Sorrow's Spectrum

by Talonticus

Summary

It has been several years since the Scourge invasion of Quel'Thalas and the destruction of the Sunwell. Despite its resurrection after the defeat of the treacherous former Prince, there is still one element that remains of the scar in the collective mind of the sin'dorei. Two women, whose lives were broken apart and separated due to those events, are making their own journeys to the cold north. One hopes for answers to questions she doesn't know how to ask, and another joins her friends as they wish to help prevent disaster. The sorrow of Northrend awaits.

Notes

**Main characters:** Rivaryn Silvershroud (Female Blood Elf Hunter OC), Thariss Dusksong (Female Night Elf Warrior OC), Raxeen (Trans-Female Draenei Paladin OC), Nadelgosa (Female Blue Drake OC), Ashindra Revenor (Female Blood Elf Paladin OC), Melia Haven (Female Human Priest OC)

**Secondary characters:** Kassari Silvershroud (Female Blood Elf Mage OC), Khroga Steelfang (Female Orc Shaman OC), Trienza Shadespire (Female High Elf Death Knight OC)

**Minor characters:** Javynna Dusksong (Trans-Female Night Elf Priest OC), Razz (Male
Raptor companion), Germark Steelfang (Male Orc Death Knight OC), Deradgos (Male Blue Dragon OC), Aruunel (Female Draenei Shaman OC), Stellagosa, Senegos

Main relationships: Rivaryn/Thariss, Raxeen/Nadelgosa, Ashindra/Melia

Minor relationships: Kassari/Khroga

Hello there, I'm Claire Talon or Talonticus. This is, as you probably noticed from the name of the series, the continuation of the story about my WoW characters and their group of mercenaries. This one goes to Northrend.

For those who don't know, this is sort of a re-release of this fic, with a different setup and structure. I wasn't entirely satisfied with the pacing and direction of the last one and therefore decided to rethink it. Took me eleven chapters to realize, but better late than never, I guess.

I sort of just sat down and wondered what it was I really wanted to focus on and realized that, well, this story is basically about a few specific characters...and most of them are elves. This series has mainly been about about Rivaryn and Thariss, plus their families and close friends. Any new character I add will have to be one with an already pretty extended backstory.

Raxeen is one that I had made a lot of plans for beforehand, but that wasn't the case for some of the other new characters, so I scrapped some of them.

Well...not scrapped, but postponed for now, to see what else I can do with them.

I figured that I should instead try to focus on what I left open in the last story - and partially in Felstruck eclipse a while back - and therefore, it's probably time to give Ashindra some of the spotlight too.

So yeah, this new version of Sorrow's Spectrum has two separate paths, I guess - one is about Riv, Thariss and Rax as they travel to Northrend to help Nadelgosa, and the other is about Ash and...well, a new character, but one that will become important to her. Their section will partially be about Ash trying to find a new path in life, how they bond and fight the Scourge together. You'll see more later.

This fic will alternate between these two groups, one chapter at a time (sort of). We start with the trio in the first chapter, then Ash in the second, trio in the third chapter etc.

Due to the nature of this story, they will obviously have the chance to meet up later on too.

Profiles and screenshots for both main and secondary characters can be found on my blog. I'll update it once more characters appear.

Anyway, hope you enjoy it.
In the moon's embrace

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The White Lady, the Mother, Elune, Mu’sha – the largest moon above Azeroth has many names, different identities that people know it by. In most places, it is cherished as an entity of warmth, safety and support, as it prevents the denizens beneath its light from feeling abandoned and alone. Whether your vision in the darkness is useful or not, once the white moon has risen, you are not left in obscurity, nor to fear the shadows that accompanies it. Perhaps not a universal truth, but comforting nonetheless.

Rivaryn has almost gotten used to staying up all night long whenever she comes to Kalimdor with her girlfriend. She cannot deny the truth that it’s rather strange to not be exposed to the brilliant light of the sun, a concept which her own people find so endearing, but she respects the strength that the moon offers as well.

The appeal of Elune is quite fierce to her, as she acknowledges what this goddess does for her girlfriend’s people. It does also make her wonder if the same embrace would ever be offered to her. Should she wish to, could she be accepted into Elune’s arms as well or be rejected due to her origin?

While she would like to focus on these thoughts and ponder what choices are available to her, there are other aspects in her surroundings, more enticing events transpiring nearby.

On a small field not too far from the house within Auberdine that belongs to her girlfriend’s parents, enclosed by a small fence, stands two people. If one were to make a guess based on the stances and the hurried movement, it would be possible to assume that they’re testing each other out.

Compared to the blood elf, the tall and muscular duo – a draenei and a night elf - is usually wearing heavier armor in most scenarios whenever they’re travelling. This is not the case tonight, as they are both dressed in nothing more than some short-sleeved shirts and pants, without shoes. Well, not like Raxeen could use the latter anyhow. Hooves aren’t compatible.

In Thariss’ hands, it’s possible to see a sturdy wooden shield and a pretty average sword of the same material. Rax’s weapon is also made of wood, but she wields a staff instead. The paladin had hoped for a hammer of some kind, to match what she uses in the field, but that doesn’t seem to be an option at this time. This is a decent replacement, though.

For now, Thariss tries to keep her eyes sharp and her attention firmly trained on Rax’s movements. The draenei herself is watching Thariss’ stance, constantly hoping to find weak spots that she can exploit.

After a few hesitant seconds, the bustling nose of combat starts again, as Rax charges ahead, trying to go for an overhead strike. Just as Thariss’ raises her shield to counter it, Rax changes her mind halfway through the action – a feint. Instead, she quickly turns it sideways and attempts to swing again.

It appears that Rax must try a little bit harder, as the trick doesn’t work. Thariss still manages to lower her shield in time to block the first hit and then evades the second, shortly before she tries to counter. With the paladin’s weapon lowered, Thariss tries to lash out with her blade, hoping to score a quick point before Rax has a chance to close it, but it’s not enough. The staff deflects it at the last second, and they both take a step back.

Switching the position of her grip, Rax pulls out the staff as far as she can get and prepares for a
wide sweeping attack. This move isn’t particularly quick, unfortunately, and with Thariss pretty adequate reflexes, she can jump over it, giving her a slight advantage. She lowers her defenses temporarily and runs towards the draenei, while attempting to slash at her. Rax’s parrying opportunities are pretty limited at this time, so all she can do is jump away, something she forces herself to perform.

It doesn’t stop there, as Thariss got a taste of blood – so to speak – and she drives her offensive further, hoping to push the draenei into making a mistake. Unfortunately, it doesn’t last long enough to be useful. Rax has too much combat experience to be suppressed this way. During one of Thariss’ wild swings, she manages to deflect the sword with her staff, before angling her body to elbow the night elf in her abdomen, knocking her backwards. She had clearly not expected this.

What surprises the kaldorei even more is when Rax, instead of attacking, actually attempts to stomp at Thariss’ exposed feet.

“Hey!”, she yells once she manages to evade it. “No stomping, dammit!”

With the elf being too focused on the hooves now, Rax smirks and notes how she has finally received a good opportunity to make a smart move.

Before Thariss even has a chance to react, she feels how the sword is knocked out of her hand. She widens her eyes as she realizes that she got disarmed and now only has one chance of staying in this fight. She can’t allow herself to lose, can she?

Continuing without a sword, Thariss tries her best to block the barrage of strikes delivered from Rax, doing a fairly good job at stopping most of what comes at her, but it’s not enough. Her right side is too open, and she can do little else with it other than keeping it hidden. It won’t last forever. Eventually, without Thariss having noticed, the paladin has forced her closer to the house wall, knowing she will soon be cornered. This is where the match will end.

At just the right moment, when Thariss is surprised as she bumps into the wall, Rax delivers a quick hit with the butt of her staff into the warrior’s abdomen to make her buckle and then directs it just beneath her neck, holding it in that position. To emphasize her victory, she pushes herself very close too, their bodies being connected and their similarly colored eyes staring into one another. With both of them breathing rather heavily, it’s almost annoying to Thariss how smug her friend looks.

“I suggest you give up, ex-Sentinel.”

Despite her physical fatigue, Thariss can’t help but smirk at the same time. Rax does have her, but it’s not like the staff is a deadly weapon. She could easily just knock her opponent back with the shield and continue. Might not be fair, though.

“You know that thing isn’t sharp, right?”

Rax tilts her head amusedly and leans even closer, their faces almost touching.

“It does not need to be for me to plant you face-first to the ground.”

“Pff, like you could ever do that.”

“Well…”, Rax says, before she makes the night elf feel something further down. A hard object strokes against the bottom of her legs. “Your soft sensitive feet are noticeably exposed. Would be a shame if I happened to trample them.”

Thariss narrows her eyes, the large ears slumping somewhat, not seeming so defiant anymore.
“…you wouldn’t dare.”

“Then perhaps you should surrender.”

Sitting in the distance, just outside the fence, Riv watches them. Seeing her two friends like this is undeniably rather exciting for her. They are two very physically fit and capable women, with their sweaty bodies in such intimate positions…

It’s hard to ignore how appealing that thought is. Thariss may have all her love, there is no question about that, but she won’t pretend like she doesn’t find Rax attractive too. Even more so when the paladin happens to show her prowess.

Eventually, Thariss rolls her eyes and sighs.

“Alright, alright. Fine.”

“Fine what?”, Rax asks expectantly.

“I give up.”

“No. That is not what you are supposed to say.”

Thariss arches her brow skeptically.

“What do you want me to say then?”

“Come now, do not be foolish. ‘Yield’. That is what it should be. You yield.”

Thariss slowly shakes her head.

“You’re really stupid, you know that, right?”

“Say it, Thariss. Or I will have to punish you. The fight will not be over until you do, and I have the advantage.”

Even if she probably doesn’t want to be in this position, for whatever reason, Thariss starts to look somewhat mischievous anyhow.

“Alright, if you insist. I y…earn to have a rematch, so that I can make you say stupid crap too.”

Rax furrows her brow as she stares right into Thariss’ eyes, but her smirk lingers. Instead of using her staff to punish the ‘insolent’ kaldorei, she drops her hands down to the sides and before Thariss can properly defend herself, Rax begins to tickle her. A whole barrage of it as well.

It seems she knows exactly what areas to target, as the warrior erupts in laughter almost immediately, squirming and hoping to get out of this treatment, but it’s no use. She drops her shield while this happens and eventually, she uses whatever strength she has left to push the draenei away.

“It seems there are still a few techniques I might need to teach you, dear Dusksong.”

“You’re an asshole, Rax!”, Thariss says, between what remains of the laughter. Her stomach sort of hurts now, but not from any injuries.

The paladin wiggles her eyebrows.

“Maybe, but a crafty one.”

Outside the fence, both of them suddenly hear a similar, albeit softer sound. It’s Riv, who giggles and shakes her head.

“You know what I think? You’re both stupid.”
Thariss glances in that direction, and while Rax gathers the items up, to put them back on their racks, the warrior moves towards her girlfriend. Along the way, Thariss swirls her head around to loosen up her moist white hair, which happens to be a rather pleasing sight for Riv. This is accompanied by the appearance of her strong and sweaty pale blue body glistening beneath the light of the moon.

Thariss obviously notices the staring and she smirks, likely having had this as part of her plan.

“Enjoying the show, babe?”

“Always. Though, I am a bit disappointed that you lost. Again.”

“Tsk. Are you going to be a little shit to me now too?”

Riv tries to hide her rather satisfied smile, by diverting her face, and shrugs.

“I’m just saying that you probably need to improve on certain aspects of your abilities.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you. I mean, you’re useless with a blade!”

“Are you sure? Who knows? Maybe even I could beat you now.”

Thariss snorts and once she’s close enough, she leans down to wrap her arms around the sin’dorei’s waist and lifts her off the seat. This makes Riv gasp in mild surprise at how easily it’s done, like she weighs practically nothing, but it is interrupted shortly after by giggles instead, as Thariss wrestles her to the grass.

She is not done there either, as she imitates Rax’s last action, by tickling Riv all over. When Riv tries to struggle, Thariss grabs her wrists and holds both down to the ground above her head, using only one hand.

“Hey, not fair!”, Riv exclaims in between the laughter. “You’re stronger than me!”

That makes the kaldorei look thoroughly pleased.

“What was that? Thought you said you could handle me.”

“Not in a wrestling match!”

“Maybe you shouldn’t boast so much then, shorty.”

Thariss obviously appears to enjoy this moment, to make her beloved have a bit of fun, but the sensation is soon replaced by a need for intimacy. She leans down and once the tickling stops, she runs her mouth over Riv’s neck, occasionally using her teeth and fangs to nibble playfully. The tone of the sin’dorei’s sounds alter from joyful into somewhat sensual instead, the laughing replaced with gasps.

“…that changed quickly”, Riv whispers.

“Well, maybe you’re useful for more things than physical combat. There are other ways we could ‘exercise’ together”, she says quietly, with an added wink at the end.

“Naughty.”

Not that Riv tries to oppose this in any way. As soon as Thariss has let go of the wrists and positions herself on top of her girlfriend, the hunter’s arms wrap around the back of Thariss’ neck, trying to use her legs to encircle the sturdy waist too. Unless they stop it soon, things might get rather steamy.

Fortunately, they do not get far enough into their fun, before the kaldorei senses heavy footsteps on
the ground. She almost assumes it’s Rax for a moment, until a large snout comes close to her head and sniffs her.

Thariss blinks and turns her head to see what’s going on. It doesn’t take long until she chuckles at the sight of the big red-scaled creature. It’s Razz and he seems rather skeptical.
“Oh, hey there, big guy. We were just messing around.”

Riv snickers, before she reaches up with one of her hands.
“It’s fine, Razz. I’m okay, darling.”

The raptor lies down on the ground next to them and affectionately nuzzles against her face. She closes her eyes, caressing the scales around his large head, obviously enjoying his company too. In the meantime, Thariss smirks at them and rolls her eyes.
“Your eternal protector, huh?”

“And an adorable one at that.”
The raptor emits a satisfied noise in response.

While they have their little enjoyable and sweet moment, it seems this won’t extend any further either. The door to the house opens up, and they spot how Thariss’ mother, Javynna, walks out to look around. When she notices where they are, she gestures with her hand.
“Thariss? Could you and the others come inside? We have something to talk about.”

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, next week there’ll be a chapter with Ashindra.
Stranger at home

Chapter Notes

So, Ashindra. Let's start her part of this story, I suppose. If it's not obvious already, I believe that this section - especially this chapter - might be somewhat difficult to understand if you haven’t read "The Promised Land" or "Felstruck eclipse". This first part contains some flashbacks from those stories.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“But it seems you have fallen far lower than I could ever have estimated. Was becoming a monster always part of your plan?”

“I’m not a demon! I am in charge of my own mind and I have free will. I’m not some slave to the Legion.”

The beautifully paved streets of Silvermoon City. The sky is blue and only somewhat covered with white clouds. There are sounds from local birds in the air, spreading their song happily to the people inside, accompanied by a most pleasant breeze. The large yellow-leafed trees rustle gently at her approach, as if greeting her return. All around her, she can see gold, scarlet, white and green, familiar colors from her past. And yet, why does she feel like she doesn’t belong?

In the center of a group of sin’dorei soldiers walks a particular individual, with fair skin. Long red hair flows freely behind her, quite far past her shoulders, and her bright green eyes study her surroundings with uncertainty. Her toned body is protected within something heavy and sturdy – grey-colored plate armor, with golden lines and blue cloth. The most impressive section is probably the golden shoulderpads, glowing with magic and life. A large black spiked shield is strapped to her back and a sharp longsword hangs at her belt. Along with many others, she receives greetings and cheers from the people around her, but she ignores them, as her mind is far away from the present.

After months of absence, journeying into the depths of the broken world of Outland, seeing so many different lands that she never thought she’d get to experience, Ashindra Revenor is finally back home where she belongs. To see mainland Quel’thalas, and Silvermoon especially, after all this time is…strange, in some ways. She can’t deny that there are some good feelings involved, much thanks to the renewal of the Sunwell, but also discomfort.

Something is wrong. She can’t quite explain how or why, can’t even pinpoint what it is, and yet it’s definitely there in the back of her mind. She could blame this sensation on the fact that the Sunwell is not the same anymore, or that she had to fight demons not just on Outland, but very close to her capital and home. None of that would be true, though, and while she’s usually fine with lying to others, doing so to herself would just be ridiculous. She knows better.

“Ash, please…don’t do this. I don’t want to fight you, but I can’t turn myself in.”

“Then you leave me no choice.”
When was the last time she came to the city? The last time she had to walk through the gates instead of simply roaming the streets? What was the final thing she did before she left the capital with the rest of the soldiers and so many others? It’s hard to remember anymore, to acknowledge a time before everything changed and her heart was dashed against a new truth. She remembers having joined a bunch of other sin’dorei troops as they departed for the enemy’s strongholds, hearts filled with fury and righteousness. She was ready to fight not just for her people, but to show the Horde what they were made of. Where did all that go?

“I’m not a monster! I’m still your sister, Ash! I always will be, and you have to listen to me when I say that I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you!”

The first obstacle of her journey appeared when she tried to pursue the goal for the trip – her hunt for her own twin sister, Vestarial.

Ash won’t dismiss the fact that it was hard to track her younger sibling, to know where she must go. That skill was never her foremost one anyhow, as she always relied on Rivaryn to perform such things. On top of that, demon hunters also proved to be quite…elusive.

Eventually, she did catch up to Vesta’s position, but her sister slipped right out of her grasp. Ash was and still is torn about the conclusion for this encounter.

One major part of her was disappointed, angry that her deathblow was not enough. She was so close to finally be free of that accursed presence, the shame to her family’s name and she blew it all. She would be lying if she said that she hadn’t considered chasing after Vesta and her companions, but it would’ve been futile, as they were way too fast.

However, can she really ignore the other notion? There was this very small piece within her heart, a voice that hoped to get louder, but didn’t have enough power behind it. This aspect was…relieved that she had failed.

Back then, and for months after the incident, she refused to acknowledge this thought. How could she? That would mean to give up, to surrender the entire chase and accept her sister as an abomination. No, that couldn’t happen, not at the time. But now…

“There is only one way I can deal with her and I shall. If she must die in there with all those other demons, then it shall by MY hand.”

As the hunt for the twisted hunter continued, she ran into the second and most gruesome obstacle. Who can forget the encounter at the foot of the Black Temple? Even if she had seen the name on the mercenary rosters, she could scarcely have believed it.

Rivaryn Silvershroud. One of the loveliest, kindest, smartest, and most loyal women she has ever known; a soul that she used to love with all her heart. That she would see Riv again, but free of the pain and misery which the former ranger had descended into, was surprising, but not disappointing…at first.

Even now, after having encountered the hunter at two separate occasions, she still doesn’t know what to make of it. How should she interpret her own feelings about this whole matter? The initial meeting was tense, but not enough to rattle her. The longer time spent in the same location, though, the worse her reluctance grew to be within the vicinity of her lost beloved. Should she regret all the things she said?

When more revelations arrived, Ash began to recognize the cracks in her heart.

"You abandoned Quel’thalas and our people in our most dire of times. You abandoned me. If you want to pretend that everything is better now, you can be delusional on your own. I do much better without you.”
Should she be jealous of Riv for having found someone new to mend her broken soul, for having endured her own mental agony?
Should she be jealous of Thariss for gaining the love of the woman who Ash cherished for so many decades, the one person that she has ever felt truly connected to? If she should be honest, she feels as if both of these conclusions are justified and yet she doesn’t wish to admit either publicly.

Riv clearly seemed like she knew what she was doing, that having torn her spirit from the shackles of duty was a relief. Should Ash envy that freedom?
Her old girlfriend managed to change herself without tearing apart what she once was, preserving the core of her own presence. Should Ash be enraged for having failed to do the same thing and inadvertently caused the death of her old self?

