbling beneath his feet seemed to fade away, leaving only the angry crackling of energy in the air - but even that noise seemed to fade from his notice. The only sound was the continued movement from Tracer and Tassadar, however futile their efforts might now be.

“Not possible,” whispered Abathur. Winston opened his eyes, only to stare in disbelief.

The beam of energy was frozen in place.

Beside him, Chromie was holding her hands out in front of her, moving them in complex patterns. Power swirled around her like the fine sands of an hourglass. Her face was calm, but the effort she was expending was obvious. She saw his look, and smiled. “High magic has its place after all, Winston.”

“But, the signal…” he began.

“It’s being sent now. If I’ve timed it correctly, we should have about 30 seconds before it ends.” She chuckled, despite the exertion. “Plenty of time.”

Winston looked back to the energy beam, and saw that it was not actually frozen, but seemed to be inching forward very slowly. She had not stopped time, only slowed it dramatically.

She saw his look. “Time flows like water. Let a little bit flow, and you can hold the rest back. But stop it entirely, and eventually banks overflow, the dam breaks.”

Tracer disappeared to the other side of the emitter, then reappeared just as rapidly. She looked at Tassadar, who nodded. Winston saw her reach in one last time, moving one last connection inside the emitter. “Done!” she cried out. The beam from the emitter, crawling forward as it was, was not obviously affected - but as he watched, Winston saw the beam actually exit the emitter. No additional energy followed, and lights began to slowly fade out as the emitter powered down.
Chromie made a final gesture with her hands, and the beam shot forward, out of their view. The sand surrounding her seemed to disappear entirely, carried off on a breeze that had not been there before. Tracer sat down, catching her breath, as Tassadar spoke quietly with her. Abathur was examining the now dead emitter for himself.

Winston sighed. “It’s over.” Then he looked at Chromie. “Almost.”

Her expression turned grim, and she nodded. “Alexstrasza has a plan.” She recalled being impressed at how the Life-Binder had resolved the question in so poetic a fashion. On hearing the story, Chromie had told her that she had truly lived up to her title - but that she was welcome to become a timewalker whenever she wished. That comment had gotten a glass of sake thrown at her.

“Perhaps we should join them.” said Winston.

Chromie shook her head. “I’m needed elsewhere, Winston. But yes, you should go.” She grinned at him. “I’ll see you soon, of course.”

Winston returned her smile. “How do you know that?” he asked, already knowing the answer. He saw her shrug, as the sands of time carried her away.

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Duran’s body fell to the ground.

The brutality and rage behind Kerrigan’s attack had been a surprise, as Winston had said nothing over comms about how the attack would play out. Clearly there was unfinished business between Kerrigan and Duran.

Within seconds of his death, the rumbling began. This was not a simple tremor, like the ones they had traced here. Rather, it felt almost like the beginnings of an explosion - which it was, in a way. The rumble faded after a few seconds.

“No,” she heard over comms - it was Tracer’s voice. Seconds later, a bolt of white energy struck the shield. The blast knocked the group off their feet, even bringing Zenyatta to the ground.

“Auriel?” said Alexstrasza. The angel nodded, then let golden energy flow from her hands. As she watched, the angel gathered Duran’s head and corpse, bringing them together at the center of a bright sphere of light.

“Remarkable,” said Zenyatta quietly. Alexstrasza nodded, watching intently. Her magic brought new life, where there had been only death. Auriel’s powers undid death itself, restoring the life that had departed. In the nexus, this had the added effect of preventing a captured being from appearing elsewhere.

As the light faded, Duran began coughing. His eyes opened, and he looked at the team. Alexstrasza was already binding him again, preventing him from movement as she had before. Duran’s eyes were filled with rage, especially when he saw Kerrigan. Then he turned and looked at the shield.

“You have no idea what you have done,” He said, and his voice had overtones that sounded very much like those of the Protoss. It was his true voice, carrying the weight of thousands of years of masquerade and infiltration, of manipulation and intrigue.
Alexstrasza was having none of it. “What we have done is destroy your emitter. Now we deal with you, and their world will be safe.”

Duran laughed at her. “Safe? Look at what you have done. Killing me triggered the emitter - and opened the portal! You did my work for me, woman.”

Auriel floated closer to the trapped Xel’naga. “Being newly formed, the portal was tenuous and weak. Easily manipulated by a being such as yourself.” She leaned in toward him, her pleasant voice somehow dripping with malice. “They used your device to strengthen the portal just enough. Now it is stable, just like every other portal. And you cannot pass through to their world.”

Duran’s rage grew as he heard her, then again as he looked back at the portal and saw the truth of her words. It was stable, just like every other portal. And just like every other portal, he would not be able to pass through without help. He turned back to Alexstrasza, sneering at her.

“You can’t hold me forever. One day I’ll escape this prison. Any prison. And then, I will find your world and reduce it to ash.” He grinned at her. “Look at me and see the face of your death.”

Stukov chuckled. “Can I kill him again?”

Alexstrasza looked at Duran, kneeling once more in the rubble of the Dragon Knight. The pathetic creature wasn’t wrong, they couldn’t hold him here forever.

Or could they?

“You’re right, Duran, I can’t kill you. And I can’t let you go.” She shrugged. “So we will have to do the next best thing.”

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Stukov ran his zerg hand over the statue, whistling to himself. “You are a cruel and vicious opponent, your grace.” He took off his cover and tipped it at her in salute. “This is better than anything I would have done in your place.”

Alexstrasza nodded, as she finished the binding spell. Once she was done, she stepped back and inspected the altar.

The Dragon Knight stood silently, atop a small set of stone steps. One hand held a great axe, and the other carried a shield. Its armor was as ancient as its weapon, but the craftsmanship had undoubtedly been the best its world had to offer.

At its neck, etched into the stone, was a set of dog tags.

“Eventually,” she began, “He will free himself. This will not hold him forever.”

Raynor nodded. Kerrigan stared openly at the statue, saying nothing.

“But from your accounts, Duran has a part to play in your world. So when he does figure out how to escape his prison, the nexus will send him home - with no memory of us or the nexus, or anything that might get him to change his plans.” Alexstrasza looked at the three warriors. “You will stop him, have already stopped him.”
“He won’t remember his prison, either, will he?” asked Stukov.

She shook her head. “No. Because if he remembers this, he will remember you - and will avoid you at all costs. He does seem the coward, after all.”

Stukov looked at her, and she saw the anger in his glowing eyes - but also the despair. “Perhaps that would have been best.”

Alexstrasza looked over, and met Kerrigan’s eyes. The Queen of Blades nodded - she would speak with him later. There was history here that did not involve Alexstrasza.

“What now?” asked Raynor.

Alexstrasza turned to look at him. “I do not know.”

He laughed. “Then may I suggest that we go back to our base for a bit of a debrief?” Alexstrasza’s look of confusion gave him a chuckle. “And by debrief, I mean we have a few drinks and relax after a job well done. Then we send your folks home, now that we have a stable portal.” He grinned at her. “My treat.”

Smiling, she nodded. “Debrief, it is.”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve set an endpoint for this story. For my part, this story has been at its best with quiet character moments, and there are plenty yet to come. There are also lots of story beats that didn’t make it into this tale - but will in the next. Worry not.

Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Debriefing

Chapter Summary

The team enjoys a well-earned party. You know, for a strange in-between dimension of magic and chance, the nexus has amazing catering.

“I have to admit,” began Tracer. “That’s a good look on you.”

Hana grinned, spinning around to show off her outfit. Her usual armor had been replaced with a blue tunic and leather vest. The entire ensemble, down to the leather boots, could have come right out of medieval times - or from a pseudo-medieval magical society a world away. She had not exactly gone native, Tracer could see - for the outfit was distinctly Hana. But as a way to fit in while living in another world? It worked.

“And you spent three weeks living in a bar, you say?” asked Jim Raynor, reaching for another beer.

Once more, Hana launched into the story. After Volskaya, she had found herself face down on a cobblestone street, in some sort of city. The nearest door with lights inside was the Harthstone Inn, run by none other than Harth Stonebrew. He and Chromie had set her up with a room at the inn, given her money for new clothes, and told her to relax. It had been her first vacation in years, and she had enjoyed every minute.

“You must have made quite an impression,” said Kerrigan, gesturing at the banquet tables before them. “If we ever need catering in the nexus, I know who to call.”

Chromie had come to Azeroth to bring Hana back to the nexus, but stayed (at Harth’s insistence) for dinner before their departure. When the old dwarf learned that Hana would be returning in time for an after-battle celebration, he had insisted on providing the food and drink. And Harth Stonebrew was not someone to take no for an answer.

When Hana had asked him how he planned to get all that food to the nexus, he just looked at Chromie, who shrugged. “I’m a timewalker, not a delivery service.” Then the gnome had grinned broadly. “But just this once, I think I can manage it.”

Hanzo and Alexstrasza, having accompanied Chromie to the inn, had laughed at that. But they were future Hanzo and Alexstrasza, Chromie had said, so Hana didn’t mention seeing them. And that was weird, she thought, looking across to see the pair sitting quietly by themselves. She raised a green bottle of pop their way, and saw the pair raise their glasses in turn.

Sipping her drink, Hana reminded herself to ask Harth how he managed to import Mountain Dew all the way to Azeroth. Magic again, probably. Shaking her head, and smiling to herself, Hana Song walked back over to sit between Sarah Kerrigan and Jim Raynor. Be cool, be cool, be cool, she thought to herself. Not everyday you host a party for your heroes.
Zarya had sat down with her fellow Russian soldiers, now numbering half a dozen. While she had been at Dragon Shire, a corporal and a sergeant had found their way to the camp. Both were uninjured, but had had an adventure of their own trying to figure out where to go. When the team had departed for the battle, the soldiers had seen the light of the portal from the far end of the valley. Having no other leads, they decided to see what that light had been - which turned out to be the right call. Nikolai had almost re-broken his ankle, such was his eagerness to properly greet his lost comrades.

There was no indication that there were other Russians lost in the nexus. Jim Raynor had added the Russian’s radio frequencies to his search, with no luck. He had promised to continue the search after their return to Earth, however - and if there were still others missing in the nexus, Chromie could get them home.

It was obvious to her men, and to the others, that Zarya still worried. Getting her soldiers home was her responsibility. But Raynor’s assurance had settled the matter, for now.

“After all this,” she heard Nikolai saying, “Tomorrow we go home.”

“So they said,” replied Anatoliy, clearly unconvinced. He raised a drink to his lips, considering it. “I just hope they don’t expect us to fly between worlds sober!” The others laughed as he downed the vodka. To her surprise, Zarya found herself laughing with them.

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“They have much to celebrate,” said Auriel, watching the Russians pouring more vodka for another toast.

“They do indeed,” replied Zenyatta. The pair hovered at the edge of the field, watching the proceedings. Auriel, being an Archangel of the light, was not one for parties, and while Zenyatta often indulged in polite conversation with his friends and colleagues, tonight he found himself in a contemplative mood.

The pair watched as the Russians toasted, then emptied their glasses. Zenyatta noted that Zarya had joined them in their toast, this time. They were becoming the rowdiest group at this impromptu celebration, but he knew that Zarya would keep them from overdoing it. The combined healing of Auriel, Alexstrasza, and himself had done wonders for their injuries, but little for their fatigue - the Russians would sleep well this night.

“And what of you, Tekhartha Zenyatta?” said Auriel, quietly. “Are you prepared for your journey, tomorrow?”

Zenyatta did not turn to face her. “I have sought to transcend the boundaries of my world since I knew enough to seek anything.” He shook his head slightly, almost in amusement. “This was not quite how I expected that to happen.”

“Normally, the transition is quite painless.” She replied.

Now Zenyatta turned to her, floating gently. “That may be.” he allowed. “Of course, the last time I travelled between worlds, I died, so…”

Auriel returned his gaze, opening her hands as if to shrug. “I suspect this trip will be easier, given the
new stability we have brought to the portal.”

“I believe you.” He turned back to the party, watching his friends - old and new - celebrating. After a few moments, Zenyatta spoke again. “I have not properly thanked you for my resurrection, Auriel.”

The angel turned back to him, inclining her head. “Alexstrasza did much of the work, as you know. I just showed your spirit the path.”

Zenyatta nodded, for that was much the same explanation as he had gotten from Alexstrasza. “The granting of renewed life is no trivial thing in my world. I feel that I owe you a debt.” On the grass before them, he saw the angel’s soft pink glow ripple with colors, and Zenyatta realized that it was the closest the archangel would ever come to a laugh.