“My point is that this doesn’t have to be your whole purpose, Ash. There are other paths in life, other ways to grow."

“What happened to the Ash I once knew?! Where is the priestess who believed that the Light is everywhere, and everyone deserves a second chance?!”

“She died in the Scourge, Riv. Just like everything else!”

No, there’s obviously more to it than that. Riv confronted Ash in a way that she hadn’t expected, sent shockwaves through her that completely shattered certain illusions.
Before she met Riv again, Ash was sure of herself, that she knew exactly what she must do to become whole once more. The only way to reach those lost emotions was not to continue trying, but to tear off a part of herself. There was seemingly no other solution.

Her first attempt, out in the wilderness of Zangarmarsh, obviously failed. Despite whatever sensations that clash might have given her, she wasn’t entirely surprised either, and she was ready to continue. She simply had to persist and strengthen her resolve in whatever way possible. It would achieve success eventually. That is why she was at the temple, why she had to break inside those damn gates.
But then Riv came with an earth-shattering realization, bringing the ferocity of truth, one she really didn’t want to accept. Despite how some small parts of her preferred to embrace the hunter again, she believed it was impossible for Riv to even budge her. It just wouldn’t happen.

"I killed my parents, Ash. Do you understand me now? I. Fucking. Killed them."

“If there is one thing I regret in this life, it’s that I didn’t give them a second chance. To let them redeem themselves."

After the conversation was done and her mind had broken into too many pieces, she saw no other alternative – she had to leave. Immediately, she asked for a transfer to another area, another front. She didn’t even care where it was, as long as she didn’t have to fight opponents that were so… harrowing, that began to haunt her dreams. All her resolve had dispersed in a night and she couldn’t stay. She needed to think, to ponder who she was, what she wanted and where she had to go.

Eventually, she was called back to Quel’thalas, thankfully. Sure, it was shocking to hear that the Sunwell was apparently being restored and even more alarming that demons were assaulting it with a new invasion, but at least it would give her a chance to protect the cleansing source that her people thought they had lost.
Ash felt such joy at the possibility of not having to be distracted by hesitation anymore, that she didn’t linger for even a moment when they told her to go. She was very relieved that the fight succeeded without too much issue, but it has also changed everything in the process of renewal.
Once the Sunwell’s power spread out across Quel’thalas again and she was allowed to drink from its light, it began. For some reason, she…doesn’t feel like herself anymore. Or rather, a section of her old self had rematerialized in her mind and was forced to experience what she had become, which made her realize just how much of her being she had destroyed. What has she sacrificed in order to be the protector that her people needs?

As she wanders upon the streets of Silvermoon now, she feels distant, as if she’s not really there, only watching pictures. She looks at the cheering people, the soldiers, the waving Silvermoon banners and senses nothing. She even gazes down at herself and the gear she wears, surveying the weapons and the tabard of the Blood Knights that she chose to put on specifically for this occasion when it was asked of her. All of it somehow feels…foreign.

This is not the Ashindra she knew in the past.
This is not the Ashindra who embraced the Light and joined the Church.
This is not the Ashindra who Rivaryn loved so dearly for so many decades, and almost married her.
This is not the Ashindra who constantly bickered with her little sister and yet always made sure to tell Vesta that she cherished their connection.
This is not the Ashindra who healed the wounds that bled from Quel’thalas and the quel’dorei people.

Who is Ashindra Revenor? Can she ever be mended, be returned to the living realm of this world or has she been lost in the depths of the Twisting Nether, to never be seen again?
As her gaze turns to the holdings of her Order in the distance, she has to swallow. Her chest feels unnervingly hollow at the sight.

Chapter End Notes

My plan wasn’t originally to have Ash as one of the main characters here, so it's pretty fun to give her the opportunity for some introspection.
Wait for dusk

The Dusksong house in Auberdine. It’s a location they’ve been staying at for a little while now, the same home that Thariss once grew up in and where she will always have a place to live. It will likely remain this way for the foreseeable future, unless something disastrous occurs. It’s not the first time this group has been here, and it probably won’t be the last. Rivaryn always feels surprisingly relieved during every visit. The whole building gives her a very cozy feeling, as if it instinctively invites her and she gains the impression that she belongs here.

In some ways, she could compare it to the old Silvershroud house, but that wouldn’t be particularly fair. Her family’s home could never match how this house has been created, because her parents were all about being orderly and practical. They did have decorations, sure, but it always felt fairly rigid or even sterile to her.

The Dusksongs seem to fit in better with the general artistic design of their city and have taken their surroundings into account. Or maybe she’s just being biased. She won’t deny that some of these opinions may have been affected by how often she argued with her parents.

This is why Riv can understand why Thariss is so attached to this place, why she has so many good childhood memories left, despite a certain tension between her and Veldarya, her other mother. It must have been a very fun experience, especially when she’s also got such a healthy relationship with her siblings.

Once Riv, Thariss and Raxeen enters the living room, the enjoyable sensations increase even further, as they smell something tasty in the air.

“Mmm”, Thariss emits, obviously pleased. “Damn, I’m hungry now. What are we having, mom?”

Javynna doesn’t smile or even look at her daughter at this time. For some reason, she seems kinda distracted, but answers regardless.

“Rainbow albacore stew with some moonglitter potatoes”, she says, her voice somewhat distant.

This hesitant notion makes all three look at her, observe her with interest.

Riv doesn’t exactly mention it very often, due to how embarrassing it would be, but Javynna is a very beautiful woman. Pale blue skin like her younger daughter, long teal hair held up in braids on her back, green thin markings over her eyes and a slim soft build. She does give off an aura of wisdom and kindness, but Riv still finds it kinda weird to consider that her age ranges over ten millennia. That just seems…excessive, and yet it’s the truth.

More than anything, the hunter has to admit that she always feels safe with Javy, like she can trust the priestess completely. Sometimes, Riv just wants to hug her, let Javy embrace and care for her. She emanates the sensation of a mother like no other person Riv has ever met. It does make her feel kinda stupid at times. Unfortunately, right now, the older kaldorei mostly seems concerned instead and that affects the younger women too.

“Sounds good”, Thariss admits.

“Sadly, that will have to wait.”

Thariss glances around the room, and her ears twitch slightly, listening for any other sound in the house, but hears nothing.

“Where’s Shae?”

It is not strange for Thariss to ask about Shaerai, her older sister, even if she has her own house. She sometimes joins them for dinner, together with her husband, when her work has been overly
cumbersome. Javy’s food has always been a source of comfort for the Dusksongs. “I’m sorry, honey, she’s not in Auberdine right now. She had to check on her dispatched soldiers.”

Thariss refocuses her gaze on her mother, raising an eyebrow in doubt. “Dispatched? To where?”

“Along the northern and northwestern coast.”

The warrior folds her strong arms and glances at her companions. They merely shrug in return. “Uh, why?”

Javy exhales briefly and gestures at the comfortable sofas and armchairs nearby. “If you will sit down and listen, I will tell you everything, sweetie.”

Her words are fairly solemn and troubled. That makes the entire trio quite worried and they therefore decide to do as she says without complaint. Javy being serious is not a completely unusual occurrence, but she tends to still show a bit of optimism during those moments. If she is actually concerned to this degree, that is a time when one must listen.

Riv chooses to sit down close to her girlfriend, leaning against Thariss’ side and entwines the fingers of their closest hands. Rax is seated on the other side of the kaldorei, her legs folded and hands in her lap.

“Go ahead, miss Dusksong”, the draenei tells her.

Javy gets seated in an armchair and takes a moment to think, possibly pondering what information is on her mind. “I recently received a missive directly from High Priestess Whisperwind, in Darnassus.”

Thariss widens her eyes. “Lady Tyrande?”

Indeed.”

Riv tilts her head curiously. “Hmm. Isn’t she your leader or something like that?”

“She could be defined that way, yes. She speaks for Elune. As my oldest daughter is the Battlemaster of the Darkshore Sentinels and I am the senior priestess in this region, she had to inform both of us of recent developments. Apparently, there has been some chaos erupting inside of Stormwind. There was an attack.”

That obviously alarms them immediately and they widen their eyes. “Attack?”, Riv asks. “Was it…the Horde?”

Javy shakes her head quickly. “No, thankfully not. However, the news is still not particularly encouraging. The attack was conducted by forces of undead.”

If they had been shocked before, that is nothing compared to how Riv feels while hearing those words. Instinctively, she clenches Thariss hand and her ears shiver somewhat. “Wait…are you speaking of the Scourge?”

The priestess views her daughter’s girlfriend and nods gravely. “That seems to be the name they use for themselves, yes. The undead legions swept in through waves over the city, weeks ago, but we never got word of it at
While tension increases through Riv’s body, Rax folds her arms and furrows her brow in thought. “How is that possible? Stormwind has a lot of mages, does it not? An entire district in the city is dedicated to magical studies, if my memory serves me correctly.”

“I believe so, but they have had some problems. Apparently, there are currently some disruptions in the magical leyline network all over Azeroth, which have yet to be explained. This has prevented quick magical communication and teleportation has not been reliable. Stormwind could do nothing to tell the world for quite some time, as the Scourge attempted to kill every messenger bird they sent out. Eventually, one did manage to escape, however, and it was this one that carried news to us of what has happened, and the dangers involved.”

Due to what she’s feeling, Thariss obviously turns her head to view her girlfriend. She is not surprised to witness the unnerving reaction, how Riv does not look happy at all. The Scourge invasion is still one of the most traumatic experiences of the hunter’s past, one that occasionally comes back to haunt her. Being away from undead and Quel’thalas for quite some time has obviously helped her cope with these horrors, and the return of the Sunwell has been another positive element. The idea of facing such creatures again must be horrible, though, even if it was inevitable. The Scourge was never going to wait around forever.

“Did Stormwind have any orders or did they send out a call for help?”, Thariss asks.

Her mother shrugs in return. “I don’t know. All that lady Tyrande told us in the letters was that we should remain vigilant for now. If there are further developments, I’m sure she will let us know.”

Rax still seems both perplexed and bothered by a specific element of what they’re being told, which is why she runs a hand over her chin in thought. “This is certainly quite unsettling, but I am most troubled by the idea that your leylines are somehow disrupted. I am not a mage myself, so my knowledge is definitely limited, but is that even possible? Can the arcane across a world really be damaged to such an extent? Who or what is capable of doing so?”

If she had hoped to gain a helpful response from Javy, she is disappointed, as the priestess merely shakes her head. “I am sorry, Raxeex, I can’t really give you much. If I should be honest, I know about as little of the arcane as you do. I haven’t read or thought much of such things since my days in Suramar.”

“Well, you are a priestess, so perhaps that is not surprising, but why have the rest of your people not noticed?”

“Not a strange prospect either. We kaldorei are fairly uncomfortable with magic of that sort, after the disaster with the Well of Eternity, and therefore try to interact with it as little as possible in our lands.”

Rax nods slowly, not really being one to judge. “Fair enough. But have there not been portals established in your capital city?”

“Yes, of course, but Teldrassil is several miles away from Auberdine. We can see it, but not feel the magic from this distance. However, I am certain that our gnomish, human and quel’dorei mage allies will attempt to
investigate this mystery somehow. From what I understand, this is more their field of expertise.”

Hoping to drag herself out of the fear, Riv attempts to enter the conversation again.
“I wonder if my sister might not try to do the same. Kassari is a member of the Silvermoon Magisters, our mage Order. But, well, it’s not like I’ll be able to send a letter that will reach her any time soon…”

Shifting the location of her arm, Thariss wraps it around Riv’s shoulders instead.
“Hey, no need to be worried, babe. I’m sure Kass will be okay. She’s smart and resourceful - she’ll know what to do.”

Riv sighs, shuts her eyes and leans her head against Thariss’ chest.
“I hope that’s true. After having been absent from my sister for a few years, I never thought I’d get her back. Now that I do, I’d prefer not to lose her.”

Thariss tilts herself closer and kisses the top of Riv’s head.
“You won’t, I promise. Besides, she’s got Khroga with her too, right? She’ll watch over Kass, I’m sure.”

Despite the grim news that they received, Javy still manages to smile slightly as she watches her daughter and Riv cling to each other. The priestess herself has been very supportive of the relationship, wanting them both to be happy. It’s also why she’s always ready to let them stay here. However, at this time, it seems like they could use something to distract them.
“Oh, there was also another part of the letter that I didn’t really know what to make of. Something about a ‘return of Dalaran’. I’m not sure what that means.”

This makes Riv mildly interested, which Javy assumed would be the result.
“Wait, really? Uh, Dalaran was a mixed city-state of human, quel’dorei and gnomish origin, ruled by mages. Didn’t see it myself, but the city was apparently destroyed during the invasion by the Burning Legion and the Scourge, in the middle of their march to the north. It was seen as a threat too, which is reasonable, I guess.”
She lifts a hand to scratch her cheek.
“Hmm. If it has come back, that could be an interesting ally to have against the Scourge, since they’ll surely want to fight the undead.”

“True enough. However, the letter also mentions something about the mages being able to levitate the entire city. I’m…uncertain how that’s possible, but they said they would try to send it straight to Northrend.”

Hearing this, Rax chuckles amusedly.
“Azeroth seems to have everything – gigantic trees, wells full of power, a crashed Exodar, and now a floating city. I can see why living here is so exciting.”

It does indeed sound kinda funny, but Thariss is more interested in something else.
“Hey, what about Shae and the Sentinels? If they’re patrolling the coast, does that mean they’re expecting an attack?”

Javy places her hands over her lap, gently trying to correct her robes.
“I don’t know, dear. Shaerai was worried about potential assaults, yes, but she didn’t mention if she had any information that would indicate anything. It was why she dispatched troops, though, and why she’s inspecting them now.”

Thariss glances between her two friends.
“Well, maybe we should join them at some point, just to make sure they’re alright.”

Thankfully, she does get a nod from Riv.
“Yeah, I agree. If anything, maybe that’ll help me feel a little less anxious.”
Losing heart

Chapter Notes

I'm not sure how clear it is, but these two storylines don't operate on exactly the same timeline.
Oh, and there's a canon character in this chapter. She briefly appeared in "The Promised Land" too, but here I'm trying to explain her connection to Ashindra a bit better.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Calm quickly returned to Silvermoon after the celebrations were over, and many people were relieved to once more proceed with their lives in peace. There’s still much that needs to be done in order to restore Quel’thalas to its former glory, but at least now they might be given that chance. With the renewal of the Sunwell, a lot of elves feel as if nothing is impossible anymore, like the sin’dorei have truly reached a fresh start and the ability to mold a new identity.

One who has not been able to absorb such ideas for the time being is Ashindra. She wants to join her people in their hopes for the future, to consider what she can do to help out, but there are other concerns on her mind that keeps swallowing practically every waking moment. She needs to deal with them now, or she will never be free. She can’t be fully certain exactly what it is she wants, but she’s not going to discover it by staying silent.

This is why she headed towards the Blood Knight building in the city and searches for a particular individual. Several people greet her as she passes by, which she only briefly waves at, but offers no words. She’s too distant, focused on the task at hand.
Once Ash reaches one of the meeting halls in the facility, she spots the correct woman – Lady Liadrin, the Matriarch of their entire Order. The older woman is not wearing her armor today, but instead stands in a red and silver suit of some sort, with the Blood Knight tabard still adorning her chest. There are few days where she doesn’t have it on her, as she constantly wants to set an example for her people. She is not alone either, but surrounded by a half dozen officers.

It’s pretty clear that the Blood Knights are required as guards and soldiers during this time of recovery, even if many of them probably would want to rest, which is why Liadrin has a lot of administration to deal with. Ash understands and figures it’s best not to disturb her. She attempts to leave after watching the group from afar for a few seconds, wondering if she should try again later. If she thought that would be the end of it, though, she’s sorely mistaken.

“Did you need something, Revenor?”

Ash had faced away from the door and was about to walk in another direction, but now blinks and turns back towards the room. She hesitates as every pair of eyes are aimed at her and clears her throat.
“I…uh, yes. I wanted to talk to you, but…it can wait if you’re-“

“Nonsense”, Liadrin interrupts her. “We were just finishing up anyway.”
She turns her attention briefly to the other elves in the room.
“You know your assignments and tasks - get to it. Send me your reports when you’re done inspecting every section of your posts. Dismissed.”
She should’ve anticipated this result. Liadrin always makes time for her, unless what the leader is doing is absolutely critical. Obviously, that doesn’t make Ash feel any better, especially when some of those who leave the room side eye her. Guilt washes over her, as the reason she’s about to enter is probably not going to make her leader particularly happy. This won’t stop her, but it makes the situation worse.

Some may be confused why Liadrin would create time for someone like Ash, though, as she’s not from an important family, nor is she one of the top leaders of the organization, despite still being a mid-tier officer. She was one of the first Blood Knights, after all. Liadrin was the one who first taught Ash about being a paladin, and they have known each other to some extent since their joint time in the church of the Light. When Ash sought a new path after the Scourge invasion, Liadrin invited her and they began a sort of master-student relationship. In some ways, Ash could be seen as the protégé. This only increases the difficulty, though.

Ash closes the door behind her when she enters the room and then approaches the table in the center. She considers going straight for the topic at hand, but hesitates as she views Liadrin’s smiling face.

“How have you been doing since we returned?”

Liadrin takes a deep breath and while she had been standing, she now moves to grab a chair and sit down. She’s more comfortable now than in the previous company.

“Well, it hasn’t really been all too long yet, so it’s hard to claim that things have returned to normal. Whatever that means nowadays, anyway.”

She corrects some of her hair and folds her arms.

“Having the Sunwell back and with the success of our various missions on Outland, at least morale has risen quite substantially.”

Duty, loyalty and honor – not concepts Liadrin simply exemplifies, but embraces completely, sometimes to the extent where it gets worrying. In the past, Ash has tried to live up to it, but now she understands how dangerous it can get.

“And what about yourself, my lady? Are you doing alright?”

Liadrin blinks confusedly at first, before she offers another smile. Of course, Ash would care.

“Well, I believe certain rumors that claim I am overworked are exaggerated, but…not entirely incorrect, I suppose. I think some rest would probably do us all good.

And you, Revenor? Not feeling out of shape, I hope?”

It’s asked so casually, without comprehending how hard it actually hits Ash. She had hoped not to be confronted with this issue right away and Ash senses doubt slipping into her heart. She has to talk about it now, there’s no escape.

How the hell is she supposed to discuss this issue, though? There’s not just hesitation and confusion on her mind, but actual palpable fear. What if Liadrin gets pissed off, yells at Ash for failing not just their Order, but her specifically? She isn’t really the type to do such things, but she can certainly be fierce.

“I…have been thinking a lot”, the younger paladin finally admits, diverting her eyes to the table.

“How about yourself?”

“Erm, the Blood Knights and my position among them. And, you know, perhaps what I should be doing with it.”

These words are alarming to Liadrin and she knows it, but it’s not like she can lie, not right now. Her leader wants the truth and it has to be exposed.
The Matriarch is silent for several moments, until she untangles her arms, leans forward and rests them on the table.
“I think you will have to elaborate. Are you saying that you wish to leave us, Revenor?”

Ash furrows her brow and lifts one of her arm to scratch the other.
“I…I don’t know.” She interrupts herself by sighing. “It’s difficult for me to explain this properly. It’s really weird not to truly understand your own emotions.”

Liadrin’s eyes move searchingly as she scans Ash’s face, even if the younger Knight is not watching her yet.
“Does this have anything to do with the confrontation at the Black Temple? I heard of the outburst from that Farstrider. Or…is this about your encounter with Vestarial in the swamps?”