“You owe me no debt, Zenyatta.” She said. “But if you insist upon payment, pay your debt to someone in your home. I have no need of any such.”

“Of course,” Zenyatta replied. Turning to Auriel, he bowed in respect. She nodded her head in return.

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“How much did you know?”

Chromie sat back in her chair, looking over the table at Winston. “That’s rather a loaded question, is it not?” She asked, with a smile.

“Perhaps.” he allowed. “Let me put it another way, then. I know that you know how to avoid paradoxes and broken time loops and so forth. I know that, at every step, you told us exactly what we needed to hear. For example,” Winston pointed toward Alexstrasza and Hanzo with his fork, before taking another bite of fruit salad.

“You want to know if I could have prevented any of this.”

Winston shook his head. “If you could have, you already did. No, Chromie, I ask from professional interest. I want to know what your path through this little adventure might look like.”

Chromie chuckled, taking a sip of her wine. “You’d need a chart, I think.”

Winston grinned at her, before holding up his wrist, and the glowing display there. “Charts and graphs are something of a specialty for a scientist. A chart, I can handle.”

“Ah, but you forget one factor, Doctor.” She said, teasing him with his own words. “A fact so simple, and yet one that renders any possible discussion of my involvement in this affair completely impossible.”

Winston leaned forward, sipping his tea. His eyes betrayed the effort he was putting into not laughing, and Chromie could see that the effort was considerable indeed. “I am keen to know it, Master Timewalker.”

Chromie spun in her chair, a tall backed bar stool straight from Harth’s tavern. “It’s simple, Winston. I can’t tell you what I did, because…” and then she leaned in close, bringing her voice almost to a whisper. “I haven’t done all of it yet.”
Winston blinked. Then he leaned back and laughed out loud, a deep and jovial noise. Chromie couldn’t help but grin as the scientist finally got it.

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Zarya turned at the sound of Winston’s laugh, and she smiled in turn. He had been worried about the mission, ever since he arrived at their camp. Now that the hard part was done, it was good to see him relaxed, for once.

“He earned his victory, today.” A voice said, from behind her. “As did we all.”

Turning, she saw Admiral Stukov standing nearby. He seemed unsure, hesitant - and as she watched him, she understood. Rising, she pulled out the chair next to her.

“Comrade Admiral, we would be honored if you joined us.” She said.

Stukov nodded to her, taking the seat next to her, at one end of the table. Looking at the Russian soldiers, he saw nods of respect - and, from the two young ones on the other end, who had not been here when they departed for Dragon Shire, he sensed fear.

Zarya caught it too. But before she could speak, Yevgeny was already answering their unspoken question.

“This is Vice Admiral Alexei Stukov, born in another world’s version of Russia.” The sergeant poured an eighth glass of vodka as he spoke. “He had stood against monsters and wizards and all manner of bizarre nonsense, just to protect our world.”

Zarya reached over and slid the glass to the Admiral. He looked at it, as if it were some foreign thing. His glowing eyes met hers. “They do not drink much in the Zerg Swarm.” He took the glass in his human hand, considering it. “It’s been a long time.”

Zarya chuckled. “I know nothing of the Zerg. But while we sit around this table, Comrade Admiral,” She raised her glass, and saw the men doing likewise. “We’re Russian.”

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Zenyatta had noticed him a few minutes ago, and presumed that Auriel had done the same. The moment did not demand any action, and so he said nothing. It was Tassadar who broke the silence.

“The time has come to take my leave of you,” the executor said, simply.

“I should warn you, Tassadar, that I was instructed to prevent you from leaving before you had an opportunity to speak with Hana Song.” Zenyatta turned to the protoss.

“So she said,” replied Tassadar. “We spoke of her journey to Azeroth, and then she asked questions about my people.” Zenyatta could hear the puzzlement in Tassadar’s voice, as he continued. “Then she turned her back to me and aimed a small device at herself. I could not see what she was doing.”

“They are an honorable people,” said Auriel. “But some of their ways are strange.” Then she heard
Zenyatta’s soft chuckle.

The Omnic’s eyes betrayed none of his amusement, but it was clear in his voice. “Tassadar, it would appear that you gave Hana Song the gift of a selfie.”
**Toasts**

Chapter Summary

Alexstrasza and Hanzo share a toast or two, and discuss the future. Chromie shows up with a toast of her own.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When the team returned to Raynor’s base, Alexstrasza had been amused to see that arrangements had been made for a banquet.

Wooden tables had been set up in the grassy field just south of the Command Center, with chairs and benches to match. Two large tables at the center of the field were covered in foods of all kinds. When she and Hanzo went to fill their plates, Alexstrasza saw that most of the selections were standard fare from any good tavern in Azeroth. Some items she did not recognize, however, suggested that whoever had planned the feast knew their audience.

A small table had pitchers of different kinds of wine, alongside glassware of various types. Nearby, three barrels were overflowing with drinks. One had bottled beers, another boasted more potent spirits. A third was split between bottles of bright green liquid and small jugs of sake. To Hanzo’s surprise, the green drinks (Soda, he had called it) were ice cold, while the sake remained warm. A simple feat of magic, she explained, common in her home.

“I will look for it,” he replied, “when we find ourselves in a tavern in your homeland.” Smiling at her, he had taken his food and a jug and walked toward a small table, set apart from the others. She watched him go, smiling to herself. So much tension had left him, now that the crisis had passed. He was almost relaxed, she realized.

Taking her plate in one hand, she gestured at a small table. A pitcher of what looked like Sunkissed wine lifted into the air, joined shortly by a wine glass. Both followed Alexstrasza as she walked over to Hanzo’s table.

“There are no taverns that would call me a regular,” she said, taking the seat next to Hanzo. “But perhaps I know a few likely spots.” Her glass set itself down before her, and was filled by the pitcher. Hanzo watched, amused, as it set down gently on the table.

“With a trick like that, you could make a fortune tending bar.” He said, with a grin. He inclined his head at the jug next to his plate. Alexstrasza raised an eyebrow, but repeated her gesture under the table.

“Hanzo Shimada,” she said, trying hard to remain serious as she spoke. “It would be unbecoming for the Queen of the Dragons to become a barmaid.” His smile faded slightly, until he heard the clink of a jug setting back down onto the table. He lifted his glass, and saw that it was full. He looked back at her, and saw her renewed grin, her glass already in her hand.

“Perhaps you are right, after all.” He leaned over to her, tapping the edge of her glass with his own. “To what should we toast?”
She looked at him, meeting his eyes. “For a victory such as we have won, tradition demands three toasts.” She raised her glass, and he joined her with his own. “For the first, we toast the past. Everyone who brought us here, everyone who carried us on our journey. Living and dead, we honor them.” She kept her eyes on his, watching as Hanzo emptied his much smaller cup. She took a sip of her wine, and found that it was not the Azeroth wine she had expected - but one, probably from Earth, that was just as good.

Hanzo leaned back in his chair, looking out over the field. He could see Hana Song, freshly returned from Azeroth, showing off her new clothes. “Most of those whom we would honor are here. At least, this time around.”

Alexstrasza followed his gaze, and looked at their friends and allies as they enjoyed the feast. Hana saw them looking in her direction, and raised her soda in salute. Then the young woman laughed when she saw that Alexstrasza and Hanzo had raised their glasses in return - together, almost in unison.

Her eyes were drawn to the tree line, where she saw Auriel and Zenyatta floating quietly by themselves. Were they contemplating the festivities, she wondered, or speaking of faith and philosophy and other such matters, as a guru and an archangel might? Zenyatta lacked an actual mouth, and Auriel lacked a face, so Alexstrasza could not tell one way or the other whether they were speaking or silent. And then she realized that it truly did not matter.

But seeing Zenyatta was a reminder, in its own way. “Not every battle will end with such a result, unfortunately.” She looked over to him. “As we both know very well.”

Hanzo nodded. “True.” He refilled his glass, by hand this time. “What was your second toast?”

Alexstrasza kept her eyes on him, and the smile returned. She reached over and took his hand as she spoke. “The second toast is for the present. We cherish what was won, relish in what we have, and honor those who find themselves at our side.”

Hanzo gave her hand a squeeze as he drank. “To you, then.” he said, simply.

“To us.” She replied, taking another sip of her wine.

They sat that way for a few minutes, watching the party and holding hands. Alexstrasza had not found herself very hungry, and what little food she had taken sat untouched on her plate. Hanzo’s appetite matched her own, it seemed - he had taken a few bites, but that was all. With a drink in one hand, he would need the other to eat, and at the moment he didn’t want to let go.

“I have not had a chance to thank you,” Hanzo said quietly, “For saving my world.”

Alexstrasza’s eyebrows raised at that. “You need not thank me, Hanzo.”

“Yes I do,” he replied. “If you had been anyone else, we might have won, and we might have lost. But I can guarantee, the cost would have been much higher.”

Once again, she was glad she had dispensed with her gauntlets, as she ran her fingers over the palm of Hanzo’s now open hand. She considered how to respond. I didn’t do it for them, she thought. I did it for you.

It startled her, that realization. She had sworn, thousands of years ago, to protect life in her world. On learning that another world was under threat, and that she could act to protect that world, her choice should have been an easy one.
And it was - she had not hesitated to protect Hanzo’s world. But she had not done it for them, though she rejoiced at their newfound safety. She hadn’t even done it for her new friends in Overwatch - Ana, Jack, Angela, and all the rest.

No, she realized, she had done it for Hanzo. Seeing his world broken, crushed under the boot of Gul’Dan or Samir Duran or any beast of their ilk, would have destroyed the man. Especially when they, together, had the ability to stop it. He had wandered for so long, lost after his fight with Genji. And then he had found Overwatch, and a home. And then the nexus, and her.

It was in the nexus where he stepped forward and placed himself between his home and whatever harm might befall it. Seeing his courage, his steel will, how could she do less?

There were no words, just then. So Alexstrasza lifted his hand and kissed the back of it, lightly brushing her lips against him. The look in his eyes said everything - her meaning was clear.

Absently, she nodded toward the table. Once again, his cup filled itself. “There is a third toast, Hanzo,” she began. “But we need not make it now, if you do not wish it.”

He smiled, and there was a slight sadness in it, just at the edges. “The future?”

She nodded. “The future.”

He lifted his glass, looking into her eyes, seeing the worry there. “Would you prefer to discuss the future another time?”

She met his gaze, her expression carefully neutral. “I fear what the future holds, at least in the coming days.” She sighed, more from frustration than sadness. “Saying what will come may make it so.”

“Perhaps,” he said. “But is the future set in stone, Alexstrasza?” His eyes held hers, and he seemed hopeful as he explained. “You and I both have paths to walk, but is it not in our power to bend those paths as we will?”

“Sometimes,” she allowed. “But sometimes we are chained by the people we choose to be.”

Hanzo watched her, saying nothing. He saw her decision, heard her sigh.

“I will need to return home, Hanzo. At least for a while.” She looked down at their hands, as she continued quietly. “I have been gone for a long time.”

“So you have said,” he replied. “I wish I could join you.”

“I know,” she said, and meant it. “But Genji and Angela will worry if you do not return.”

“For one. For another, I will need to visit my homeland, if only briefly.”

Her eyebrow raised again. “You mean the castle you left so long ago?” Her mind wandered to the nexus’ version of Shimada Castle, and to their night and morning spent there. In spite of the subject, she smiled at the memory of their night together, even though most of it was spent in exhausted slumber.

Hanzo nodded. “If I will be gone from my world for so long, then it would not be proper to depart without honoring my ancestors.”

“Departing… what?” Alexstrasza’s voice trailed off.

“Allie,” a voice said behind her. “What did I tell you about the future?”
Alexstrasza looked over at Chromie, standing there holding her own glass of wine. “Lots of things, as it turns out.”

Hanzo laughed. “She said that tomorrow is her job, if memory serves.” Reaching over to his plate, Hanzo grabbed an orange and tossed it in Chromie’s direction.

The gnome reached up and caught the fruit. “Say, that’s a good line. I’ll have to remember that one.”

“Chromie,” Alexstrasza began, obviously trying to sound more annoyed than she truly was.

“Relax,” Chromie replied. “Have I mentioned that I can move to and from Hanzo’s world at will? And that I can do more than travel alone?”

Alexstrasza looked at her, wondering what she was getting at with this. “Go on.”