“Well, that’s…no, I don’t it would be fair to-“
She stops herself again and this time bites her lower lip. Can she really lie with enough conviction? She feels her own heart being squeezed with uncertainty.
“…actually, yes. I keep thinking about when I met Vesta, running the event over and over in my head. I wonder if I should’ve done some things differently.”

“Hmm. You didn’t seem particularly bothered afterwards, though.”
“I know, probably because I wasn’t being entirely truthful with you at the time.”
“What do you mean?”

Ash briefly glances towards Liadrin, noticing how her leader has both doubt and curiosity in her eyes. Will she still accept Ash after what she’s about to hear? Either way, Ash turns her gaze away once more.
“I…may have misjudged my sister somewhat and the idea of what I was trying to do. It kept weighing on me during the journey, but I was oblivious of the ramifications for quite some time.”

“Hold on. What are you saying? I asked you to capture her.”

Ash swallows once.
“I know, but I…I wasn’t being truthful about that either, my lady. Despite your orders, my goal all along was to…to kill her.”

She practically mutters the last part, but thankfully, sin’dorei hearing is quite sharp. Liadrin’s ears twitches and her eyes widen in surprise.
“What? But…she’s your sister, Ashindra. Your twin sister, if I’m not mistaken.”

Ash sighs, shuts her eyes and shakes her head. Her shoulders have slumped by now and even if the words aimed at her are not particularly accusatory, she still feels guiltier than before.
“I know, and for some reason, that affected me even further. At the time, I felt that Vesta’s transformation was somehow the problem. It was like a constant pain in my throat that I couldn’t get rid of. I became…blinded by this cause and therefore went full out when we confronted each other. I never just stopped and considered my actions. The outcome continues to haunt me and some nights, I can’t even sleep properly.”

She feels both relief and regret to reveal all of this now. She has wanted to say something, but not dared to. Now, there’s no need to hold back.
Liadrin raises her hand to stroke her chin in thought.
“I did know that something was wrong at the Temple, when you asked for a transfer, but you told
me that you had been exposed to too much demonic energy."

“Indeed, another lie.” She has done a lot of that lately. Perhaps too much. “After my argument with Rivaryn, I realized the true meaning of what I was attempting to accomplish, and the horrifying effects it would have. I was so afraid of breaking myself, I had to get away.”

She lifts her gaze, glancing around the room. She views the golden lights, the banners, the shields hanging upon the walls.

“After all that happened in Outland and on Quel’Danas, standing in these halls now feels…strange. I can’t quite explain it in any way that makes sense, other than to say that I don’t know if what I’m currently involved in is right for me anymore. I don’t know if I actually belong here.”

She redirects her attention to Liadrin, trying her best to face those golden eyes.

“I have not felt like this since…well, the aftermath of the invasion.”

Liadrin’s eyes almost immediately drift down somewhat, making her look uncertain and perhaps a bit disappointed.

“I remember. I recall how you spoke to me with pretty much exactly those words. It is why I decided to train you as a Blood Knight to begin with.”

She sighs heavily and runs a hand through her hair, looking somewhat tired.

“If you are having another crisis of faith or possibly questioning your own existence, that could obviously be bad, potentially disastrous. But, if I should be honest, you are not the first one who had to deal with such side effects.”

“I’m not?”, Ash asks, with a bit of surprise in her voice.

“No. There are people both after the invasion and now with the return of the Sunwell, who have reported difficult psychological effects. Nightmares, flashbacks, indescribable headaches and pain, whether physical or mental. What our people have suffered for the last several years has been traumatizing and I think that is finally catching up to some of us. I won’t blame what you are enduring now specifically on the Sunwell, but perhaps it is part of the issue, at least? It can’t be easy to deal with…what you have done.”

Her words are not an accusation, but spoken with sympathy. Ash is not the only one who has made mistakes.

“It’s not, no.”

“I don’t aim to punish, though, as Vestarial was still technically a criminal, one that we wanted to capture. Your methods were severe, but I can’t be your judge. I leave that to the Light.”

Ash bows her head politely.

“Thank you, my lady. I am not sure if this is fair to my sister, but I’m grateful. In my opinion, though, no one should attempt what I did.”

“Well, that is not up to me to decide. I believe this type of dilemma is something you will have to work through and perhaps come to terms with eventually. I’m not sure if you will get the chance to speak with Vestarial any time soon, though.

In the meantime, I suggest speaking with a counselor. If you wish, I could set up a meeting with one. I assigned a few to our troops, as there were some who have had to deal with trauma that they could not handle on their own.”

It is a graceful suggestion, one that Ash should probably accept, but her reluctance takes charge of her for now.

“Thank you for the offer, but right now, I just wish to be alone. I want to consider what I’ve done and see if I can do something on my own. I’m not sure I will be able to perform my duties during that time, however.”
Once more, Liadrin seems saddened by this conclusion.
“I understand. It is disappointing, as you are one of my best, but I won’t refuse this request.
However, if you wish to hear my opinion, I think departure is a bit drastic.
Instead of quitting the organization entirely, I would be willing to grant you a leave of absence. It
would have to be indefinite, of course, until you feel you’re ready to return.”

Ash seems surprised once more and hesitates. Is this truly acceptable, the right thing for the rest of
the Order? She doesn’t wish to become a liability.
“Are you…sure that’s wise, my lady? Not everyone may agree, and I’d prefer not to weigh down
the entire Order with my problems…”

Liadrin snorts.
“Nonsense. I don’t care what the others think. I know you too well by now, Revenor, and I will not
discard you just like that. Take some time off and relax. I’m sure we will manage.”

Chapter End Notes

I figured that the sin’dorei people might have counselors or therapist-esque roles of
some sort, especially due to the horrifying stuff they experienced during the Scourge
invasion.

Ash won’t be gone for an indefinite amount of time, but her path to Northrend will
obviously not be with the Blood Knights.
Lessons of misjudgment

Within kaldorei lands, due to everything concerning time seeming to work in the opposite way, troop movement and tactical maneuvers are done at night as well. It takes a while to adapt and without eyesight created for the dark it can still be difficult, but not impossible. For the last week or so, Rivaryn, Thariss and Raxeen have done their best to maintain a strict schedule, in order to be of use for the denizens of Darkshore. They have been travelling between Auberdine, Sentinel outposts and nearby towns.

The reasons for why shouldn’t be anything that people need to question, as the group obviously wants to help. They wish to secure this region before any dangers from the north arrive, if such things can even be expected. It’s not like this shore is a strategically vital position on its own, but could be a good location for invaders to establish bases upon, before advancing further into the land. Then again, when has the Scourge cared about the difference? Riv knows how little this matters firsthand.

At this time, the trio is in a camp together on the outskirts of a Sentinel outpost around the northern regions. It’s late evening and the last vestiges of the sun is descending on the horizon. While this would mean the end of the day for many people elsewhere, for the kaldorei it signifies that it’s time to get up. Many of their animals and plants operate on a similar timetable, as the night appears to have affected the majority of species here in a similar fashion.

As Thariss wakes up by the blankets she was resting on, she slowly blinks her eyes to get rid of the blurriness within them and turns her body to stretch her arms and legs. She’s never quick to awaken and usually requires something to drink in order to fully remove the last remnants of any weariness. However, during this process, she also notes a particular aspect of her surroundings – Riv is not next to her anymore. This is not an entirely surprising fact, but she still gets worried. She prefers waking up next to her girlfriend and snuggle with her before they move anywhere. Riv usually sticks around for that purpose too.

After she grabs her pants and a shirt, Thariss rises to her feet and glances around the area, doing her best to block the sun’s blinding light with a hand. To the west, on a rock overlooking the coastline and the distant beaches, she can see her girlfriend sitting by herself. It appears she hasn’t put much clothes on at this time either, only a shirt and a pair of shoes. Not even her pants are equipped, displaying her long and nimble pink legs. A sight Thariss enjoys, but one that can’t be comfortable on that cold rock.

During the last few days, Riv has been acting as a bit of an advisor to the Sentinel officers in the region that they have encountered. As she has direct experience with facing the undead, the kaldorei have been eager to receive as much advice as she’s willing to give. That she’s a sin’dorei appears to be an advantage in this situation. That said, Riv has still seemed…unsure, to a certain extent. Thariss assumes it’s not just due to a potential fear of having to face such enemies once more, but probably because she already lost one home to the undead.

Once she has walked all the way to her girlfriend, Thariss comes up behind her and wraps arms around her in a protective manner, hugging her gently. Riv doesn’t appear to be startled and instead leans into the embrace. Thariss kisses her cheek before she says anything.

“Aren’t you a little cold sitting like this?”

Riv nods and then tilts her head to rest it on the warrior’s chest.

“Mm, I am. It helps me think, though, so it’s fine.”
It’s fine, is it? She very much doubts that’s the whole truth. Thariss snorts briefly.
“Ah, okay. Does that mean you don’t want my warmth?”

After raising one of her long eyebrows, Riv glances over her shoulder. She places a hand on Thariss’ chin and pulls her down, angling her own head so that she can give the night elf a firm kiss. Their eyes both close during this event.
“You know I do”, she says after their lips part.

With a smile, Thariss decides to get on top of the rock as well and lifts Riv up, placing the hunter in her lap and envelopes her once more. Riv curls up in those big and strong arms, feeling safe in between them. Thariss rests her nose on top of Riv’s hair and watches the sunset.
“So, mind telling me what you’re doing out here all alone? It’s early.”

“Technically, it’s late.”

“Not here. This isn’t Quel’thalas, beautiful.”

“Tsk.”
Instead of the sun, the hunter’s eyes are drawn to the dark waters of the sea. The light on the horizon is still reflected against it, giving the impression of being on fire.
“Nothing special. Mulling on the past, I guess.”

Yeah, Thariss was afraid she’d say that. She doesn’t want Riv to be haunted by such elements, but…it’s never over easy, is it?
“Oh, right. You mean, like…uh, the invasion and stuff?”

She almost didn’t want to say that word, just in case it might trigger something within her girlfriend. Thankfully, Riv remains intact.
“Not specifically, no.”

Thariss leans her head a bit to the side, trying to get a better view of the emerald eyes. It appears Riv’s gaze is somewhat far away right now.
“You wanna share?”

It takes a few moments for Riv to acknowledge the request, during which time her ears twitches somewhat in thought.
“I’ve been thinking about some stuff that my mentor used to tell me.”

“Mentor? You mean…Trienza, right?”

“Yeah, that was her name. She was often a stern, confident and blunt woman, but sometimes she was filled with all sorts of weird wisdom too.”

Thariss watches Riv curiously and the words resonate with her as well.
“Heh. Sounds like my mother. Veldarya, I mean.”

Riv nods, obviously remembering the stories.
“They were similar in some ways, I expect. Several decades ago, when I went into my first major battle against bands of Amani trolls, I was anxious, so Trienza gave me advice about combat. She said, ‘Rivaryn, every warrior and officer out there will tell you that the most important element for one to have in battle is duty, honor,
justice or strength. That is all just posturing, though. While they may all be of some use, I’ve never found them particularly helpful as a guiding light. Instead, I would say there are two much more critical aspects – trust and introspection.

War and conflict is rarely a solitary event and you will often have allies fighting at your side. You must learn to trust and believe in them, that their abilities and expertise can succeed just as much as your own. Without it, doubt will grow, and failure will follow.

Introspection is important because you must always know your own limits, what you are able to overcome and where defeat is inevitable. It is the difference between staying to fight and fleeing to survive another day.”

Thariss is silent during the explanation, finding it all rather interesting. Once it is done, she ponders this opinion, thinking that she actually likes it in some way.

“Sounds like pretty wise words to me. I can think of several battles where this could’ve helped me.”

Riv displays a faint smile and inclines her head.

“Yeah, I agree. They are words that I’ve lived by for a long time, among other things. I haven’t always adhered to them without failure, but I feel that they’re quite useful in my own philosophy.”

This is definitely an angle Thariss can see, after they’ve spent so much time fighting side by side. However, there’s another element that she can recall which somewhat makes her question the truth.

“Didn’t Trienza fail to follow her own advice, though? She fell, didn’t she?”

Almost immediately afterwards, Thariss wonders if this was the right thing to ask, as Riv hesitates and some sorrow enters her eyes. The warrior is about to apologize, but Riv shakes her head.

“She did fall, yes, but it was not because she failed with any tactics. She knew what fight she was getting into, but…”

She exhales through her nose.

“There’s a difference between picking the wrong fight and choosing to sacrifice for the greater good.”

Oh, damn. Now that makes Thariss feel even more awful.

She strokes a hand over Riv’s hair, shuts her eyes and tilts her head towards the hunter’s ear.

“…shit. I…I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to-”

Without Thariss seeing it happen, she feels how one of Riv’s hands caresses her cheek.

“It’s okay. You didn’t mean to be rude.”

“I just…”

“I know.”

She lifts her hands to hold both of Thariss’ cheeks, guiding her into another kiss, albeit in a tender fashion. When the night elf looks at her again, Riv rests against the strong chest once more, peering towards the sea. Thariss senses how the hunter takes one of her hands, stroking her fingers at the back of it rather slowly.

“Sometimes, I…miss her, for several reasons. There was just something comforting about being in her presence.

I was never very confident in battle and if I look deeply into myself, this is still probably true. However, Trienza was somehow able to summon incredible feats out of me, some things that I never thought were possible.”

“She was that important?”

“Yeah. If she had survived the invasion, I sometimes wonder if I would’ve suffered as much as I
did without her, to go out alone and forget the rest of the world for so long. Who knows? I might've stuck with the Farstriders because of her influence and found my way back to our people. That's just the kind of power she had over me. It was overwhelming, but also inspiring and comforting.”

Thariss tries to recollect the past, wondering if she ever had anyone like that. She can’t think of any Sentinel leaders that she has ever respected more than Veldarya or Shaerai, and while they were certainly crucial in influencing her progress through the ranks, she doesn’t believe that they could’ve done much to alter her position or the end result of her exit from the army. Then again, she has never suffered the same type of defeat as Riv did with the Scourge. Not even the latest Legion invasion was that bad.

Eventually, she clears her throat, as she senses some reluctance.
“…now you’re making me feel awkward.”

Riv blinks and sits up, turning her gaze towards Thariss, who looks practically guilty. It makes the blood elf smile and stroke a few fingers along her jawline.
“Hey, don’t be like that. I’m not saying I regret my time with you, dear. Sure, it would have been nice to potentially not have to live through a few horrible years of my life, but in the end, I found a new path. I am happier now than I’ve been in a several years, so it’s not like I really wish to have my old life back. I have developed into a completely new person because of you.”

Hearing these words manages to rematerialize Thariss’ smile as well and she leans forward, nuzzling their noses together.
“And I think this person is pretty damn awesome.”
“I know and she’s all yours.”
“Probably the best part.”
Thariss hugs her girlfriend once more, sighing contently. Not really the way she had expected to wake up this evening, but it’s always nice to have Riv in her arms. After a few more minutes of this, she figures that it might be time to start moving. They’ve dawdled for too long.
“So, what do you want for breakfast?”

Riv is about to respond, but halts when both of them hear noises in the outskirts of the camp. In that direction, they can see how several Sentinels are walking around and their stances emit clear signs of tension.
The two women glances at each other, and doesn’t even need to say anything, as they know they’re both on the same page.

Once they’ve gotten fully dressed, they head towards this location, eventually approaching the commanding officer in the group.
“Captain?”, Thariss asks as they come close. “Is something wrong?”

This woman, with lilac skin and long green hair in a ponytail, is watching the ocean with the aid of a spyglass. She stops and turns in their direction, nodding curtly to acknowledge her advisors.
“We’ve spotted something in the ocean to the north, but we don’t quite know what it is. It seems to be a ship of some kind, heading this way, but I don’t recognize the design.”

With worry surging through her chest, Riv swallows and extends her hand.
“May I see it?”
The Captain turns the tool around and offers it to the sin’dorei. Riv only has to view it for a few seconds, before her body freezes and her eyes widen in shock. Thariss furrows her brow, putting a hand worriedly at her girlfriend’s shoulder.

“You alright?”

“That’s…not a ship. It’s a necropolis.”
The city of Silvermoon has always been very pleasant to live in for the majority of its citizens. The sin’dorei, and previously the quel’dorei, have similar divisions of class and rank as humans, but they are more generous regarding the distribution of resources. The inequality in wealth is not nearly as wide and the elves prefer it that way. Instead, it is simply power and control that differs to an extended degree, something that also determines where you live.

This is reflected in Kassari Silvershroud’s situation as well. She is a member of the Magister Order, which means she is given more power than normal citizens due to the magocratic nature of Quel’Thalas. However, as she is but an Arcanist still – a middle rank – her home is located in the mid-tier of the city, not all too far away from where the upper class is situated, but still quite a distance to the areas of leadership.

Today, she is walking around in her apartment, checking various boxes for scrolls and items, wondering which ones she’ll need. She stands up a bit straighter and corrects her black hair which is kept in its usual bun. That’s when hears a voice.
“Decided yet?”

The mage blinks and looks over her shoulder, seeing a taller and more muscular woman standing in the entrance to this particular room, an orc. Compared to Kass’ pink or fair skin, this one has a fern green complexion and black hair that is braided at the back, but empty at the top except for one thin and pointy line, like some type of mohawk. Other sections that differ are the dark brown eyes and the small tusks at the edge of her mouth. Her name is Khroga Steelfang, a shaman and she is someone that has become very important to Kass in the last year.

While the elf wears a loose set of purple and black robes, Khroga is standing in a blue short-sleeved shirt with brown pants.

Kass briefly shakes her head.
“Not quite. I’m not sure which ones I’ll definitely need.”

Khroga folds her arms, leans against the door frame and snorts amusedly.
“Figured as much. You can’t bring all of them, you know.”

The elf runs a hand over her cheek and emits a sigh.
“…I almost wish I could.”

“Kass, I’m not going to carry every box in your house.”

The eyes of the mage quickly drift back to view the taller woman, before she decides to close the distance between them. Upon approach, a charming smile crawls onto her lips and she sways her hips somewhat.
“Aww, why not?”
Once she’s right in front of the orc, with Khroga watching her intently, she sensually strokes her hands along those strong arms, displaying a small pout which she hopes look adorable.
“Sure you can’t do it? Just for me?”

Khroga rolls her eyes. She’s not going to pretend that this doesn’t get her heart racing, but she won’t let that rule her.
“Tsk. You’re pretty, but not that pretty.”

“We’ll see about that.”

She grabs the top of the shirt and drags Khroga into a more amenable height, in order for their lips to clash in an eager kiss. Ever since they got back to Silvermoon together, the two of them have been enjoying a lot of interactions like these, in a variety of locations. This apartment has not seen so much physical activity in quite a while, but it is refreshing.
Before Kass can get all too far into her persuasive methods, however, they hear a knock on the door, albeit in a surprisingly gentle fashion.

As the kiss ends, both of their eyes glance to the side, before facing each other again.
“Expecting guests?”, asks the shaman.

Kass furrows her brow as she considers her schedule today. Nothing comes to mind.
“Not that I know. Better go check it, though.”
She pushes herself onto her toes and plants another quick kiss on her girlfriend’s cheek.
“Wait here.”

“Sure.”

When she eventually reaches the door and opens it, Kass sees someone she definitely hadn’t expected to meet anytime soon.
“Oh, Ash! It’s good to see you”, she greets her in Thalassian.

The mage takes a few steps forward and quickly hugs Ashindra. In the past, the paladin used to be a lot more open to intimacy, but this has diminished somewhat since the Scourge invasion, with the slow change in her personality. However, at this time, she actually returns this act with vigor.
“You too.”

“How are you doing? I somehow expected that you would be stationed outside of the city right now, what with all the talks of recovery.”

As she tilts her head back, she notices another curious element – Ash appears both hesitant and slightly saddened. Her eyes are lowered towards the ground.
“Erm, yeah, that might be the case for others, but…I’m actually on leave.”

“Oh. That’s…unusual.” She catches herself in the act, wondering if it sounded inappropriate and clears her throat. “Erm, but not unwarranted, of course. You’ve been working very hard for the last few years.”

Ash shrugs.
“Yeah, I guess. Didn’t really have much choice, though.”

“I see. Did Lady Liadrin force you to go on a holiday for once or something?”

“Not quite. I…I’ve simply had to ask for a break, as I can’t perform my duties at this time.”

Now that is definitely not the type of sentence she’d expect to hear from Ash, someone who has
shown to not just always be ready to protect their people, but also work long and grueling hours. Then again, that was probably quite unsustainable.

Kass looks unsure and places a hand on Ash’s shoulder.

“Are you okay?”

It takes a few seconds for the paladin to respond, as Ash still refuses to fully look at her.

“I…no. I’m not.”

This woman is not just a friend to Kass, but to her family. Or at least she has always been close to Rivaryn and that means Kass can’t just discard this situation.

“You want to come in? Khroga is here, but she won’t disturb us, if you want to talk.”

“Yeah, I’d like that. And no, I don’t mind. I…was actually looking for someone to talk with and…well, I don’t have a lot of friends, besides you.”

After leading Ash inside, Kass closes and locks the front door behind them. As they slowly wander through the hallways together, the mage turns to gaze sideways at the other elf.

“Does this have anything to do with, uh…your conflict with my sister?”

She notices how Ash swallows hesitantly to begin with, eyes focused on the path ahead.

“You heard about that?”

“Just a little bit. She told me about some kind of confrontation at the Black Temple, that it got kinda heated.”

“How much details did she get into?”

“Not much at all. She mentioned that you were yelling at each other and that she wanted to prevent you from making some kind of mistake. I didn’t ask for more.”

As Ash sighs, it seems like it’s done out of relief, that Riv didn’t reveal the entire truth.

“Well, she was right. I…did some things in Outland that I’m not entirely proud of, actions that I didn’t fully comprehend at the time, but that might have scarred me for life if I had completed them.”

Eventually the duo comes into another room, the one with Khroga, and the shaman is just placing another box down in an appropriate location, but now turns to face them. She gives them a quick wave.

“Uh, hello.” She coughs somewhat awkwardly. “Ashindra, right? Not sure you remember me.”

As this is said in Common, Ash has to make a brief switch.

“I do. Khroga Steelfang, shaman of the Horde and now Kassari’s girlfriend.”

“Oh. You’ve got a sharp memory.”

She glances between the two women, but she doesn’t need to await the question.

“I can give you some space, if you wanna talk.”

Ash inclines her head.

“I would appreciate that, thank you.”

Khroga takes a few steps away, towards a separate exit, but slows down before she has fully left.

“Oh, I could make some tea for you, if you want. Got some ingredients with me for a Blackrock brew.”

This offer makes Kass smile.
“I’d like a cup.”

Ash glances at Kass, before she nods.
“Sure, that might be interesting.”
The shaman smiles, gazes at Kass one last time and then departs the room, closing the door behind her. Once she does, Ash faces the mage.
“She seems like a very good person, one who cares. You’re lucky to have her. I remember when I was like that…”

More self-criticism, something that sounds a little strange. Kass hasn’t heard much of that nature from Ash in the last few years.
She gently strokes the paladin’s arm and leads her towards some seats.
“You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself, Ash. You’re still the same person and there’s still a lot of good in you.”

Ash exhales and shuts her eyes.
“Am I, though? Have you been talking to me in the last couple of years?”

“Of course, you know I have. Not as often as when you were with Riv, but…”

“And am I really the same woman as back then, you think? There’s no change at all?”

Kass hesitates, searching through Ash’s expression.
“I haven’t seen you like this in quite a while. What exactly happened in Outland?”

The other woman slowly shakes her head again, refusing to meet Kass’ gaze.
“I…I can’t tell you. All I can say is that I ended up in a few conflicts, not just with Riv, but Vesta too.
Both of their words keep lingering in my mind and I can’t seem to get rid of it. I think about our conversations, dream about them. Only the battle at Quel’Danas helped to momentarily relinquish these thoughts from my head, but once the Sunwell returned, it somehow got worse.”

Kass arches an eyebrow, the confusion growing.
“What? How could it get worse? The Sunwell has helped us, hasn’t it?”

“Well, it’s supposed to, but it hasn’t done for me what I may have hoped for. With a light like the Sunwell returning to our lives, it also awakened a type of guilt I haven’t felt in years. I know it probably sounds silly, but sometimes it feels like…like it judges me for my actions. I can’t describe it in any other way.”

They eventually end up pretty close to the seats and Ash slips down in an armchair, while Kass takes one on the opposite side.
“That does sound quite strange. I’m not sure I’ve encountered a reaction like that in anyone else.”

Ash slumps in the chair and buries her face in her hands.
“I don’t know what to do anymore, Kass. I don’t feel like my position in the Blood Knights is… what I should be doing.”

Kass views the paladin curiously for a few moments, crossing her legs.
“Are you saying you don’t like the Blood Knights anymore?”

“No…no that’s not what I meant. I think they do good work for our people, for the most part, but there are some…unfortunate actions which have been taken by that organization. Perhaps we have advanced too aggressively into our society.”
Such an opinion was expressed by Riv as well, even if Kass didn’t really agree with her. “I don’t know. The Blood Knights have done a lot to protect Quel’Thalas and you were certainly needed against many threats around here.”

Ash sighs and turns her eyes towards the mage. “Kass…we enslaved a naaru to our cause, a being of pure Light. Is that really something that the Ashindra of the past would have done? My faith in the Light was absolute back then. I would’ve been horrified at something like this.”

Kass nibbles at her lower lip, knowing that she had heard of this event, but never actually saw the being itself. “That…is true. Drastic measures had to be taken, though, for our survival.”

“Yes, but forcing a creature, an entity of Light, to serve us?” She shrugs, looking a bit lost and helpless. “I feel like my mind, my morals, my beliefs, all of them have been twisted and changed into something different after the invasion. That was probably why I was willing to go so far in Outland.”

The way she says it is certainly enough to get Kass interested, as she doesn’t know what occurred between Ash and Vestarial, but she doesn’t wish to intrude either. “You can’t be fully blamed for the way you acted, Ash. The Scourge destroyed a lot of lives, whether by killing them or causing trauma for others.”

“Perhaps that’s true to a certain extent, but at some point, I’m gonna have to accept some responsibility. I can’t keep blaming others for every mistake I make.”

It’s hard to know what to do here, what would be right to tell Ash, as Kass herself has not been in such a position. Then again, she probably just wants someone that listens to her. “So, what do you want to do?”

Ash leans back in the chair and folds her arms. “I don’t really know. I don’t wish to just abandon the Blood Knights, but…I also don’t know if I belong there.” She raises a hand to rub her eyes. “Maybe your sister had the right idea.”

“About what?”

“Leaving Quel’Thalas. Maybe I…need to get away from here, find something new elsewhere.”

This is Ash’s life and her decision, of course, but Kass still doubts whether this would be the right choice. “Will that really solve anything, though?”

“No idea, but at least it worked for Riv, right? She found a new purpose, a new home, a new…” She stops for a few seconds before she dares speak the last word. “…lover.”

The way this is said, it is pretty clear that emotions are tense within that section of her mind as well. “You’re not…I’m not…jealous of Thariss, are you?”

Ash furrows her brow, diverting her eyes elsewhere, but her tone mostly remains calm. “I admit that…there might be something to it, but mostly I’m just happy for Riv. I’m not gonna try to take her back. That would never work anyway. She is a new woman, while I’m just…broken.”
Sorrow. That’s what she displays, what she expresses, what seems to be infused in her. It is beyond the jealousy, anger, irritation and doubt. Kass knows she both wants and needs to help.

“I don’t agree, Ash. You may be hurt, but you aren’t gone. You have to trust yourself somehow, that you can do better.

If you really want to get away, though, maybe I can help. I’m actually temporarily leaving Silvermoon soon, with Khroga. That’s why we’ve been packing.”

Ash looks at her and blinks.

“Packing?”

She glances around the room and sees the boxes, as well as the erratically placed items.

“Oh. I hadn’t noticed. Where are you going?”

“Well, there have been a lot of strange occurrences as of late, surrounding the magical leylines of Azeroth. We haven’t been able to perform teleportations the way that we should, and the Magisters are worried. A few have already been dispatched and I’m now being sent away as well. I have to travel to the Undercity and speak to some of the Forsaken mages. If you wish, you would certainly be allowed to accompany me. I could use another friend there and you would also be a pretty decent escort.”

Ash seems to drift into her own mind for a short while, perhaps pondering the angles and the options available, but it doesn’t last as long as expected.

“I think I’d actually like that. I can’t come with you in any ‘official’ capacity, though. I’m still on leave.”

Kass smiles at her.

“You don’t have to. You’re still my friend and a talented paladin, Ash, so you can simply act in that capacity. Come with us. I’m sure we can think of something.”

Ash turns to view the slightly younger woman, her former lover’s little sister, and it doesn’t take long for her to mirror the expression.

“Alright then. Let’s do it.”
These surroundings, the images before her, the unavoidable fear…it’s familiar. All around the vicinity, the very soil of the ground becomes cracked and rotten, the plants withering unnaturally quick and the air is filled with stenches of death, decay, and charred remains. The earth beneath her is not just stained with the blood of her people, but a foul corruptive energy as well. It’s like the very world is becoming a twisted image of itself, overrun with grotesque creatures, and everything else slowly deforms around them.

“Sergeant!”

She has been here before, hasn’t she? Is this reality? Was everything else but a dream, a mistaken memory, and this is her actual world? Or is her mind possibly playing tricks on her? It certainly feels like the former. The armor tightly hugging her body, the bow in her hand, the quiver hanging over her shoulder, the wind running its grasp through her hair. It’s all very familiar, very comforting…if it were not for all the horrors that slowly tries to close her inside of a living Nether realm.

“Sergeant!”

There are noises in every direction, distant ones, almost like flickering distorted whispers through the wind. Most of them sound like screams, ones of terror and agony. She has heard this tune before; not by choice, but because she could not escape it. No one could. At the same time, though, it feels like someone else tries to reach out to her, to get her attention, but she can’t quite hear them. It’s not because she doesn’t want to, but her perception is dulled, not quite as it should be. She wants to make a better attempt, but much like her body, it’s locked, paralyzed.

“Sergeant!”

All hesitation is suddenly knocked out of her by a vicious blow to her back. She is ambushed from behind, tackled to the ground as sharp edges like daggers dig into her skin. She is unable to oppose them and falls down, hitting the tainted soil in an unstoppable velocity. Gathering her strength, she only has time to roll around in order to face the things that chase her. The terrifying visage of the monsters above her is hard to explain, even more so to actually strike. Their skins are rotten and torn open, intestines pouring out from the gaps. Tattered remnants of clothes and hair can be seen, now almost as part of their bodies. The only sign that they are actually creatures with any activity, is the blue light of their eyes, like a wavering flame. Why it burns, she doesn’t know, but it fills her with fear, shame and pity. Her people should not have to suffer like this. They deserved better.

Before any of these undead abominations are even able to touch her, one of them gets an arrow right into its side, piercing the body with such speed that it stumbles away. Slowly, the ghoul tries to turn, but is hit by another fierce arrow, this time in the throat and it drops to the ground. Only moments after this, a vengeful shade leaps into the area, digging a blade into the abdomen of the second creature, slicing it open and kicking the remains away. The third faces a similarly short fate, before it is decapitated.

A woman with long flowing brown hair, light skin and a headband on top of her head, turns
towards the onlooker. She is both beautiful and intimidating, standing there in a similar green armor and cloak as the one on the ground. Her long and pointed ears are easily distinguishable, as are the glowing blue eyes filled with life – unlike the undead – ones that now turn towards the woman on the ground with fury, shortly before grabbing her arm and dragging her to her feet.

“Pull yourself together, Silvershroud!”

Rivaryn can’t answer her, but the other elf isn’t about to wait either. Instead, she delivers a brief backhand slap to Riv’s face, to knock her back into reality.

“I didn’t keep you around this long just to see you fall now.”

Riv’s face stings with pain, and she raises her hand to ease it, before she faces her companion.

“Cap…Captain Sah’ nir?”

Trienza frowns at her, taking a step closer. The Ranger-Captain has always been taller than her, although not ridiculously so for one of their kind. What she possesses in abundance, though, is bravery and ferocity.

“What in the sun’s name is wrong with you? Did you think you could stare the undead into surrender?”

Riv hesitates, her eyes falling to the ground. This scolding is all too familiar of the past, especially with Trienza’s voice. She has such a sharp and commanding tone, which allows no rebellion, demands loyalty. No one can get people running like Captain Sah’nir. Riv has always respected her for it.

“No, I…I just…”

She doesn’t know what to say, isn’t sure how to make this better. Her eyes drift over towards the creatures again, vision filling with horror once more. She can’t stop staring. It’s not just their appearance, but what they represent. Is this what happens to all of those who are killed? Is this what the Scourge does to her people? She will have to destroy her own brethren to succeed? What kind of monster would allow such a thing? It almost makes her retch just to consider it.

Fortunately, Trienza is there and she grabs Riv’s chin in a firm grip, making them look at each other. The anger doesn’t wash away, but it transforms into determination. It’s not just her superior standing there now, but her mentor.

“Listen to me, Rivaryn”, she says with a tone closer to that of a stern mother. “Are you listening?”

“Y…yes.”

“I can’t hear you!”

“Yes…yes, Captain!”

Trienza inclines her head, satisfied enough.

“You are still here, Rivaryn, you’re still alive, still able to fight. I know how terrifying all of this is, how hopeless it seems, and I don’t blame you for faltering. But no matter what, we can’t give up. Do you understand? We are Farstriders, and we will fight until our very last breath in order to defend our people. If you keep yourself together and stay strong, we will not fail in our duty. Can you do that, Silvershroud? Can you serve your people like you should?”

The words fill Rivaryn with a surprising amount of warmth and courage, like it was exactly what she needed to hear. She finds herself returning to who she was always meant to be, who she knew herself as.

“I can, Captain”, she reassures Trienza. “I will keep fighting, I swear.”
Trienza lowers her hand and pats Riv’s shoulder. No smile, no hug – that’s not her style. “Good, then follow me. We must relocate.” She quickly glances around the area. “Where’s Khevala?”

By mentioning the lynx’s name, Riv lowers her gaze again, only slightly, as she clutches her bow tightly. “I… I’m sorry, Captain. She didn’t make it.”

It’s fairly brief, but sorrow appears in Trienza’s eyes, as she diverts them. “…I’m sorry to hear that. She was a good companion to you, a brave defender. She will be missed.” She then turns around, cloak swirling after her. “We must still stay strong. The day can still be won. C’mon.”

As they continue through the torn land of southern Quel’Thalas together, they face many more undead and retreating Farstriders. They’ve done so ever since this invasion began. Riv doesn’t know how it started, or why, but when Ranger-General Windrunner sent for reinforcements, they had to obey. In a one-on-one fight, any elf can defeat the abominations without issue, but the problem is in the numbers. They’re never just one-on-one, or even two-on-one, but rather ten-on-one, sometimes worse. They get overwhelmed by the sheer mass of destruction. While they help their other forces with arrows and blades, Trienza delivers more grave news.

“More defenses have fallen further north, and I’m being told that Ban’dinoriel is flickering. Something is going on, and I fear our enemies have attained pieces of the Key of the Three Moons. The undead frontline may soon breach the inner gates.”

Riv widens her eyes in shock. “W-what? How is that possible? Ban’dinoriel, it…it has stood for generations. Nothing can take it down. Not even the orcs were able to.”

Trienza’s grim appearance continues, even as she shoots down her foes with ease. “That’s what we assumed, but I don’t believe that these abominations have succeeded either. I get the feeling that there’s something else. We may have a traitor in our ranks.”

“A traitor? Who would give us up to the undead? Who would sacrifice our homeland for this…this nightmare?”

The Captain sighs and shakes her head. “I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter. All that matters now is that we do our best to prevent any further slaughter. We must find a workaround.”

That’s when they wander up on a bit of a slope, ending in a cliff edge. In the distance, they both witness something horrifying coming in their direction. It is a gigantic creature, made of reinforced bone and rotten flesh, seemingly crawling forward on four thin legs. All around it, dark magic and plague spreads, creating death and corruption to the land and everything in it.

“The Scourge has recently employed these things in their wake, in order to scrub the land clean, hoping to craft more slaves for their armies. It seems the undead feed and grow stronger when surrounded by this energy as well. This will only kill more quel’dorei and harm Quel’Thalas. We cannot allow that.”

She turns her head, facing Riv. “This enemy, and everyone like it, must be destroyed. Unfortunately, heading in without a backup plan is unwise. Silvermoon City and the rest of our people must be warned of what’s happening, so that we can prepare evacuation measures. This is your job.”
Riv looks at her superior with surprise.
“What?”

“Sergeant, grab a squad of what we have left and head back up north. You must do your very best to get ahead of the Scourge horde and make sure our people remain safe.”

Getting away from the slaughter around her is an appealing prospect, but there are still questions. “I…I can do that, of course, but what will you do in the meantime, Captain? You may be needed elsewhere.”

With an even grimmer look on her face, Trienza frowns and shakes her head, her gaze focused on the land ahead.
“No, I won’t. This is where I will be.”

Somehow, she had expected this answer, as devastating as it is. Riv’s expression mirrors this feeling.
“Captain, you can’t be serious. You can’t fight that monster! You’ll only get yourself killed!”

As she has always been stubborn, Trienza only offers her a disapproving scowl.
“I am well aware of my fate, but someone must hinder those creatures before it gets worse. The remains of my squad and I will see to this.”

It’s true that she isn’t alone, as there are still elves fighting nearby, some of them being further down as well. This is a good vantage point to fire arrows from, as the road goes around below it, but arrows won’t stop that large plague-spreading creation.
“I…no. I won’t leave you, Captain. I refuse!”

Trenza grits her teeth at first, before she stomps the ground and points at her companion.
“Sergeant! This is not up for debate!”

“You are one of our best officers, our most skilled archers! I can’t just leave you to die!”

“You will follow my orders and that is final! I don’t want to hear any more.”

She receives no more than cold and rejection in return, but Riv can’t accept this. She won’t. Trienza is not just her superior, but her trainer, her mentor…her friend.
“And what will they tell me in Silvermoon when they hear that I left you? That I allowed this to happen? I can’t just…”

She hesitates about what to say, what to convince Trienza with, but there really is nothing that could change this. In a moment of comprehension, the Captain shuts the distance between them and places a hand on Riv’s shoulder, her voice lowered so no one else can hear.
“There is no more reason to act this way, Rivaryn. The life we knew is over, it will never return. What we must do now is save everything we can.”

She stumbles on her words a bit, as if she hesitates whether she should continue.
“Find Efaria. Please. Tell her…tell her I love her, and that I’m sorry. Tell her I wish I was a better wife.”

Riv feels her throat going dry, her jaw tightening. She forces herself to stay firm.
“Captain…”

“Please, do this for me. It’s all I ask.”

Eventually, Riv is too tired to struggle, too filled with pain to fight. There is nothing more she can do.
She holds up a closed fist to her chest in salute.
“It has been an honor to serve with you, Captain.”

The determination returns to Trenza’s eyes and she gets into a similar kind of position, giving Riv the same salute.
“And with you as well, Sergeant. Know that I am proud of you, and always remember – everything for Quel’Thallas. Now, go.”