“I mean, look at all of this food - who do you think brought it over from Azeroth, eh?” Chromie grinned and sipped her wine. “I should get a commission.”

Hanzo’s chuckle drew Chromie’s gaze, and her smile widened. “If someone I know wanted to have a visitor from another universe, perhaps a few months from now when his business in his homeland is concluded?” She pointed at Hanzo, who nodded. “Let’s just say I can make that happen.”

“You would do that?” Hanzo asked, not being able to help himself. He had to know. “For us?”

“Of course.” She replied. “You’re good for her. And I know that you will never hurt her, if it can be avoided.” She turned to Alexstrasza, who was sitting in something close to shock. “And you, my old friend, have been alone for too long. I know he is not a dragon, nor is he anything at all like the consort that tradition demanded for so long.”

She raised her glass of wine, then, pointing toward the Queen of the Dragons. “Your grace, you deserve to be happy. If I can help this man accomplish that, then it is my pleasure to do so.”

Alexstrasza’s glass of wine rose, of its own accord, and settled itself into her free hand. Hanzo smiled and raised his own glass. He was not surprised to find that it had filled itself again when he was not paying attention.

“So,” said Chromie, as Alexstrasza and Hanzo raised their glasses. “To the future.”

Chapter End Notes

These two - one ancient who has loved and (violently) lost, and the other comparatively young, but who doesn't believe he deserves love at all - have been the core of this story, however much it grew around them. Neither is one to jump into anything, really. As long as Chromie can talk some sense into them, I think they'll end up OK. Because Chromie’s middle name happens to be Chekov, as it turns out, and she's a time lord on her father's side.
So, as is typical for this version of the nexus, Chromie has everything under control. Worry not. Someday, I'll write the drabble version of this where these two get proper drunk and actually let themselves go a bit. (How much wine does it take for a dragon to get drunk, I wonder?) (Oh my word now I have a prompt. Heaven help us.)

Feedback, as always, is welcome.
Departures

Chapter Summary

Raynor and Zarya have a moment, while Stukov has several. Hanzo and Alexstrasza steal one of their own.

It was early evening on the following day before Chromie prepared the portal for the return trip to Zarya’s home universe. Zarya had been somewhat annoyed at the prospect of such a delay, before she met with her soldiers - and learned how hung over they really were.

Raynor had just laughed. “Chromie is wise in all things, Major.” That comment had earned him another Russian curse.

But the extra sack time had been put to good use, and the team was well-rested when they assembled for departure. Admiral Stukov was with the men, shaking hands and gently warning them that he would hear of it if they did less than their best for the motherland.

“It’s good to see him like this,” Jim Raynor said, as he stood next to Zarya, watching the farewells.

“He has been through a great deal,” she replied. “Even before he was held prisoner at Volskaya.”

Raynor nodded. “And yet here he is, shooting the breeze with the grunts. It’s been a very long time since he commanded human soldiers, and honestly I think he misses it a little.” As they watched, Yevgeny straightened up and snapped off a salute. Stukov paused, looking thoughtful, before returning the salute smartly, albeit with his left hand.

“He has lost so much,” she said, quietly. Raynor nodded again.

“You, meanwhile, get to return home a hero.”

Zarya rolled her eyes. “I am no hero, Marshall Raynor. I just did my duty.”

“You destroyed a monster, twice, and marched into someone else’s battle to protect your home. I’d say that qualifies.” Raynor pointed at the remainder of the overwatch team, where they stood waiting for the Russians to depart. “We knew what we were walking into. We chose this fight. But you had it dropped in your lap, and fought anyway.”

Zarya saw Stukov step off of the platform, walking towards them. Her men began shouldering their packs, looking in her direction. It was time.

“All I’m saying is this,” Raynor continued. “Anytime you need someone to watch your back, I’m there.”

Zarya smiled, offering her hand. “If we find more glowing shit in Russia, I know who to call.” As he returned her handshake, she leaned over to him. “Take care of yourself, Jim.” she said, softly.

“Your chariot awaits, Major!” said Stukov, as he approached them.

“And you, Admiral,” Zarya said, as she turned toward the platform. “Keep an eye on the Marshall
for me, yes?”

Stukov tipped his hat to her, almost half bowing. “It shall be done, my lady.”

The men watched as Zarya walked toward the portal, her weapon slung over her shoulders. As she ascended the steps to the platform, Stukov leaned over to Raynor. “If I did not know any better,” he said, “I would think you wanted her to stay.”

Raynor kept his eyes on the platform, as the portal energies began to build. “You’ve got to admit, she makes an impression.”

“Funny,” said Stukov with a laugh. “She said much the same thing about you.” The Admiral ignored Raynor’s look of shock, as he watched the Russians return home.

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The Overwatch team had more equipment to carry through the portal, between what Winston had been able to salvage from Volskaya and the additional supplies Raynor had provided. Most of his contribution was equipment that would help detect uncontrolled Zerg infestations, just in case Duran (or someone else) managed to renew their attack.

Winston had also downloaded a copy of the database from the command center, including information about Azeroth. Even though he had been controlled by Duran, the fact remained that Earth had been attacked by the Orcish Horde. Having some information about a potential threat was not unreasonable. He had discussed the matter with Alexstrasza, and she had agreed - it was wise to be prepared.

And if the data somehow made its way into his world, who would believe it? Perhaps they would dismiss it as lore from a decades-old video game, just as he had the first time Hana had mentioned Jim Raynor.

Kerrigan had rolled her eyes at the download - the nexus, she had explained, was not the ideal place for cultural exchange. And their makeshift base camp was not an embassy from their world. If and when they returned home, she fully expected their memories to disappear, just as they had so many times before.

Raynor, for his part, assured him that the Command Center was more or less a permanent fixture in the nexus, and that it would remain. He included access codes in the download, so that Winston, or any other member of Overwatch who found themselves in the nexus, could make use of the facility if necessary. If they could find it, of course.

They also exchanged lists of radio frequencies, for the same reason. Winston had heard Reinhardt refer to Jim as a “Belt and Suspenders” type of soldier - and now he understood why. The man liked to be prepared.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Winston,” Raynor said, “But I really hope you don’t need any of this data.”