With no more words remaining, Trenza turns around sharply, facing the enemy getting closer and closer. Seeing no need to wait, she jumps down over the cliff edge, to the path several meters below and draws her two swords. The last thing Riv sees with tear-filled eyes is how her Captain leaps towards a cluster of ghouls, carving her blades into them, with her cloak swaying in the wind.

“Rivaryn!”

She hears her named being called again, but this time by a different voice, in a different year. It is familiar, but for dissimilar reasons. As she suddenly awakens, she finds herself being faced with danger and destruction, much like all those years ago. The green of the grass below her is darker than that of Eversong, but still comparable.

Before her, she spots the terror which probably triggered these memories and sent her into the past – the visage of undead. Much like during that event, she is saved by someone with a sword, just like Trenza once did, but this one being a lot taller.

Thariss slams her shield into a skeleton, decapitates a ghoul and spins around in order to knock everyone back. She will not allow anyone or anything to harm her girlfriend. She is not alone either, as Razz is next to Riv, growling and clawing at their enemies as he tries to keep them at bay, in order to protect his elven companion.

When all of the enemies in her path are gone, Thariss lowers herself to Riv, who’s currently kneeling on the ground. She’s shaking, sweat pouring down her forehead.

“Rivaryn!”, Thariss says again. She drops her sword and puts a hand on her girlfriend’s head, being very careful with her.

“Are you here, Riv? Can you hear my voice?”

She has to wait a couple of seconds, but Riv does eventually display a very brief nod.

“Thank Elune…”, she mumbles. “We’re in Darkshore, not far from Auberdine. Do you remember?”

From behind, Thariss hears how more undead arrive, and Razz does his best to slash and snap his jaw at them.

After taking a few deep breaths, Riv manages to speak quietly.

“I…I remember. We’re in a battle, I think?”

Thariss smiles, looking relieved.

“We are. You sort of just…disappeared earlier, when they arrived. I was afraid of what might’ve happened and found you behind this rock, with Razz trying to protect you.”

She hesitates slightly, seeing how pale Riv appears, not to mention the sweat and tears.

“You don’t look well. I can take you into safety, if you prefer.”

She’s about to continue speaking, but notices how Riv slowly looks up. She faces the undead in the distance, and without saying anything, the blood elf raises her rifle and fires on one of those attacking her raptor. It falls to the shore, dying a second death almost immediately. Her new gun is
more powerful than Thariss assumed.
“I can manage. There’s…something I must tell the defenders, about the necropolis.”

Thariss scowls and looks up, seeing the big flying construction currently positioned to the west of
the coastline. Every now and then, it fires a volley of darkened orbs, filled with necromantic
energies. Added to this, there’s also some kind of beam at the bottom, which constantly teleports
new undead forces to the ground. Thariss doesn’t know how many troops it contains, but doesn’t
really care at this point. Protecting her home is the most important aspect right now.

“Right. Well, follow me, then. I’ll get you there.”

Chapter End Notes

Anyone remember how Rivaryn talked about her mentor Trienza in Torn and
unbound? Yeah, this was her and the last time Riv saw her.
I wasn't thinking of any specific Scourge creature with those plague spreaders btw. In
my head, they just look like big crawling skeletal monsters with dark magic coming
from underneath. Just figured it made sense that the Scourge would have something
like that.
Just like in many other regions across Azeroth, there are several ways to leave the borders of Quel’Thalas. While air and sea routes tend to be the most popular options, land-based escorts are also available, even if somewhat more perilous. Kassari actually prefers using magical transportation, as it is a type of spell she is adept at casting, but that is not an option at this time, due to the arcane distortions around Azeroth. That is why she’s leaving Silvermoon, after all.

When choosing a method to utilize, Kass was disappointed to see that pretty much no ships were currently available to leave in a short time and as the amount of stuff she wanted to bring was too much for dragonhawks, they had to find an alternative. Luckily, a solution presented itself through a caravan that was departing for the Undercity anyhow. As an Arcanist, Kass is allowed to requisition escorts from the official city guard force of Silvermoon, which is why she has decided to bring a handful of them with her. They obviously increase the security value that Khroga and Ashindra already offer.

It has been a while since any of them have travelled to the south using this particular road, to the region now known as the Eastern Plaguelands. The last time Ash was here, it was called Darrowmere Forest and certainly didn’t look like this. She did occasionally make journeys down here, in order to visit the various facilities dedicated to the Light; especially the big church that existed inside Stratholme, the largest human city this far north. The path used to be littered with tall dark trees, peaceful farms and the occasional village center. The people here were friendly to the elves, always curious of what their northern neighbors were up to. Now, nothing of it remains but a plagued and torn landscape.

There are obviously still people who travel down this path, but it tends to be unruly and treacherous. It’s difficult to traverse due to the destruction that the land has suffered, along with the many physical dangers that exist in this area. The Scourge has indirectly ruled this territory for quite a while, ever since they first appeared in Lordaeron and spread through the many settlements, corrupting the denizens into becoming part of their unliving swarm. The situation used to be worse only a few years ago, but it changed after the necropolis known as Naxxramas was assaulted and forced to relocate, to avoid total obliteration. It has been somewhat quieter here since then.

The lack of direct leadership doesn’t exactly make the Plaguelands any safer, though. The undead still roam, often without any other thought than to cause chaos and very few are capable of surviving an onslaught without escorts. The leader of this particular caravan was quite sure that they would not be affected by the undead’s attacks, though, as he believed the size of their group was a bit too big to be an appropriate target. Unfortunately, he underestimated the Scourge.

At this time, they have ridden about a day into the withered forest’s domain, when some of those involved notice something in the air. It is not just the passengers, but the hawksstriders that pull the wagons get tense as well. Kass is sitting next to Khroga in the wobbling cart, which shakes back and forth due to the uneven road. She looks up to the sky and furrows her brow, instinctively leaning somewhat closer to her girlfriend.
“You feel that? The winds just got even colder.”

The orc nods slowly.
“Yeah, this land has surely suffered a lot. I could already sense it from the agonized spirits of earth, when we were in the Ghostlands. The elements here must be twisted on every level.”

“How. I dunno, it feels…different somehow.”

Ash, who sits on the opposite side of the same wagon, obviously overhears the conversation. She contemplates this notion for a moment, before she figures that it might be best to give it a try. Better safe than sorry.
She shuts her eyes and puts her hands together, saying a quiet prayer to the Light and asking for its guidance. Despite a certain lack of faith in the last few years, it returns her call and gives her access to the correct abilities, in order to sense what may be amiss.

“You’re right”, she says eventually. “I detect corruption nearby. I believe undead forces are heading our way.”

Kass starts to look rather worried.
“Damn. If that’s the case, we can’t just sit here and wait. We have to prepare.”
She doesn’t stand up, but instead moves on her knees to the edge of the cart, so that she can be heard by the caravan leader.
“Excuse me! Our paladin has just detected traces of the undead. An attack may be imminent!”

From the front wagon, a man with long blonde hair and light skin pokes his head out from the side and smiles in her direction.
“Ah, that’s nothing to worry about, Arcanist! The Scourge is always here, but they won’t do much else than watch. Trust me, they won’t dare to assault a well-protected convoy like ours.”

It’s almost exactly at this moment that Ash quickly diverts her eyes to the sky and spots something above them.
“Look out! They’re coming from the west!”

She points towards an area over the trees, but the warning is too late for some. A pack of gargoyles suddenly swoop down from this direction and fly straight for the many wagons, ripping into them. They tear at the roofs and walls with their claws, and a few even ram one cart, which loses its hold on the road and topples to the ground. Some of the hawkstriders start to panic and try to run away, while others desperately look for instructions.

Seeing no other alternative when the caravan leader does nothing to remedy the situation, Kass takes charge and offers a command.
“Stop the wagons, right now!” She turns to the guards. “Get your weapons out and defend the civilians!”

The Silvermoon guards are somewhat hesitant, but they are trained for these types of scenarios and quickly react when a member of the Magisters calls for them. They are not alone, of course, as Khroga jumps into action as well, grabbing the greataxe of her father, Magokash.
Once the gargoyle’s attack has succeeded, more shadows appear among the trees on ground level. Skeletons and ghouls release their hungry growls, as they attempt to assault the living. These creatures are supported by necromantic entities in the back, raining down dark magic from the sky.

A few of the guards connected to the caravan itself fall during this initial attack, making the other passengers and workers cry out in fear. The caravan leader himself is also getting scared and starts to panic.
“This…this is too much! We can’t handle this many! W-we need to flee, right now!”
Unfortunately, as he and a few others try to run away and abandon their gear, they rush right into another group of undead that arrive from the other side. The caravan is completely surrounded and with these civilians exposed, the undead tear them apart. It is too late for them to be saved.

Once the necromantic energies wash over them, however, Kass draws magical runes in the air above her, summoning an arcane barrier that protects their immediate vicinity from the worst of the spells.
“I can do this and brief teleportations, but no heavier transports. I can’t get us out of here, so someone will have to destroy those necromancers.”

Ash is standing nearby, wearing a few pieces of gear, but not her full armor; she didn’t exactly expect to get a fight on their hands of this magnitude.
What she can do, however, is pull out her sword and the heavy shield, which she immediately imbues with energies of the Light.
“I’ll see what I can do, but I might need some backup.”

As the first of the undead troops reach them, Khroga infuses magic from the elements to her axe and gusts of wind can be felt across its length. She uses this to cut down a couple of foes with ease. Each swing is followed by a slight growl.
“I’ve got your back. Just try to be quick about it!”

Together, Ash, Khroga, the Silvermoon guards and Kass provide probably the fiercest defensive squad in this entire caravan and the rest of the people try to gather around them, hoping to be safe. Unfortunately, this sort of boxes them in, focusing the majority of the undead forces in one location.

Ashindra gets the opportunity to display a lot of her own abilities, as compared to the other elves, she does not merely slash the undead with her sword, but severe them completely, making their bodies burn with righteous fury. Some almost shatter into ash, unable to resist the power of the Light.

She also has other skills, though, as she has a history in positions of command. She coordinates the Silvermoon soldiers, informing them and the caravan guards where the gaps in their defenses appear, so that they can minimize any weaknesses and prevent the undead from penetrating it. Even if this reinforces their belief that they may be able to last a while longer, it doesn’t actually get them any close to the necromancers, which might destroy them in the end anyhow, unless they’re swift.

Seeing as how she’s the one most suited to fight these types of enemies, Ash tries to go for a desperate assault, using her spiked shield to bash several foes away, while occasionally poking her sword out to deal with any stray targets.
Unfortunately, before she can continue the entire way towards the closest necromancer, her shield receives a heavy blow that knocks her back somewhat and briefly staggers her. She doesn’t fall, but when she looks up, she comes face to face with a huge abomination. It is a kind of creature she has encountered before, but its grotesque and twisted image, combined by so many bodies and cadavers, is always disgusting and somewhat frightening to witness.

The first one is joined by several others and Ash sees no choice but to retreat, as she is now getting surrounded by undead from all directions.
In the middle of the gathered civilians, Kass is starting to waver, her body shaking somewhat and sweat is pouring down her forehead. The necromancers are really pounding at her shield, knowing that she can’t last forever, and she pulls from her innermost reserves to keep it intact.
“Ash, please…I can’t maintain this spell for much longer!”

The paladin grits her teeth and slashes wildly around herself. Occasionally, some of the ghouls try to get their claws and fangs on her, and she has to elbow them away or otherwise get rid of them. It is inevitable to conclude that they’re getting overwhelmed.

“I’m trying my best here, dammit!”

The survivors are starting to fear for their lives, and even Kass wonders if they can remain. Perhaps she will have to attempt some kind of teleportation anyhow, but that might go completely awry and explode right in their faces instead. That’s apparently what happened to another Arcanist a few weeks ago and at this location, she might endanger a bunch of civilians. This is not a risk that she or anyone else wishes to take, but they may have no choice.

Or that is what they all assume, until they suddenly hear a different sound from the outside, with a voice calling over the undead’s unnerving noises.

“Crusaders, forward! Initiate flanking maneuvers!”

On the outer layers of the Scourge’s onslaught, a new force arrives and does not hesitate in their advance. It immediately charges into the undead, cutting down the outermost row. Given the chance to glance in that direction, one can spot various people from different origins and with different abilities, all united beneath one banner. Humans, gnomes, orcs, tauren, sin’dorei, quel’dorei, kaldorei and more. Most of them appear to be some type of warrior or paladin, but there are also a few rogues, archers and probably some priests too.

Except for their diverse nature, the tabards they wear are also interesting – the major color is grey, with lines of gold at the edges. In the middle hangs a black star symbol with a golden center and an outstretched humanoid hand, displaying an open palm. Ash can’t say that she recognizes this appearance from anywhere she has fought in this section of Azeroth before, but assistance is surely welcome, no matter who they are.

While the undead seemed to have been winning earlier, with this new group helping to cause some havoc, the sin’dorei manage to recover some of their courage and hope, and properly pushes back against the Scourge. Once Kass can’t hold out with her barrier any longer, some of the Silvermoon guards position themselves around the civilians to act as shields instead, letting the mage recuperate in the center.

During this type of reversal, any sensible living force would have begun their retreat, but these creatures are not living, and they do not care for a second death; after all, they could wait for a third or a fourth, if they are returned to use. The undead necromancers are somewhat more intelligent than the others, though, and realize that to actually have a chance at causing some damage, they must eliminate those who maintain the morale of the enemy forces. This is why one targets a prominent Silvermoon guard lieutenant, who is protecting the civilians the fiercest. A spell pierces his chest and he groans, before he falls to his knees, making the civilians scurry.

As the necromancer hisses in victory, it is just about to unleash another spell over a larger area, to finish the guard and potentially hurt the civilians too. Before it can manage this maneuver, however, another person hurries up to this location and the necromantic spell is disrupted by a different barrier appearing, this one created from Holy Light.

“Think you can destroy the wounded so easily? Not on my watch.”

Ash is fighting nearby, and she sees the eruption of magic, making her turn to look in that direction. She does not spot a typical soldier standing there, but a woman in long blue, gold and white robes. It is a human, with dark brown skin, fierce grey eyes and long black hair in a low
ponytail that dances in the wind. Her control of the Light is rather impressive, and with her free hand, she produces holy fire from her finger which destroys two nearby skeletons.

“Knights, a defender has fallen! Back me up!”, she shouts after this maneuver is pulled off.

Three warriors - an orc, a dwarf and a troll - arrives to assist her. “Yes, Lieutenant!”’, they respond.

Obviously, she’s some type of officer and actually seems to be the leader of the entire squad. While the coast is clear, she ends her barrier and kneels down to the fallen sin’dorei. She puts her hand over the areas where dark magic has penetrated his body, and a golden light leaves her palm, purging the corruptive elements, which heals him. She smiles slightly, seeming satisfied with her work.

“You’re gonna be okay and should be able to fight a while longer, if you prefer, but you will need to rest later.”

The elf pushes himself to his feet and inclines his head. “…thank you. I appreciate the save.”

“Anytime.”

The entire display intrigues Ash more than she anticipated. The wish to protect these people without being asked, the determination and the control of the Light – this Lieutenant is rather inspiring to watch.

Once the newcomers start having some trouble of their own, Ash decides to relocate and carves a path to their station. Internally asking the Light to aid her, it responds, and an aura radiates around her, letting her cut down undead after undead.

A gnome rogue is about to be overwhelmed by a few skeletons, but Ash’s blade eliminates three of them, letting the gnome himself destroy the last two. He looks up at the elf when they’re safe. “Thanks! Thought I was a goner there for a second!”

Ash nods at him. “You scratch our backs, we’ll scratch yours. We are one in this fight.”

“Sounds good to me!”

She isn’t quite sure why, but Ash turns her eyes back to the human, and coincidentally, the officer is looking in her direction too. The Lieutenant smiles and nods at her, in silent gratitude.

Before she can respond, they are distracted by the sound of the abominations, who are now coming very close to the wagons. The Crusaders have tried to deal with them, but they are persistent. “Damn”, she says human. “We have to get rid of them somehow. Hey, you, paladin! If you keep these big bastards off me, I’ll deal with the necromancers! That should scare off the rest.”

Ash has now reached this location and positions herself next to the Knights as another barricade against the waves. “My shield is yours.”

Together, they weather the remaining opposition that tries to destroy them, while the Lieutenant prepares a spell that should be enough to shatter even the fiercest of magical creatures. A few seconds later, bright lights rain from the sky, destroying a duo of the few necromancers that were present. Along with the efforts of Khroga, Kass and the Silvermoon guards, the Scourge has suffered too much damage to their collective brainpower and the remaining forces now actually
decide to retreat. There’s no more reason to continue fighting.

The civilians and defenders erupt in cheers. Despite some deaths and the losses of a few wagons, they are thankful that most of the passengers are alive. Many of them immediately approach their saviors, in order to offer their gratitude. Ash does the same, actually, but specifically approaches the human officer. From this close range, it is easy to see that the human is shorter than her. She clears her throat before she speaks.

“I…thanks, for interfering so quickly. We hadn’t expected any aid from strangers out here.”

The human smiles at her and shrugs casually.

“That’s what we do. It’s part of our purpose to protect the innocent from the Scourge, especially when they’ve come back in such large numbers.”

“Well, I wouldn’t call myself innocent, but thanks anyway.”

She extends her hand.

“Ashindra Revenor, of the Blood Knights.”

The human accepts the offer, joining their fingers in a rather gentle grasp.

“Melia Haven, medical officer and Lieutenant of the Argent Crusade.”

Chapter End Notes

*Finally the first appearance of Melia.*

*If you haven’t checked it already, her appearance is obviously available in the character list link from the intro.*
Skyfallen fire

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

If there’s one aspect of life that the kaldorei people have faced many times in the past, it is combat. Several major battles have been waged over the millennia within their territories, some more devastating than others. In fact, the fiercest one was so destructive that it tore the entire initial continent apart.

While they are no strangers to traversing the fires of death and obliteration, their opponents tend to differ. The various demons from the Burning Legion are enemies that the elves have become accustomed to tackling, having seen it as their foremost mission to stop their conquest of this world. The creatures they face today, however, are much more of an anomaly.

The terrible news from a few years ago, regarding the rise and expansion of undead forces on the eastern continent, did not escape the people of Kalimdor either. While they became aware of the events, though, none of them believed that these horrors would ever arrive on their shores. They may not be strangers to fighting terrible opponents, but it’s difficult to say whether they were actually ready for this specific type of foe.

In the outskirts of Auberdine on this windy night, a huge structure is hovering in the sky, a type of building that none here has ever seen, but that someone else had previously identified as a ‘necropolis’. It had been spotted in the northern sea to begin with, but as the Sentinels figured that the undead would not be satisfied with attacking random outposts in the middle of nowhere, they relocated almost immediately to the town, in hopes of protecting it. As they are forced to battle against wave after wave of Scourge troops, it is clear that their assumption was correct.

To avoid being targeted by anti-air devices, the necropolis stopped over the northwestern beach. The Sentinel forces reacted to this by crafting makeshift barricades outside of the town, as to focus the battle away from the buildings and civilians. They have also extracted all sorts of weapons and contraptions, anything they have to protect themselves with. The defenses are being led by none other than Battlemaster Shaerai and this happens to be her first major battle in this role. The last time anyone from Darkshore fought in a war, during the last Legion invasion, they were led by Battlemaster Veldarya.

Luckily, Shaerai is not alone. Javynna, her mother and the senior Elune priestess in this region, is obviously present as well, having brought some members of her Order here to aid the soldiers. The priests purpose is not only to support and reinforce the soldiers, but also to protect the town. The source of their concern is the necropolis itself. A bright blue beam is currently active from the bottom of it, which it occasionally teleports undead troops with, but it is capable of more than that.

Javynna had been concentrating on boosting some of the Sentinels with Elune’s light, but once more senses foul magic in the air. Her eyes are drawn to the structure and she gazes upon a growing green-black orb that forms on its side. She gasps and quickly rushes towards the edge of town again.

“Priests, to me! It’s sending another volley!”

All of the elves in lighter clothing or small bits of armor hurry to her location and prepare a united prayer to Elune. As they do, moonlight erupts around them, which they shape into a huge barrier. The necromantic energies slam into them for several seconds, but eventually abates. They survived another volley, but this also drained some of their stamina. It has done this several times by now, seemingly needing a few minutes between every recharge. It’s hard to know how many times it
can do this, but one thing is certain – the priests will not last forever.

Simultaneously, the kaldorei defenders get to witness another unusual sight, but one that is much more reassuring. Raxeen, as the only paladin and draenei in this area, has obviously joined their efforts. She walks around with Kerastha Rakkan, her special crystal hammer infused with the powers of the Light. Not only is the weapon itself large and sturdy, but with the holy blessings within, it becomes utterly devastating. She bashes and crushes the Scourge troops easily, only occasionally stopping to toss out a purging Light-based spell. The night elves have very little experience with the Light, but her strength is refreshing.

“Pheta vi acahachi! Mishun re dana’shj kar!”, she exclaims in her language, before destroying another skeleton, as well as kicking a ghoul in the chest and then smashing it on the ground. “The foundations for these creatures are fairly weak”, she remarks to the other defenders, speaking in Common. “Even the worst of demons can endure more pain than these ‘undead’, as you call them.”

Javynna soon returns to this location, gathering the powers of Elune in her hand and unleashes it on some nearby wraiths, which she smites rather quickly. “Do you have any experience with fighting against these types of enemies?”

Two ghouls try to tackle Rax from the side, but due to being so much larger and more heavily armored than them, they aren’t much of a match. She elbows one in the face and smacks the other with her wristguard, shortly before annihilating them with the hammer. “Some, but not a lot. We call them ‘man’elar’, which can be loosely translated to ‘unnatural spirits’. It is derived from a similar base as the word ‘man’ari’, a term for corrupted beings. Animating the dead is a favored tactic of the nathrezim, though in a completely different manner. They prefer to utilize them to confuse and discourage, sometimes as cannon fodder, but not to this extent. Not as armies.”

“Indeed. They did something similar to us during the last invasion, but not through these machines.”

“It is rarely a tactic they employ against my people, due to our strong connection to the Light, which often protect our fallen bodies and spirits. However, I cannot sense the nathrezim behind this attack.”

A skeleton attempts to attack her with a heavy sword, but she parries the blade, kicks it in the chest region and then finishes with a Light-infused shock attack that blasts its head. “I suspect Rivaryn probably has more experience with this.”

“From all the stories I’ve heard, I agree”, she says and then turns a worried gaze over her battlefield. “Which makes me wonder where she and Thariss are. They should be here, but I can’t see them anywhere.”

If one looks for Shaerai, however, she can be found at the front of the defensive line, despite her rank. She stands right next to the rest of her warriors, with her long light blue hair stirring in the wind and her pale blue skin glistening in the moonlight, doing her best to hold off the undead horde. Compared to the magical tools at the disposal of Rax and Javynna, Shaerai only has her weapons, which includes a moonglaive and a shield. Obviously, she is very adept with these tools, not only carving destruction in close range, but occasionally tossing it onto distant foes, thrown in such a way that it ricochets back into her hand afterwards.

Except for these weapons, Shaerai also fights with her nightsaber companion at her side, as they work very efficiently as a duo. They constantly know where the other will strike, as if they were of one mind. Their strength and speed in this unified sense is among the very top out of all the
gathered Sentinels. Thariss has technically been trained to fight in the same fashion, but she and Ilca are not as effective together.

After taking a step back to order some of her troops to another side of the battlefield, she takes a moment to breathe and look at her mother.
“I wonder if there’s any end to these accursed creatures; they just keep coming. Also, how exactly are we going to take down that necropolis?”

“Do you not have siege weapons?” Rax asks. “It is a structure, which means it would be quite vulnerable to them.”

“Yes, I know, and I did order some of my Sentinels to fire our glaive throwers at the start of the battle, but that thing has some type of barrier around it, which protects it from our attacks.”

If they turn their eyes towards the necropolis and focus, it is possible to observe a thin shimmering blue light around it, which is likely the edge of this magical fortification. Javynna gazes at it now, feeling the concern growing in the back of her mind.
“I attempted to analyze it earlier, with the help of Mother Moon’s gifts, but whatever this barrier is, I can’t seem to cut through it. We may have to consider evacuating the town after all.”

Shaerai furrows her brow as she hears it, displaying a similar – albeit not quite as fierce – determination that Javynna recognizes from her late wife.
“And surrender Auberdine to these fiends? Never.”

The priestess wonders if her daughter is simply trying to fight and protect their homes, or if some pride might be muddying the waters. She briefly switches to Darnassian, just in case.
“You don’t have to worry, you know. Veldarya would not disapprove of retreating in this situation.”

Shaerai stares at her for a few moments, before directing her eyes to the battlefield again.
“I will not lose, mom.”

Javynna sighs, not sure how she should react, but this stubborn attitude is very reminiscent of Veldarya as well.
Thankfully, at this very moment, they hear another familiar voice coming from the east.
“Surrender isn’t necessary, as the necropolis can be destroyed.”

The trio turns around and spots four individuals that come running towards them – two of them are elves, accompanied by a raptor and another nightsaber. The priestess widens her eyes.
“Rivaryn, Thariss, there you are! Thank Elune. I was so worried.”

Rax smiles and shifts her hammer into a sturdier grip.
“Glad to see you could make it. Wondered if you would miss all the action.”

Thariss snorts.
“We’ve had enough of it already, actually.”

The Battlemaster in the group ignores the greetings and instead focuses on the blood elf.
“What did you say, Rivaryn? There’s a way to eliminate that thing?”, she asks and gestures at the necropolis.

Riv nods briefly.
“Yeah. It may appear impenetrable, but it’s not. You see the portal at the bottom? That is its weak spot. It can’t keep both the portal and the barrier up at the same time, so once the portal is
activated, the barrier isn’t. You have to target that location.”

The other three women all turn to view the flying construction once more, surveying the bottom of it. None of them had really considered this aspect, as no weakness is visible.

“Hmm. That maneuver might be difficult to pull off from here. Not only would we need to alter our aim, we have to get a better angle. Our glaive throwers can lob projectiles from afar, but if we want to target the floor, we have to get closer. And, well…” She lowers her eyes to the battlefield, seeing the undead squads that keep pouring out. “That won’t exactly be an easy task.”

“Don’t worry, we’ve got your back, Shae”, Thariss tells her older sister. “If you get some Sentinels to push those things, we’ll help you defend them.”

Rax approaches the rest of the group.

“And you will have my aid as well.”

Shaerai glances between the three women, a hesitant scowl still remaining on her face and her ears twitches with doubt.

“Your attitudes are commendable, but this will be dangerous. Are you absolutely certain this will work, Rivaryn?”

Riv inclines her head.

“I am. We may have lost the war against the Scourge back in Quel’Thalam, but that doesn’t mean we didn’t cause some damage. I’ve seen it happen before.”

Thariss looks at her sister, holding a hand over the hilt of her blade, which is currently sheathed.

“You’ve got a better idea?”

Taking a deep breath to consider her options, Shaerai soon has to emit it again, imbued with disappointment.

“…no, I don’t.
Fine, let’s do it then. But I’m not going to stand here and let others sacrifice themselves – I’m going with you.” She glances over her shoulder at another warrior. “Captain! I’m taking a few troops and these glaive throwers through the battlefield, so that we can blast that necropolis once and for all. You’re in charge while I’m gone.”

This woman views her with a lot of skepticism and has to pause for a few moments, before she salutes Shaerai.

“Y…Yes, Battlemaster! Good luck.”

Javynna puts her hands on the shoulders of her two daughters, but views all four of the women that are leaving for this task.

“Be careful out there. I will have my priests standing by, just in case.”

Shaerai assigns six of her Sentinels to push three glaive throwers to the northeast, trying to at least proceed along the outskirts of their enemies’ movements. Except for Riv, Thariss and Rax, Shaerai also grabs four more Sentinels to help with defenses of the escort.

To begin with, they are rather effective, and they wander through the darkness of the night undisturbed, somewhat hidden by shadows from the tall trees nearby. For a time, they almost believe that they’re going to get all the way to the necropolis without being seen, but they do not end up being so lucky.

After a couple of ghouls smell the alluring scent of living flesh to the side and attack the escort, more attention is soon drawn towards them and the Scourge become fully aware of what’s going on. Their tactics change and soon enough, the group is being assaulted from several angles, as the
Undead forces split their focus. They are certainly numerous enough to cause devastation on two sides, especially when one is so poorly defended.

The situation is starting to look very bleak when the glaive throwers can no longer move anywhere, due to the number of foes assaulting them and at least two Sentinels get grievously wounded. It comes almost a miracle then, when reinforcements arrive for the kaldorei. The clashing of weapons and the unnatural groans and hisses of the undead are interrupted by something ferocious in the sky – a roar.

Eyes are drawn upwards, trying to spot where this sound might’ve come from and an unusual sight reveals itself for them. A large blue drake comes flying at high speed over the field of death. It spreads its wings and opens its maw, unleashing a swirling arcane fire down on the undead forces close to the escort, creating a bit of breathing room for them. It doesn’t stop there either, as the drake comes back for several runs, not only distracting the undead, but also steadily reduces their numbers.

This is a startling vision, and some aren’t sure whether they’re dreaming or not. Rax looks especially astonished by it all.

“Is that…?”

“No time to think about it now!”, yells Thariss. “C’mon, get these damn throwers rolling! We have a necropolis to destroy!”

“You heard my sister! Move it!”, Shaerai agrees.

With the assistance of their new flying ally, they continue. Together, the escort manages to cut a path through the Scourge’s defenses and eventually reach an appropriate location for their assault. Once the glaive throwers are in position, they only have to aim and fire, shooting several projectiles into the bottom of the necropolis. Just like Riv mentioned, it appears the structure is the least fortified in this spot and cracks are quickly created. The drake offers its fire to this effort as well, which widens the gap and eventually breaks it open. The portal gets the destroyed and the facility starts to fall apart, having to retreat.

Only a minute or so later, the defenders and the citizens can cheer in triumph as the necropolis crashes into the waters of the Veiled Sea. The Sentinels still have to fight for a few more minutes against the last of the undead, now aided by the escort and the drake from the opposite side, which produces too much of a disadvantage for the Scourge. They are without leadership and hope, being annihilated one by one.

When the last of the creatures are gone, the mercenary team can see how the drake gently drifts down towards them, flapping its wings to slow the fall. Upon landing, smoke starts to surround it and it changes shape. Once the dust settles, a quel’dorei appears before them. Her short azure blue hair, icy blue eyes and pale skin with a few traces of azure blue scales over her neck, arms and hands, are very familiar.

Nadelgosa gazes at them intently.

“Rivaryn, Thariss”, she says and then pauses briefly. “…Raxeen. It has been a while. If you have time, I wish to speak with all of you.”

Chapter End Notes
Don't know if I specified this in the last story, but yeah, Nadelgosa is like, a pretty old-ish drake. She's on the cusp of being a full dragon. I'm not sure how old drakes have to be before they're considered adults, but I imagine she's somewhere close to a millennium. Similar to Aruunel, actually.

The phrases I used for the draenei language was half-canon, half-made up. The first section means "Light, give me strength", while the second part was likely something along the lines of "Aid me with destroying these foul beings" or whatever. "Man'elar" doesn't actually exist as an official word, but as Man'ari is loosely translated to "unnatural beings" and is used for anything that is corrupted, I felt like I could use that as a base.
The eerie tranquility has returned to the Eastern Plaguelands. The signs of battle have far from been washed away completely, due to how many troops fell during the struggle – the vast majority of them being undead – but at least no more unnatural groans or growls can be heard in the immediate vicinity.

Once they managed to gather up all their belongings and led the hawkstriders to a safer location, the Argent Crusade set up a camp together with the sin’dorei survivors, prepared a few fires and began licking their wounds. One of the fires, in the outskirts, is currently dedicated to sanctifying and burning the corpses.

Instead of making two camps, the sin’dorei caravan members allowed themselves to be taken into the care of the crusaders, which seemed to be a good solution according to their mage. As the caravan leader is gone, everyone else has chosen to follow Kassari. Due to her position as Arcanist, everyone practically expects leadership from her anyhow.

The crusaders are numerous, friendly and ready to help. Not only do they offer rations as replacement for some of the food that the civilians lost, they also help heal any injured and repair the broken wagons. The few hawkstriders that died cannot be replaced, but they should still have enough to proceed later on, once they believe they’re ready.

During this process, the blood elves have also chosen to sit down and speak with their saviors, seeming very impressed by the crusaders’ prowess. They’re intrigued by the diverse nature of the group and to hear what brought everyone to this accursed land. There’s no hesitation when the elves promise that they’re going to bring news to other regions about this noble act. Everyone should know that the Plaguelands are now slightly less perilous than before, with the Crusade nearby.

While they focus on this aspect, Ashindra has remained somewhat separated. For the most part, she is thankful for the help they gain, but not interested in speaking to just any person regarding their deeds. Instead, she’d like to know more about the structure of the organization, where this Crusade came from.

She can’t deny the anxiety building within her. She was very impressed with their saviors and her curiosity is soaring, but she doesn’t want to get too excited or overwhelmed by what they just experienced. Maybe these people are not all that they appear to be.

As her eyes sweep across the many members of this organization who are present, she spots several humans among them. She still remembers what some of that race did to her people just a few years ago, how large sections of their survivors were simply discarded by the humans. It’s difficult to forget the prejudice they faced, even if not all humans were to blame. After all, it is why Quel’Thalas withdrew from the Alliance to begin with.

Then again, things have changed. The sin’dorei no longer care for Kael’thas or his followers, especially after his betrayal and downfall. The elves and the Horde were not the only groups trying to stop the Prince’s delusional plan of consuming the Sunwell and summoning Kil’jaeden – members of the Alliance were there too, and they struggled just as hard to achieve victory. In the end, they even left the elves to supervise their own lands once more, without too much protests. Perhaps it’s time to move on.

Besides, the human that she currently has her eyes on is not even with the Alliance, but a neutral
faction. It was...refreshing to fight with her on the battlefield. Trying to accept the aspect of being a new woman, Ash takes a deep breath and then approaches the individual known as Melia. The officer is currently standing next to several other crusaders, while they discuss the Scourge and what they’ve seen here.

Ash stops a few meters away and then clears her throat. Due to the large party surrounding Melia, Ash gets quite a few eyes gazing in her direction, which makes her somewhat nervous.

“Lady Haven, was it?”

Melia arches her brow skeptically. “Lady?” Shortly after, she chuckles. “Uh, I think that’s too formal for me. I’m not even a noble. Just ‘Melia’ or ‘Lieutenant’ is fine.”

“Oh, right. Of course”, she says awkwardly. Ash fidgets with her hands for a moment, before she decides to simply put them behind her for the time being. “Well, Lieutenant, may I speak with you for a moment? I wish to ask you some questions regarding your organization.”

“Sure, what do you wanna know?”

Ash opens her mouth, but then glances around, seeing the other troops still staring at her. It makes her repeat the act of clearing her throat. “I…uh, wonder if I might pose them to you in private?”

Melia blinks a few times and then observes those surrounding her, before she smiles and shrugs. “Very well. Crusaders, set up a patrol around the perimeter. We’ll probably be staying here for the night.”

The other troops salute her. “Yes, Lieutenant”, the dwarf among them confirms and the group departs.

Afterwards, Melia raises her hand and gestures for Ash to follow. “Let’s go for a walk.”

Together, the duo wanders around the outskirts of the camp, away from prying eyes and ears, but still not far enough to be out of sight completely. This area still has the stench of death and decay in thick layers, but Ash soon comes to realize that something pleasant slips in between them. She thinks that she can detect the refreshing scent of peaceblooms, which doesn’t really make sense out here. Is the priestess wearing a perfume of some sort?

While she ponders this aspect, she forgets that they’re supposed to be having a conversation and it gets rather awkwardly quiet for a minute or two. “So…you had questions?”, Melia asks eventually.

Ash’s eyes quickly divert towards the human, in mild surprise. “Huh? Oh, right. Yes, of course. Sorry, I…” She exhales, being annoyed with herself. “It’s been a while since I…spoke to any humans.”

Melia watches Ash’s expression for a few moments, curiosity and understanding seemingly running through her. She displays a knowing smile. “It’s alright, I get it. Some of my people didn’t act very kindly to yours a few years ago. You didn’t deserve that.”
“Yeah, it’s—yeah. Please, excuse my behavior. It’s not fair to punish you all collectively for it.”

“Like I said, it’s fine.”

Hearing how Melia doesn’t seem to be uncomfortable or at least not outraged by Ash’s reaction, the paladin takes another deep breath and then tries to proceed, to temporarily forget this issues. “What you and your forces did out there was commendable. I almost thought we were lost there for a while, but you saved us, performing a selfless act that I hadn’t expected. I wish to thank you again.”

Melia’s smile grows, but this time with a more joyful element. She shrugs casually. “That’s not necessary. We’ve been thanked enough already. Besides, it’s not like your people didn’t fight too. You’ve got some skills, Revenor; I was impressed.”

Ash looks into the other woman’s eyes, trying to detect notions of deception or mockery, but spots none. She must’ve been genuine with her praise. Ash inclines her head. “Thank you. As do you.”

“I do try my best. I pray to the Light every morning and evening, to give me strength.”

“We’ve been thanked enough already. Besides, it’s not like your people didn’t fight too. You’ve got some skills, Revenor; I was impressed.”

“Thank you. As do you.”

“I do try my best. I pray to the Light every morning and evening, to give me strength.”

She turns her gaze back to the camp, to the many crusaders guarding her own people. “I hadn’t expected such a diverse group either. You called yourself the…’Argent Crusade’, correct?”

“That’s right.”

“Does it have anything to do with the Argent Dawn?”

Melia nods quickly and then folds her arms. “It does, actually. Our organization was created very recently, through a merge of the Argent Dawn and the paladin Order known as the ‘Knights of the Silver Hand’. That’s why we have so many of your particular talents already.”

“Ahh, yes, I’ve heard the name before. Isn’t that a human organization?”

“Well, Alliance, to be specific. They’ve got a bunch of dwarves and a few elves too. We were brought together after the Scourge assaulted our main outpost to the east, Light’s Hope Chapel. It’s been our headquarters for a while already, but we now display Crusade banners instead. We’re led by Highlord Tirion Fordring, another paladin. He’s the new Ashbringer.”

Ash widens her eyes somewhat. “Ashbringer? Hmm. But…I thought that blade was destroyed.”

Melia shakes her head, to dismiss such ideas. “Not exactly. It was corrupted by the Scourge a few years ago. Then again, many thought that meant it was lost anyhow and could never be returned. Luckily, the righteous power beneath our chapel renewed its strength in the Light and it chose Fordring as its new wielder.”

Beneath the Chapel? Ash can’t recall anything extraordinary from it in the past. Maybe it has changed.
“Huh. That’s interesting and unexpected. What are the Crusade’s goals? Are they the same as the Argent Dawn?”

“Yes and no. Our purpose is simple and remains the same – to fight the Scourge, the Burning Legion and other threats to Azeroth, so that we may protect all of its people. The difference between the Crusade and the Dawn is that we have now changed to more offensive means, to no longer stay put in one area. We aim to expand. We’re still doing our best to secure the regions around the Plaguelands, but our ultimate goal is far more ambitious – we aim to travel to Northrend and stop the Lich King once and for all.”