Winston laughed at that. “I’m a scientist, when have I ever said no to more data?” He then closed his display and looked around the command center. “Besides, when will I have the chance to return? To see and explore new worlds?”
Now it was Raynor’s turn to laugh. “Whatever magic controls the nexus saw something in your team. Even if it’s not soon, don’t think for a second that you’re immune. We’ll see you around the nexus before long, I expect.”

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It surprised no one that Hanzo was the last of their group to take his place next to the portal.

The team’s gear had been packed, their goodbyes offered with hugs and lingering handshakes - and, in the case of Hana Song, with multiple selfies. Raynor’s eyes had almost left his skull when he saw her run up and give Kerrigan a hug - and Sarah’s reaction had been just as priceless, with the mighty queen of blades rendered helpless by a nineteen-year-old girl.

Alexstrasza, too, had been gracious with her farewells, thanking every team member for their help - not just here, but in their world as well. Tracer, being last in line, promised to convey her thanks to Jack and the rest of the team, but only if she promised to visit someday.

“Besides,” she said, “You’ve got someone to visit, now, don’t you?” Hanzo’s face reddened, and he took a step forward - only to see Tracer blink away, laughing.

Alexstrasza stifled a chuckle of her own. “She’s not wrong, you know.”

Hanzo’s expression softened, as their eyes met. “I know. I am not accustomed to being teased about how I spend my time. Nor with whom.”

“You’ve been on your own for a long time, Hanzo. They seem happy for you, that that is no longer the case.” She watched as he reached down and took her hand. “I can’t say I disagree.”

Hanzo looked at their hands. “I wish I could stay, even if only for a little while.”

“I know.” She said. Leaning forward, she placed a gentle kiss on his forehead. “But you have a family who would worry, and I have duties that have gone neglected for too long.”

Hanzo nodded, meeting her eyes again. “Soon, then.”

“So Chromie says,” she agreed.

“Not soon enough, I fear.”

She fought hard not to roll her eyes at the now-obvious stall. Her face must have given her away, however, for Hanzo’s serious expression broke out in a grin. Then he laughed, and before long she had joined him.

“Look at us,” he said, still chuckling. “What a pair we make.”

Alexstrasza shot a glance over at the portal, where the remaining members of the Overwatch team were carefully not looking in their direction. Releasing Hanzo’s hand, she waved at the platform. Hanzo saw a green mist appear, shrouding them from view.

He looked back at Alexstrasza, meeting her eyes once more. An eyebrow raised, asking the obvious question.
“It would be unseemly,” she replied, formally, “for the Queen of the Dragons to carry on in such a public manner.” Then she grinned again, leaning toward him. “I believe your teammates would allow you a moment of privacy, would they not?”
The Overwatch team returns to Gibraltar, to much fanfare. Chromie brings Alexstrasza up to speed, and then she receives an update from her own sources.

Alexstrasza, the Life-Binder, Queen of the Dragons, stepped out of the portal. Her boots crunched down on the pebbles littering the plateau, a far cry from the smooth stone of the platform she had just left. The cold air gave her a slight chill, for the weather in the nexus had been warm. Here, in the mountains north of Wyrmrest, even the midday sun was cold and unforgiving.

Later, Chromie would ask Alexstrasza why she had not transported herself directly home.

Alexstrasza grinned as the green magic flowed over her, shrouding her form and masking her transformation. Only when she let out a mighty roar did she feel it - and with a beat of her wings, she took flight, heading due south.

Flying home.

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Sergeant Donnelly did not bother to look back as the door to the command center opened. Either it was Captain Amari or Commander Morrison, and both would want a report.

“All teams are standing by,” the Sergeant reported.

“Good.” replied Pharah. She never wore her combat armor when she was the officer of the watch - but it was always on standby, just in case. Tonight, it had taken her less than two minutes to suit up and run a systems check. Whatever had triggered the alarm, she was ready.

Now all they had to do was figure out what was happening.

“Have there been any other alarms?” she asked, as she walked over to the large table display at the center of the room. A map of the Gibraltar complex was shown there, with red indicators showing active alarms.

“Just the perimeter alarms at the landing field,” came the reply. “No other alarms, inside or outside of the complex.”

Turning, Pharah walked to the large window that overlooked the landing zone. There was no aircraft being prepped for flight, nor did they have any landings scheduled. But, for some reason, the landing lights were active. And the landing pad was where the security field had been triggered, even though there was nothing in evidence - no intruder, no misplaced cargo, none of the seagulls that plagued the
south end of the island. Nothing.

“How does our pattern look?” She asked, her eyes remaining on the field below, and on the soldiers forming a perimeter around the landing zone.

“Clear skies, ma’am,” a corporal replied. “No landings, nothing inbound on the satellite feeds.”

The door opened again, admitting Soldier 76. His visor made it impossible to tell whether or not the man had been asleep, and his voice had its typical hard edge. “Athena,” he said.

“Good morning, Commander Morrison.” Athena’s response was quick, as if she had anticipated the summons.

“Compare this alarm to the one seventeen days ago in Hanzo’s quarters.”

“Working.”

“Measure the interval between the first alarm and the first sensor readings showing Hanzo and Alexstrasza in the complex.”

“Sensors registered a perimeter alarm 7.2 minutes before Hanzo’s appearance, Commander.”

Pharah kept her eyes on the landing field. She saw Reinhardt, armor and all, making his way out of the equipment bay. Brigitte followed closely behind, flail in hand. The young woman had arrived the previous day, prepared to take a more active role with the team. Her father had not been thrilled, but agreed (at Reinhardt’s urging) to give her a shot. This would be her first battle, if battle it turned out to be.

“Athena,” Pharah said, as Soldier 76 joined her beside the window. “Time since first alarm tonight?”

“6 minutes 42 seconds.”

Now she looked over, and saw Soldier 76 looking back. “Here we go,” he said.

Pharah nodded, then walked to the emergency exit left of the windows. The door slid open, and she walked onto a small balcony. She could launch easily from here, while retaining a clear view of the entire landing zone.

Whatever came through from the nexus, they were ready.

Wind began to blow across the field, and Pharah noticed sand begin to swirl around the landing zone. “Hold,” she said, as the nervous soldiers began to aim their weapons. The volume of sand continued to increase, becoming a spiral of dust and grit. Then a blue glow appeared, and the sand vortex became an energy vortex. Pharah prepared her rocket launcher, lowering her helmet and activating its HUD. Just as her targeting system came online, there was a flash of light, shorting out her vision.

Blinking, she raised her helmet once more. As her vision cleared, she saw six figures standing where the portal had been. Four of them looked as stunned as she must have - they, too, were blinking away the disorientation. Zenyatta, of course, was unaffected, as was the sixth, a very small woman in golden armor.

Reinhardt’s deep laugh broke the silence. “Stand down, they’re friendlies.” He set his hammer down on the deck, before walking forward to greet his lost teammates.
Sunset found her alone in the temple’s aerie, looking out on the sunset. She was once more in her humanoid form, seated at a small table. Alexstrasza had had no need of such furnishings prior to her journey into the nexus, nor was she one to sit and drink wine as she gathered her thoughts. Yet there on the table had been a bottle of wine from Hanzo’s world, with three glasses.

“Welcome home, Allie”, the note had read. At the bottom had been a hand drawn sigil of the Bronze Dragonflight.

As she heard the footsteps behind her, she poured a second glass. “Why is it,” she said, without turning around. “That you always seem to be in a hurry?” Now she looked over, as Chromie took a seat next to the table.

The gnome shrugged, grinning. “Good planning, I guess.” She took a sip of the wine, nodding appreciatively.

“I take it Hanzo and his teammates made it home?”

“They did.” Chromie replied. “Though you should have seen the look on their friends’ faces when we appeared in the middle of their base.”

Horror crossed Alexstrasza’s features. “They live in a fortress, Chromie! What if they thought there was another attack?”

“As soon as we arrived, Winston asked Athena to cancel the alarms. We were fine.”

Alexstrasza relaxed. “If Athena was involved, then there was no danger. Even though Commander Morrison is in charge, I think Athena is the force that drives that place, more than anyone else.”

“Morrison…” Chromie said, thoughtfully. “Is he the one with the metal face mask and the glowing eyes?” Alexstrasza nodded, causing Chromie to chuckle again. “He wasn’t very happy with me.”

“No, I don’t imagine he would have been.” Then she thought about it. “Chromie, when exactly did you arrive?”

Now Chromie looked sheepish. “Well, you know that times don’t translate across universes, so…”

“Chromie.”

Chromie took another sip of wine, before quietly saying “After all, they have a different system of…”

“Chromie!”

“Winston said it was 3 in the morning.”

“Oh,” said Alexstrasza. No bloody wonder Jack was angry.

“Everyone calmed down once Athena explained what had happened. And then we went and grabbed an early breakfast, while Jack and Ana and Ana’s daughter Faree ha and Angela all listened to our story.”
“That’s quite a… what did he call it? A Debriefing?”

Chromie nodded. “Funny enough, that’s exactly what Jack called it.”

The sun seemed to hang in the air, its reds and golds throwing color on the stone pillars of the temple. Alexstrasza took another sip of her wine, wondering how to ask the question that was really on her mind.

Leave it to Chromie to see right through her. “Hanzo and Genji were still deep in conversation when I left. And Angela was almost crying when she thanked me with a hug.”

Alexstrasza nodded. “Good. Hanzo and his brother have a… let’s say, complicated, history. That they are at least mending their relationship is a good sign.”

“So Angela said.” Chromie waved her hand idly over the table, and a sheaf of letters appeared. “She gave me a letter for you. And so did Winston, and Hana, and Genji. Zenyatta did not, but sends his greetings.”

Alexstrasza’s hand rested on the letters. She had seen Winston only hours before, in the nexus. When would he have written a letter?

“Chromie, how long have they been back home?”

Ignoring her, Chromie waved her hand again. A small wooden box appeared next to the letters. Alexstrasza lifted it gently, found that it was lighter than it appeared. Inside, she found a small medallion. The metal disc had a depiction of some sort of bird of prey, wings outstretched, inset within what appeared to be some sort of cross. Around its edge were words in a language she did not recognize. The medal was attached to a ribbon in bright colors of white, blue, and red.

“For the defense of the citizens of Saint Petersburg in the face of great personal risk, and against overwhelming opposition, Her Grace Alexstrasza of the Red Dragonflight is hereby awarded the Order of Courage. On behalf of a grateful city, Mayor Stanislav Novikov.” Alexstrasza looked up from the medal to see Chromie reading from a certificate of some sort. Once she finished, Chromie looked up. “The mayor insisted on giving medals to the Overwatch team who saved his city. Hanzo made sure they gave you one, as well.”

Alexstrasza gently closed the box. She would not have occasion to wear the medallion, of course, but that did not mean she could not give it a place of honor somewhere here in the temple. Again she looked over at Chromie, who was grinning at her.

“It sounds,” Alexstrasza remarked, “as if you have had a productive few hours.”

“More or less,” Chromie replied.

Alexstrasza gathered her thoughts, considering how to ask the only question that really mattered to her at this point. Before she could speak, Chromie offered a question of her own.

“It was no time at all, here,” she began, her eyes intent on the horizon. “But from the perspective of your timestream, you spent seventy-three days in the nexus. That doesn’t count your time in the world of Overwatch, nor elsewhere.” She turned, her eyes meeting those of her friend. Her expression was unreadable.

“Was it worth it? All the pain and death and hardship?” She inclined her head.

Alexstrasza finished her wine, setting the glass on the table. “Yes.” she said, quietly.
Chromie’s voice grew quiet, as well, and her words were less those of the Timewalker and more those of Alexstrasza’s old and dear friend.

“And did you find what you were looking for?”

Alexstrasza closed her eyes, allowing herself a deep sigh. “Hai,” she said, in Hanzo’s language.

“I thought you’d say that,” was Chromie’s reply, and this time Alexstrasza could hear the light playful tone in her voice. “Well, just remember one thing.”

Opening her eyes, Alexstrasza saw that Chromie had already standing. The timewalker grinned at her, before beginning her walk back into the temple.

“What is that, Chromie?”

“Tariolstrasz won’t be back for about three hours or so.” Another set of footsteps sounded alongside Chromie’s, and as she listened they sounded familiar. Alexstrasza heard the sounds of Chromie’s magic, as she departed the temple. The other set of footsteps approached, metal on stone.

Alexstrasza smiled to herself, before standing and assuming her most formal and regal demeanor. Best do this properly. She turned around.

Hanzo Shimada stood next to the table, smiling at her, and his eyes seemed to light up when they met her own. In one hand he had a large jug of what had to be sake. He wore heavier clothes than when last she had seen him (hours ago!), including a jacket and backpack.