Now that is not only ambitious and interesting, but something which Ash immediately recognizes that she has a stake in too. Not only did her people suffer under the Scourge’s invasion, but Arthas’ cruelty specifically. Or whatever that monster calls himself now.

“Do you really think that can be accomplished?”

“Well, I can’t say it’ll be easy, but we do have more hope now than ever. A lot more people are joining us all the time, as the name of the Crusade is drawing attention.”

Ash survey’s the crusaders once more, seeing so many different individuals gathered under one symbol, more than she has ever done in any army that she has been part of.

“No, not quite, but we do have members from each of those who are involved with the Horde and Alliance.”

Her eyes turn a little bit distant when she continues.

“Many of those who join us have suffered in some way, having lost friends and loved ones to the Scourge. Others simply believe that this is the right thing to do or that the Scourge is the greatest threat to this world at this time, and the other factions aren’t doing enough to combat it. That’s why they come to us.”

“So, after you’ve defeated the Scourge, you’ll disband?”

Melia sighs and shrugs.

“To be honest, I don’t know. I hope not, as I believe Azeroth needs an organization like ours, but ultimately, it’s unclear how long we’ll last if we do succeed. Right now, we’re not bothered with the future anyhow, as the road ahead is much more difficult. We do have some general support from the Alliance and Horde, though, especially after recent attacks. Whatever they choose, we will proceed regardless.”

Ash suddenly stops in her tracks and furrows her brow.

“Hold on. Recent attacks?”

“Yeah, haven’t you heard? Stormwind, Orgrimmar, Teldrassil, the Undercity – several cities have been attacked by waves of Scourge troops. It wasn’t enough to succeed, but every report suggests that this is just an initial tactic, a process to a greater invasion. That’s why we’ve decided to launch our own assault on Northrend and stop the undead before it gets worse.”

Very little news has arrived in Silvermoon, last she heard. Either Orgrimmar didn’t have a chance to tell them or they didn’t want to. Then again, is Quel’Thalas even of interest to the Scourge? Can they even penetrate it, now that the Sunwell has been resurrected?

While she considers these aspects, she also returns to a name that was mentioned previously.

“Hmm. Light’s Hope Chapel…I believe I’ve visited that place before. Back then, it wasn’t much more than what the name suggests. Pretty small and insignificant, really. It was simply one of the locations that those of us from the church in Quel’Thalas went past on our regular journeys through
Melia’s smile returns. “Yeah, I remember. It is true that the chapel hasn’t exactly grown much, but it’s on the way. The Crusade is building it into something greater, with fortifications that can last against the Scourge.”

Ash turns towards her, surveying the human. “It’s been a while since my last visit. Do you think there’s room for one more person on your trip back?”

If she had simply been glad for the interest before, Melia now looks far more intrigued. “Oh, sure, if you want to. What about your comrades, though?”

Ash gives herself a few seconds to decide on an appropriate answer. The truth is already pretty blatant to her. “They…don’t need me.”

Eventually, the duo ends their solitary stroll and returns to the rest of the group. Ash takes Melia with her all the way up towards Kass and Khroga, who are currently sitting with some of the other elves around a campfire. “Oh, there you are, Ash. Want some food?”

Ash lifts a hand and scratches her neck. “Uh, yeah, sure. But…I thought I should tell you that, when you leave, you should proceed to the Undercity without me.”


Instinctively, the paladin’s gaze is drawn back towards Melia. “To explore what the Light has to offer.”

Chapter End Notes

If you've played the game, or the Wotlk expansion specifically, you probably know about the Argent Crusade already, but I think I've said before that I enjoy letting my characters discuss this information on their own and describe their versions or opinions on the matter.
The battle at the coast of Darkshore, close to Auberdine, has ended. Whether any more are waiting in the nearby future is hard to tell, but the kaldorei have done their best to prepare for such eventualities.

Another activity that has to be dealt with is the cleanup effort, a task that hasn’t actually been as easy to solve as they may have hoped. They have some experience with erasing demonic energy, but this is a little bit different.

While the Sentinels were initially quite happy to simply burn the bodies and begin cleansing the earth, to remove the undead taint, Rivaryn offered them a warning. She informed the kaldorei forces, through Shaerai, that leaving a necropolis in the sea where it crashed is probably not a great solution in the long run. Foul magic will seep out of it, which is why she recommended that they find some way to fish it out and dispose of the remains elsewhere. This is why several ships have been dispatched and are doing their best to deal with this very situation.

In the meantime, the mercenaries and potential ‘heroes’ of the battle, are once more back in the Dusksong home. They’re currently getting ready to speak with their new guest, one that has been met with an ambiguous welcoming.

For the time being, it’s only the four of them sitting inside the living room and it is quite awkward, to say the last. Nadelgosa is looking rather guilty, with her ears bent back somewhat, while Raxeen glares at her. Riv and Thariss sit on one sofa, with Nadel in the opposite one, but Rax has taken a solo armchair, somewhat off to the side. She sits with her arms folded.

Eventually, Thariss clears her throat, hoping to break the silence.
“So, uh…it’s pretty weird seeing you again, Nadelgosa. Kinda came out of nowhere.”

“Indeed”, Riv agrees, “though we’re obviously grateful for your assistance. Not sure we could’ve won that fight without you.”

The drake puts her hands in her lap and slowly shakes her head.
“There is no need to thank me. I simply did what was necessary.”

Rax furrows her brow, with her hands clenching somewhat.
“Ah, I believe I have heard a similar line before. You did ‘what was necessary’ during our last encounter as well.”

Her voice drips with an accusatory tone, of irritation. The others go quiet again and Nadel looks both unsure and uncomfortable, trying to figure out where to begin. She likely never believed they’d have to see each other again. Not like this.
“Look, Raxeen, I…I’m sorry, okay? What I did was-…I never meant to—“

She’s interrupted by the draenei before she can continue her explanation.
“Sorry? That is it? You attempted to wipe my memory, potentially give me permanent mental damage, and you believe a simple apology is enough?”

Nadel stops for a few moments, reluctantly trying to work on a statement that may sound better. It's not easy, as she's not used to apologizing.
“I assure you, this is genuine.”
“I do not care if it is or not. If you were in my seat, would you accept nothing more than words and empty promises?”

“I…no, perhaps not”, she agrees cautiously. “But why do you believe it’s empty? I flew all the way out here and aided you in battle.”

“Yes, for which I assume you have a purpose. You would not have come here out of the goodness of your heart.”

The guilt reappears, perhaps even descending into levels of shame, especially due to how dismissive Rax’s tone sounds. She does have a point, though. Riv sighs and raises her hands, hoping to get their attention.

“Hey, let’s calm down, alright? I realize your last encounter was uh…difficult, but isn’t that all the more reason to talk about it?”

Finally, Rax tears her eyes away from the drake and stares at her friend instead. The skepticism does not disperse.

“That is easy for you to say. You were not the one she targeted.”

“Yes, that’s true, but don’t assume this means I’m okay with it. We’re not simply going to leave this issue behind us, because we are gonna make her answer for it, but are you not even a little bit curious about why she’s here? Just listening to her isn’t too much to ask, is it? She did something wrong before, but by helping us, she has proved that she’s willing to make it right.”

In the trio, it tends to be Thariss who acts as the unreasonable or the skeptical member, usually because she likes to get into trouble. Rax’s concerns aren’t unjustified, but it’s somewhat unusual that they have to resolve tension between her and another person, where Rax is the angry party. At least Riv takes the role of the diplomat again. Rax appears fairly dissatisfied and sighs, but her resistance loosens up.

“Fine, I will listen, but I shall not promise to agree to anything.”

Riv gives her a small smile.

“No one said you have to.”

Thariss shakes her head and snorts.

“Wow, this is awkward.”

“And such comments aren’t necessary, dear. Let’s all try to get along, alright?”

She redirects her eyes towards Nadel.

“So, my lady, you have anything to say?”

Nadel clears her throat and tries to correct her position. She fidgets a bit, but eventually decides to cross her legs and place her hands over them.

“Well, first of all, I wish to thank you for giving me a chance.” She turns her eyes specifically to Rax. “I appreciate it and I promise that this will be worth your time.”

Rax rolls her own eyes.

“We shall see.”

“At any rate, I assume by now that you’ve heard of the magical distortions and disruptions in the arcane network, yes?”

“Yeah, it’s kinda been impossible to avoid”, Thariss admits. “We received a few reports from
Darnassus and other sections of the Alliance about this. People believe something is going on.”

Nadel briefly bites at her lip, her gaze being diverted to the ground.
“Yes, something is definitely wrong, and I have the answer for it. My dragonflight, the blue dragons, are responsible. To be more specific, the source of your problems is our leader, Malygos. He is the one that has caused this entire scenario.”

The three women react somewhat differently. While Thariss mostly looks curious, both Riv and Rax are confused, albeit not for the same reasons.
“Because of one dragon?”, Rax asks. “How is that possible?”

“You misunderstand. Malygos is not a simple dragon, but one of the Dragon Aspects. Millennia ago, the Titans offered powers to my people, to become the guardians and overseers of this world. They sent abilities into five individuals, which would help with these tasks – Alexstrasza, Nozdormu, Neltharion, Ysera and Malygos. The leader of my dragonflight is known as the Spell-Weaver and was granted immense power over the magical leylines of Azeroth. It was meant to help him supervise arcane usage and protect people from its dangers.
Sadly, during the War of the Ancients, Neltharion turned against the others and in the battle to defeat him and the demonic forces, my flight was almost completely destroyed. Malygos took much of the blame and went into semi-hibernation for millennia, being caught in a state of crippling depression.”

Thariss nods slowly, as old memories reappear.
“I’ve heard the stories. My mothers used to talk about it, how they for a long time believed that blue dragons had died out.”

Some of the guilt on Nadel has dissolved, but it is replaced with a somber and gloomy tone instead.
“I know. Many of the other dragons assumed the same thing, but we remained and eventually rebuilt. Perhaps not to the same extent as in the past, but…we are still alive. During that time, we have tried our best to maintain the work that the Titans gave our kind, to watch over this world’s magical development.
A recent event has altered our path – Malygos has awakened.”

Thariss raises a hand to scratch her cheek.
“Huh. Didn’t expect that. What changed?”

“That is…a difficult story, with many interpretations, but one for another time. The most crucial aspect for you and your people is that he awoke with a new purpose. For a long time, he has ignored what mortals have been doing on Azeroth and when he finally began to examine your actions, he concluded that you have been carelessly misusing the arcane gifts. He couldn’t let that stand.”

Riv looks a bit confused.
“Misusing? How?”

“I believe he may have misinterpreted the acts of the Burning Legion, the Horde invasion, the Lich King and more unfortunate conflicts, as the fault of all mortals.”

“Hold on”, says Thariss. “He blames us for that shit? It’s not like we asked for that to happen!”

“I know, I know, and I’m not saying you were. I am simply trying to explain where Malygos is coming from.
Anyhow, he summoned many of the older and most powerful blue dragons who have survived through the ages and asked them to join in a council. There, he relayed the information that they
would be modifying and changing the energy of the leylines, to take control back from mortals. Afterwards, your people would either have to give in to his demands of how to use magic from now on or lose your connection to the arcane altogether.”

The trio lets that sink in, feeling that it’s definitely not a negotiation. Sounds to them like the arcane would become something for only those that Malygos can accept. “That is…quite extreme, yeah. I can’t believe that anyone here would take that well.”

“And they haven’t. The news hasn’t reached everyone, but it did get to Dalaran and the Kirin Tor. Their Council of Six immediately rejected the notion, of course, but not every mage did. There are those who saw it as more useful to align with Malygos, which is why his faction has been joined by rogue mages.”

Riv interrupts her by raising a hand. “Wait. ‘Faction’? You’re making it sound like not everyone is on his side.”

Nadel nods briefly. “It’s true, not all of us agree with him.”

At the same time, Rax looks rather skeptical. “But why are you telling us all of this? You do not honestly expect the three of us to strike down one of these Dragon Aspects, are you?”

“No, no, of course not. The reason I’m here is to ask for your help with related matter. Members of my family were involved with the deliberations and most of them were not very keen on Malygos’ ideas. My older brother – Deradgos, a full dragon – was very openly opposed to those suggestions. He thought it was pure delusion and a misuse of our powers.”

“Hey, he’s got a point”, says Thariss. “Think I like this brother of yours.”

A bit of sorrow washes over Nadel. “Well, sadly, anyone who resisted Malygos’ commands at the meeting were arrested and imprisoned. They are now locked up in underground lairs at Coldarra. This included my brother.”

This is obviously grave news, although Thariss and Riv seems to understand the ramifications better than Rax. “A Dragon Aspect would do this to his own flight?”, Riv asks. “My people also have stories about the aspects, but most describe them as noble and wise, not tyrannical.”

Nadel shuts her eyes and sighs heavily, her shoulders slumping. “Indeed, that’s how we view Malygos as well. He is like a father to many of us, even those who aren’t directly related. Deradgos was there to represent our grandfather, Senegos, and my family was horrified to hear of what happened. Many of them have been hesitant about how to react, hoping that negotiations with Malygos will be enough, to show that we don’t wish to fight him. I disagree.”

“Well, as one drake, I do not suppose it is easy to start a rebellion”, Rax comments.

“I don’t care”, says Nadel, her voice growing a bit more determined. “I refuse to leave my brother to rot in a cell somewhere, when we have no idea what his captors might do. He’s a ‘traitor’ now, apparently, and they might hurt him. I won’t allow that. Malygos is clearly not well and acting like this against his own people is not why the Titans gave him his gifts. I must rescue my brother, but…well, I can’t do it alone.”
Riv leans back in the sofa and crosses her arms.
“And that’s why you came to us.”

Nadel’s expression and demeanor is quickly regaining the humbler streak. She knows this won’t be easy.
“Yes. I…have to admit that I need your help. Erm, again. I know how to speak to my people and my own powers are not unsubstantial but…I will likely be outnumbered.”
She turns her eyes towards them, surveying all three, one at a time.
“During our first encounter, you proved that you can fight, that your abilities and tactics are above mere grunts. While I do not aim to start any fights with my flight, hostilities may be unavoidable. You are outsiders, but you are the only mortals I trust.”

This comment immediately gets a retort from Rax, who frowns.
“Oh, you trust us now, do you?”

Nadel hesitates again, shrinking somewhat in her seat, while Riv sighs.
“Raxeen…”

Rax spreads her arms and directs herself towards the blood elf.
“I do not think I am being unreasonable here. She did not trust me before and I do not see why she would suddenly change her mind.”

Unfortunately, she does have a point, and neither of the two elves have much to respond with. The only one who can disprove it is Nadel herself.
Suddenly, the drake stands up and looks straight at the paladin.
“Raxeen, listen to me. I…know that what I did before was wrong. It was hasty, stupid and unfair. I wish I could take it back, but I cannot. It’s done, and I have to live with the consequences. This scenario is different. One of my people, my family, needs me. I beg you to give me another chance and help me. Please, I’ll do anything.”

She has regained some determination, but one laced with urgency.
Riv and Thariss glance at each other, trying to survey their emotions and they mostly seem to be on the same page.
“Well, uh…”, Thariss starts, “we’re both okay with it. I mean, we’re willing to help, but we’re also not the only members of this group.”

Hesitation and doubt is still blatant on Rax as she views the drake, likely assuming that Nadel isn’t being fully honest. They can’t really blame her for it either.
“A paladin does not usually turn down those in need, but…I do not enjoy the prospect of being betrayed later on. Again.”

Nadel takes a deep breath and then decides to approach Rax directly. She gets down on her knees and looks up into Rax’s white eyes.
“I will do everything I can to undo that act, Raxeen. If you wish to punish me later, I will give you that chance. All I ask is that you help me save my brother. Please.”

Rax stares at the drake, looking into those icy blue eyes and listens to the voice. The sincerity is there, that much can’t be denied, but Rax is still cautious. Dragons remain an anomaly to her and first impressions are everything. However…
“I…am willing to come with you and investigate the matter, to look into these claims. The arcane is important to my people as well and if I can help in some way to solve it, I will do my best.”

Both Riv and Thariss smile as they hear it. Nadel, however, is much more relieved, something she shows by taking Rax’s hands and kissing the back of both. Rax is quite surprised by this, but
doesn’t oppose it. “From the bottom of my heart, thank you. You will not regret this, I swear.”

It’s somewhat awkwardly silent for a second or two after this, but Thariss is the one to refocus their efforts. “So, where do we have to go, exactly?”

Nadel stands up again and looks at the elves. “Northrend.”

“…what? Northrend? But how the hell are we supposed to get up there in time? We don’t have a ship.”

“You won’t need one. Don’t worry, I have an ally who will assist me in getting us there. You’ll have to come with me.”

Chapter End Notes

I guess the roles are a little bit reversed here, compared to their last encounter in The Promised Land. Raxeen was obviously the more upset party, which I felt was reasonable. I mean, what Nadelgosa attempted to do wasn’t minor. At the same time, Nadel feels kinda awkward here, since she needs them and realizes that she has to make amends. Solving this situation is one of the main elements of this story.
The journey towards the easternmost section of the plaguelands is not a particularly lengthy one, no more than a day or two. For Ashindra, it is a strange experience, as she constantly compares it to the trips she used to make with the faithful elves in service of Quel’Thalas’ church. This was when this forest was filled with life and greenery. Sure, it wasn’t always completely safe, as wild animals or even bandits could potentially threaten them, but all of that is gone now. It is like she’s walking through nature’s forgotten graveyard.

Thankfully, a break is achieved in all this gloom and doom, once they arrive at their destination. Light’s Hope Chapel is, in many ways, similar to what it once was. It is a humble building in grey stone with a red roof and only one tower at the front, placed at the foot of a small mountain range. It is strange for her to come here as a new woman, one who no longer holds the same ideals as the old Ashindra did. Perhaps she can regain that somewhere down the line.

Looking around the area, it’s clear that not everything is the same, though. There are smaller buildings erected close to the hill where the Chapel is standing, along with a whole range of tents, work stations and barricades. Scaffolding has been put up in certain locations, where fortifications and defenses against the Scourge are currently being constructed. There are those who build weapons, armors, fix resources or decorations too. The entire region wears the banners with the gold, black and grey symbol, the mark of the Argent Crusade. To Ash, this proves what a big and united effort the Crusade has already become.

It appears that Ash is not the only newcomer or visitor either. Many more people, without tabards or other items that signify their allegiance, are walking around. They inspect the territory or seek guidance from any of the crusaders. They wish to train or learn more of what needs to be done in order to fight the Scourge.

Ash can see members from all races of the Alliance and Horde, which is fascinating. What surprises her the most is probably the fact that she can spot a few quel’dorei among them as well, visible through the blue eyes. Before coming to Outland, she wasn’t sure any of them still existed, but this is the first time in ages that she actually encounters one.

While the rest of Melia’s troops wander off to the barracks, the Lieutenant herself stops next to the paladin. Ash takes a deep breath, to absorb the moment, before she turns to the priestess.
“You weren’t kidding.”

Melia smiles and arches an amused brow.
“You assumed I’d be messing with you?”

“Not exactly, but I never thought anything like this was possible. The conflict between the Horde and Alliance is…an extensive and complicated one.”

“True, but not endless.”

Ash slowly spins around again, in order to not just view their surroundings, but also gesture at them.
“Your words were encouraging, but seeing all this actually makes me believe that you accept anyone who wishes to fight for the Light, no matter where they come from.”
Melia nods in agreement to begin with, but then decides to lift her hand and shake her finger slightly.

“It’s not just followers of the Light, actually. We have druids, worshippers of Elune and the Loa, the elements and many more.