He set the jug on the table, before placing his pack on the chair Chromie had vacated. Then he walked around the table, until he was standing next to Alexstrasza. She had held his gaze as he approached, and now he just stood there, drinking in the sight of her. Her eyes darted to his lips, only for an instant - but it was enough.

Stepping closer, the two dragons reached out to each other. Their eyes closed, and their lips met, and their wait - just like that - had ended. For Hanzo, it had been close to six months since last he had seen her. For Alexstrasza, it had been less than six hours.

For both, it had been too long.

One kiss became several, and Hanzo held her closer still. An arm slid around her waist, underneath the thick red cloak she still wore. Her palm found its way to his cheek, highlighting the urgency they both seemed to feel. It was a kiss they would remember long after their reunion.

Presently, Hanzo pulled back slightly. Alexstrasza’s eyes opened, and she met his gaze once more.

“Tell me,” He said. “Who, exactly, is Tariolstrasz?”

Alexstrasza laughed at that. “He is the steward of the temple. I don’t know how she did it, but somehow Chromie convinced him to leave for a few hours.”

Hanzo nodded, thoughtfully. “It sounds like we owe her a favor, then.”

Alexstrasza grinned. “Several.” And then they stopped talking for a time.
Chapter End Notes

For those playing along at home, Chromie and Alexstrasza's "Was it worth it" dialogue was the second major scene I wrote for this work. It's spent months tucked into the bottom of my outline, and got rewritten a bit before arriving here, but for all that it's the major story beat I wanted to hit. Hanzo comes prepared for a long stay, it seems. Alex got a tour of Earth, perhaps she will have a chance to return the favor? This is the final chapter of the story, but expect an epilogue to settle dangling threads (and, perhaps, dangle some new ones).

By far, this is the most complex piece of writing I've ever put together, professionally or personally. It's the longest work I've written, by word count or chapter count, and somehow matches up to the outline I made so many weeks ago, with only minor variations. I've enjoyed stretching out, seeing what lies beyond the short form - and am immensely proud of the result.

This has been quite a journey. Thank you all for taking it with me.

As always, feedback is welcome.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Orcish Courier Dimm Warcleaver's travels through Azeroth go unnoticed. Hanzo's, meanwhile, do not.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He had expected to find the war council in session. But his journey had been long, and he had chosen the path that avoided detection by the many alliance forces between here and there. Better to arrive unseen, than to get captured quickly.

The guard let him into the war room anyway, despite the late hour. Once the door closed behind him, the reason became clear.

“High Chieftain,” he began.

Baine Bloodhoof stood at the head of the table, looking over a map of Azeroth. He had not looked up as the courier entered. “Come in, boy.”

The room was dominated by a large hearth, and the fire blazing within. Several lamps hung from the ceiling, giving just enough light for Orcish eyes - and Tauren, it seemed.

“So, one of our spies finally came up with something interesting, did they?” The High Chieftain sounded unconvinced. “The message did not say what, however. I imagine that’s why you’re here.” Bloodhoof rolled the map and secured it, before walking to a cabinet along the wall. “What is your name, lad?”

The courier cleared his throat, hoping that his nervousness did not come out in his voice. “I am Dimm Warcleaver, Chieftain.” He watched as the chieftain opened the cabinet, revealing shelves of neatly stacked maps. War plans, he realized.

Bloodhoof returned the map to its place, before closing and locking the cabinet. Turning back to the table, he seemed to be giving Dimm a closer look. “Was your father Thran Warcleaver, by chance?”

“High Chieftain,” he began.

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“He knows who I am? “I have that honor, Chieftain.”

Nodding, the chieftain walked back to the center of the room, standing once more next to the council table. “A fine warrior, your father. I would say that you have a lot to live up to, but the warchief already started you on that path by giving you this mission.”

Dimm said nothing, but his grin revealed the pride he felt. Nothing like impressing the warchief.

“So,” he continued, indicating the empty table. “What do you bring us this day?”

Dimm set his pack down on the nearest chair, before removing a long, leather-wrapped bundle.

“These were retrieved from one of the smiths in Ironforge,” he began, placing the bundle gently on
the table. Unrolling the leather, Dimm revealed two arrows.

The Chieftain leaned closer, and saw that the shafts were of different materials. Both had matching heads, however - bright metal polished to a mirror shine. The fletchings and notch at the other end seemed standard - well crafted, likely, but otherwise the like of any other arrow he had seen before.

“One of the arrows needed to be reshafted.” Continued Dimm. “When the smith examined the head, he discovered this.” Reaching down, he gently grasped one of the arrowheads, Ever so slightly, he pulled the tip of the arrow apart, revealing that the arrowhead was not one but three piercing surfaces.

“The arrow splits in flight, striking multiple targets. It relies on the shaft, but the old dwarf hadn’t figured it out just yet. Something about the material makes it work.” Dimm indicated the other arrow, with the metal shaft.

“What sort of enchantment is at work, here?” Bloodhoof asked. No one would use arrows of this sort, with materials this rare, without magical enhancement of some sort. But then he saw Dimm shaking his head, and looked up.

“High Chieftain, I had these arrows examined by two of our shamen and one rogue alliance mage. None could detect the faintest hint of magic, in any form.”

The chieftain looked back at the arrows. “So there is a new player on the board, then?”

“There is. These came from a warrior from the east, or so the smith was told. He has been seen in several cities over the past month, always in the company of the lady Alexstrasza.”

Baine Bloodhoof looked up at Dimm. “And does this warrior have a name?”

Before Dimm could answer, a chill caught his breath. Beside him, a hand reached forward and lifted the intact arrow. He had heard no door open, detected no footsteps - but the heavy armguard covering pale, purple skin left no doubt as to the identity of the newcomer.

“His name,” said Sylvanas Windrunner, Warchief of the Horde, “is Hanzo Shimada.”

Chapter End Notes

For Alexstrasza and Hanzo, I found it best to leave them as they were, getting reacquainted high atop Wyrmrest. But certainly, a warrior of Hanzo's caliber would not go unnoticed in his travels. It remains to be seen what he and Alexstrasza will find as she shares her world.

But that, as they say, is another story.

Thank you again, one and all, for taking this journey with me. Feedback, as always, is welcome.

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