While we, as a group, represent the Light, the fight against the Scourge is for everyone. After their attack on the Chapel, it drew a lot of attention, especially with our success. Uniting people from all origins of Azeroth is an ideal that the Crusade took from the Argent Dawn.”

If she considers this aspect, Ash is both amazed and bewildered. Is there anyone who has ever been able unite believers of all kinds?

“You mentioned this assault a couple of days ago. What was that about?”

Melia gestures for her to follow and the duo starts a small and slow journey along the outskirts of the Chapel grounds. Here and there, the occasional crusader waves or salutes at Melia.

“I’m a little surprised you haven’t heard about it. It was pretty big news for a lot of folks. But anyway, a few months back, the Lich King was leading a new strike force in the region, which mostly focused on the Scarlet Crusade’s outposts and towns nearby. He flew here on a big necropolis, one called Acherus.”

“There was another necropolis here? I heard about that first one, the uh…”

“Naxxramas. Yes, that one was a bit more of a fortress, the base of his second-in-command, Kel’Thuzad. Acherus was…a training facility. It was where he crafted a new army of Death Knights.”

The term makes Ash frown. She has heard it before, as it was what Arthas had called himself.

“A whole army of them? That doesn’t sound good.”

Melia slowly shakes her head.

“It wasn’t; not for us and definitely not for the Scarlets. He attacked them first and destroyed their homes without mercy. This action didn’t just give him more troops for his undead forces, but also made his new Knights stronger.

Eventually, they were brought towards their real goal – Light’s Hope Chapel and the Argent Dawn. We assumed, both now and back then, that he saw us as the real threat.”

Ash crosses her arms and raises one of her long eyebrows.

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but…I find that peculiar. What’s so special about the Chapel? It’s not exactly a fortress, nor has it ever been particularly impressive. No offense.”

The human turns her head and smiles somewhat mysteriously at her companion.

“I’ll get to that, Revenor.

At any rate, their forces were humongous, several thousand walking corpses of all kinds. Naturally, they were led by elite death knight troops, ones that had been forged in the fires of conflict against the Scarlets. The Dawn only had a few hundred defenders.”

Ash considers the scenario, the contrast between the two sides. It makes her snort amusedly.

“You know, this kind of sounds like one of those tall tales you used to hear from soldiers in the taverns of Stratholme, after they came back from fighting in the Second War.”

It appears that Melia is familiar with the idea, which is why she tilts her head back and lets out a hearty laughter. The sound makes Ash’s ears twitch slightly, as she finds it quite pleasant.

Melia raise her hand and pats the paladin’s shoulder.

“It’s been a while since I thought about anything like that. I get what you mean, but I’m not trying to brag. Not that much, at least.”
“If you say so”, Ash replies, with some underlying mirth.

“Anyhow, the Scourge battered themselves against us, but in the end, they failed. They used a tremendous amount of strength, but it wasn’t enough. Not because our troops were better, but because the Light protected us. Unfortunately, the Lich King wasn’t really after the defeat of the Dawn, but the death of Tirion Fordring. The paladin rode here together with some of the remnants of the Silver Hand, to help out. Luckily, with the power of the Chapel, the Ashbringer was cleansed and Fordring claimed it, which ended Arthas’ attempt. He was forced to retreat.”

There’s still some boasting involved in the process, but Ash doesn’t find it unbelievable. The power of the Light can be immense, if used correctly, to shatter even the darkest shadows. Despite the uplifting tale, a wind of solemnity still blows across Ash’s features.

“That’s definitely an impressive feat for the Dawn as an organization. Quel’Thalas attempted the same thing, but…well, I guess you know how that ended.”

Melia’s joy temporarily disperses as well, and she exhales from her nose.

“Yeah. Lordaeron met the same fate.”

Suddenly, Ash feels stupid. She did it again, didn’t she? Destroyed the mood and got both of them thinking of unnecessary grief. She enjoys seeing Melia’s smile and perhaps shouldn’t try so hard to erase its existence.

“Erm, were you part of the Argent Dawn previously?”

Melia corrects some of her hair that flutter around in the wind and inclines her head.

“Mhm, I was.”

“I don’t know much about it, other than the name. Where did it come from?”

The priestess diverts her eyes to the road ahead.

“Well, that’s not an all too distant tale either. Originally, the members that later founded the organization were followers of the first Ashbringer, Alexandros Mograine. I think this was somewhere after the Second War. They fought with him against the Scourge as well, once it arrived. When he fell, many of his supporters wished to keep the crusade going, but it gradually became more zealous. Some didn’t agree and split from the main group, to establish the Argent Dawn. The others named themselves the Scarlet Crusade.”

“Ah. I’ve heard about the latter group too. Their methods sound…severe.”

Melia snorts and shakes her head.

“To say the least, yeah. Not only were and are they more zealous than us, but they restrict their recruitment policy to humans. There were some quel’dorei and dwarves to begin with, but that changed. The Dawn opened its doors to any races of Azeroth that wished to fight the Scourge. At the time, interest was unfortunately limited, as not everyone wanted to come to Lordaeron after its destruction. Due to our lack of numbers, we were forced to cooperate with the Scarlet Crusade for a time, hence why we lived so close together. With the help of the Horde and Alliance, we stopped Naxxramas’ schemes and decreased the plaguelands’ spread. As you might imagine, it was quite a momentous effort.”

Sounds like Ash missed a lot of events, while her people were recuperating behind the crumbling walls of Quel’Thalas. She knew that some left to fight anyhow, but she didn’t really care for the ideas of helping out with conflicts here. The homeland was more important.
During the course of the story, Ash’s eyes are drawn to the Chapel once more.
“What’s with all the interest for this place, though? Why is it so important? I can’t see or feel anything special with it.”

She doesn’t notice, but Melia watches her rather intently, being intrigued by the question. The priestess leans closer and lowers her voice.
“That’s because you can’t sense it from a distance. You’re gonna have to get closer. C’mon, follow me.”

Being too curious to decline, Ash goes with her and together, they enter the Chapel. Interestingly enough, the interior is similar but not the same as the structure she once knew. It has clearly been renovated in recent years.
The benches and small prayer booths at the side still remain, with the stage at the back, for the bishop or priest that holds sermons for the faithful. Cozy, but not exactly unique in any way.

Her doubt lasts for no more than a few seconds, however. Suddenly, from within, she senses something entering her chest. It’s like a gentle breeze, a warm caress and a soft embrace all at the same time, forcing the paladin to take a deep breath as to not be overwhelmed.
“W-what’s going?”, she asks in a whisper. “It feels like…like I’m standing outside the Sunwell. But how can that be? I know the Light is powerful, but I’ve rarely sensed anything with this strength.”

She turns to Melia for answers and the human smiles at her, glad to see her reaction.
“It’s because of what rests beneath the Chapel. We’re standing on holy ground, Revenor.”

“Yeah, okay, that’s true, but what’s causing it? It can’t just appear out of nowhere.”

Melia bites her lip, almost excitedly, as she considers another aspect.
“Hmm. We’re…not actually supposed to discuss it with outsiders, but…I know, I can ask them to show us.”

“I’d like that, if you don’t mind.”

The duo walks further into the building, and in the center, there are several people. Most of them are discussing various subjects in different groups, but Melia walks past them all, towards a set of individuals who seemingly just stand around in the back as guards.
One of them is a Forsaken. His hide is rotten and decayed, with a strange grey hue and his eyes glow in an unnerving yellow color, but he still manages to operate like everyone else, though his body is somewhat hunched. He even wears the tabard of the Crusade.

“Hey, Donlan”, Melia says as she waves and smiles at him.

The undead nods politely at her.
“Lieutenant Haven. Good to see you.” His voice is quite raspy.

“Everything alright in here?”

He glances around the room briefly and then shrugs.
“As good as ever, I suppose. Why?”

Melia clears her throat.
“Well, I uh, was wondering if you could let us inside.”

Donlan watches her with an expression that Ash can’t really read, not until he turns towards her. That’s when he shows clear signs of skepticism.
“We’re not supposed to let outsiders in.”

“I know, I know, but this is important.”
She gestures at Ash.
“This is Ashindra of the Blood Knights, a true believer. She has come here to take a closer look at the Chapel and to understand the power of the Light. I believe showing her the truth of this land can help sway her to our cause. She might be able to recruit others in the future.”

This is, of course, overly theatrical, but he doesn’t have to know that. Donlan remains skeptical for several more seconds as he glances between the two, but it appears Melia’s eager plea manages to defeat it in the end and he shrugs.
“Alright, alright. Just don’t make a mess down there, okay?”

“Tsk, when am I ever messy?”

He allows them to walk around him and Melia shows Ash to a section at the opposite wall, where she pulls at a torch holder. Suddenly, a hatch slides open in the floor, revealing a set of stairs. As they descend together, the pervading presence of the Light steadily increases, to the point where Ash eventually feels rejuvenated, strengthened by the spiritual ambience. A few seconds later, she has to lean against the wall, as she becomes somewhat light-headed.

The only reason she regains her senses is because Melia takes one of her hands.
“You okay?”

Ash clears her throat and shakes her head to brush the faintness away.
“Y…yeah, I think so. It’s just a bit…”

“Overpowering?”, Melia asks with a smile. “I know. Some people have said the same. You can lean against me, if you need to.”

Thankfully, Ash can proceed on her own two feet for now, but she does maintain the grip around Melia’s hand.
Here, in the underground lairs beneath the Chapel, they see a much larger area. It’s filled with neatly constructed corridors and rooms, stacked with weapons, book shelves, artifacts and more. They see quite a few people down here too, most of them wearing Crusade symbols, but there appears to be some old Dawn items lying around as well.

Deeper into the halls is perhaps the largest section of all, stacked with rows of what appears to be tombs and attached plaques.
“This is the Sanctum of Light, the source of the aura you’re sensing. Here, we have exhumed and blessed the remains of powerful heroes from Lordaeron, Khaz Modan, Quel’Thalas and other believers in the Light. It is so strong here, its presence so robust, that they cannot be raised in the service of the Lich King. It is our sanctuary.”

Now, finally, Ash understands the capabilities of the Argent Crusade, what they fight for and represent. True unity, true faith in the Light and its principles. They may be able to defeat the Scourge after all.
After taking a few moments to let it all sink in, Ash eventually turns to Melia.
“Are you looking for new recruits?”

Melia smiles at her more brightly than previously and while still holding hands, she places the other on Ash’s shoulder.
“We’re getting kinda full, but I’m sure we can squeeze you in somewhere, Revenor.”
Yeah, we as players don't really visit this lair until Legion, but Blizzard isn't in control of this story, I am.
Also, yes, I know they say that only heroes of Lordaeron rest in the in-game Chapel, but I feel like that's a somewhat human-centric view. I know that the plaguelands is, technically, in Lordaeron, but as it's the best area to protect the souls of heroes, I felt like the Crusade would reach out to nations across the kingdoms and offer to bless them as well.
A tale of azure

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s a cloudy and windy day on the northern coastline of Darkshore. Very little activity tends to occur in this section of the land, although it is not for the lack of people. There are a lot of kaldorei living in the several towns and outposts that litter this region, but they tend to avoid certain areas. Remnants of the past, ruins of powerful and long dead Highborne, can be found in many sections. While they are sometimes of interest to the younger ones who want to search for relics or adventure, most do not wish to disturb the potential spirits that rest there.

However, this day is unlike others, as a quartet of people can be spotted riding on their mounts up along the old central road. The group appears to be rather determined, with a set goal, even if there really isn’t much out here that one can visit, except the ruins. What any onlookers do not realize, is that this team has a destination in mind which is hidden from prying eyes, a location that only one of them can point out.

After Nadelgosa described where the group had to travel in order to meet with her secret ally, Thariss said that they can provide her with a nightsaber of her own, but she declined. She was sure that it would become quite unnecessary. The drake had considered flying all the way, but discarded this idea when she realized how slow the mounts are in comparison. The only solution they could find was to let her ride with one of them and as she didn’t want to create any further tension, she decided to sit behind Rivaryn. Razz can easily carry them both anyway.

After travelling for a day or two, the shores in the north are now more visible to them, but the water is clearly not their intended target.

“We’re almost there”, Nadel informs them. “You see that hill to the east? That’s where we’re going.”

The eyes of the three other women follows the indicated direction and spot the ridge lurking behind some trees. It’s slightly concealed, hundreds of meters off road, with a few rocks and plants on top. Had Nadel not told them, they would’ve probably ridden past it, as it’s not a particularly impressive or distinguishable area. Then again, perhaps that’s the point. Why else would anyone go all this way in the middle of nowhere?

Riv gestures for Razz to change direction and then glances over her shoulder at the woman sitting behind her.

“Not that I doubt you or anything, but could we really not have met in Auberdine? This still feels a bit excessive to me.”

The drake has her arms around Riv’s waist, as she needs something to hold onto. The hunter has gotten the sense that she’s not entirely comfortable travelling in this manner. For now, Nadel shakes her head.

“You misunderstand. We didn’t ride here because I wanted to hide her identity. This person is guarding an important aspect of our journey.”

Thariss overhears the conversation and arches her eyebrow.

“Uh, and what would that be?”

“You’ll see. Once we arrive, I shall explain.”
It only takes another few minutes for their mounts to go through the woods and stop at the foot of the hill. The riders jump off and they all ascend on foot - or hoof - together with the animals. Once they’re at the top, Nadel’s gaze searches the area and she calls out.

“Stella? You can come out now. I’ve brought our allies.”

Suddenly, close to one of the rocks, a magical veil breaks and a fifth woman shows herself. It is another high elf, or at least someone who carries that appearance. She has the same pale skin, icy blue eyes and azure-blue scale patches as Nadel, but much longer hair. She’s also shorter than the drake, while wearing a set of blue and purple robes. This elf smiles brightly at Nadel and runs up to her, offering the drake a hug.

“I’m relieved that you’re alright”, says Stella, her voice being gentler than Nadel’s. “Took you a while to get back. I was getting worried.”

“You shouldn’t be. I had to help them clean up some of the mess that was made, that’s all.”

The trio briefly glances at each other, before directing very curious gazes towards this blue-haired duo. They somehow get the sense of what’s going on, but they still have to ask.

“Who is this?”, Raxeen inquiries.

Nadel clears her throat and takes a step to the side, so that they can all see her companion.

“Let me introduce Stellagosa, my little sister.”

Stella offers them a fairly warm smile, placing one hand behind her back and lifts the other to wave.

“Hello there!”

They had somehow expected what she’d be, but not how closely related these two are, which is why the trio appears rather surprised.

“Hold on”, says Thariss. “Sister? We didn’t know you had one.”

Nadel raises her brow skeptically and tilts her head.

“What? Of course I do. I have many siblings. I thought that was at least something you kaldorei would know about my people.”

“Hey, I don’t read a lot of books on dragons and their familial structure, ya know.”

Riv folds her arms and watches them rather intently, being more intrigued than before.

“Wait, if there were two of you, why didn’t you both join the battle?”

“Stella is a few centuries younger than me and certainly not as experienced in combat”, Nadel explains. “I preferred to let her remain behind and protect what we created here instead.”

Her description, while reasonable, is not satisfying to the younger drake. Stella now frowns at her sister.

“Excuse me? I am quite capable of defending myself, thank you very much!”

“I didn’t say you weren’t, just that you aren’t experienced.”

“You implied I couldn’t!”

Nadel rolls her eyes.

“No, I didn’t. Listen to what I say, not what you want to hear.”

Their little bickering makes Riv giggle, while Thariss smirks and even Rax smiles.
“I see you girls get along”, the warrior comments.

Riv seems very amused by this thought and nudges her elbow into her girlfriend’s side. “Reminds me of you and Shaerai.”

If she had been smug before, this emotion now disperses from Thariss’ face, to be replaced with a large amount of doubt. “…what? That’s ridiculous. We’re nothing alike!”

“If you say so, dear.”

Surprisingly, it is Rax who makes the first attempt at establishing a connection. She approaches Stella and bows her head slightly. “Achal hecta, lady Stellagosa. My name is Raxeen, a Vindicator of the draenei. This here is Rivaryn and Thariss.”

Being inspired by gestures in other places, Stella smiles at her and offers her hand, a motion that Rax accepts. “Yes, I know. Nadia told me about you, but it is very nice to finally get the chance to meet you.”

Shortly after she says this, a solemn expression descends upon her. “I believe it would be wise of me to extend apologies on behalf of the blue dragons, for what was done to you. I hope that Nadel has tried to do the same.”

Nadel diverts her eyes out of embarrassment and coughs awkwardly. Rax glances at her, but then focuses on Stella. “She did. I have not yet decided if I will accept it. However, I am not one to judge an entire race based on the actions of a single individual. I do not hate your people simply because of what your sister attempted to do. I will gladly help you here - a paladin always assists the needy.”

This seems to please Stella, who bows her head in return. “Thank you, I am glad to hear you're a woman of honor. We hope that we can prove the same to you.”

After their hands separate, Rax folds her arms and studies both drakes with a measure of curiosity. “Are the two of you close?”

Stella places her arms behind her back once more. “I’d like to say that we are, yes. The Azurewing dragons are quite a tight group in general.”

“Azurewing?”

The question confuses the younger drake, and she briefly checks with her sister, who doesn’t do much to explain. “Nadia hasn’t told you?”

“Not really. She has not provided us with many personal details at all.”

Nadel sighs and shuts her eyes. “…of course not. That’s why they’re personal.”

Stella simply shrugs at the thought of that notion. “Well, I don’t think it’s too much to reveal. Our brood hails from Azurewing Repose, in the land some know as the ‘Broken Isles’. We’ve lived there for quite a long time.”
The name doesn’t say much to the draenei, but Thariss seems to recognize it.
“Broken Isles? That’s…where the city of Suramar was, right?”

“Parts of it, yes. Although we have no idea if there’s anyone still alive in there. Ever since the War of the Ancients, it has been locked behind some kind of magical barrier. I’ve never seen anyone go in or out.”

“When we encountered lady Nadelgosa, she was on Draenor, or Outland as you call it”, says Rax.
“Do you travel a lot as well?”

Stella smiles and quickly shakes her head.
“Not usually. Nadia is the more adventurous out of our siblings, preferring to go on important missions and make extended trips outside our lair. I usually like to stay at home. That’s why our grandfather dubbed her-“

Before she can say it, Nadel gasps and puts a hand on her sister’s shoulder with a sturdy grip.
“Stella, no!”

The younger sibling looks confused.
“What is it?”

Without being able to discern where it comes from, they see how Nadel starts to blush.
“Don’t…don’t tell them that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s private!”

It’s not like they haven’t seen Nadel uncomfortable or awkward before, but this particular reaction only garners more of Rax’s interest.
“It is that embarrassing? Well, now I am certainly curious to hear more.”

Unfortunately, Stella merely chuckles and shrugs.
“Sorry, if my sister really wants to keep it a secret, then that’s what it’ll have to stay.”

Nadel refuses to look at the others and instead buries her face in her hands, while she exhales.
In the meantime, Riv focuses on Stella.
“What about this brother of yours?”

“Deradgos? Oh, he is a more charismatic dragon. I guess you could say he has aspirations of leadership. Even if our grandfather is still the local ruler, Derad tends to be his representative from time to time. He wants what’s best for our brood overall and likely wishes to become grandfather’s successor one day.”

Some sorrow enters her eyes and she lowers them to the ground. Both her shoulders and ears slump at the same time.
“That’s why these latest events were so disheartening…”

Feeling a need to reassure her, Rax closes the distance and puts a hand on Stella’s shoulder.
“We will rescue your brother, lady Stellagosa. We promise.”

This does seem to help somewhat, as she offers a faint smile in return.
“Thank you, I appreciate it. I hope we can succeed. Oh, and feel free to call me Stella.”

“So”, Thariss tries to interrupt, “now that we’re better acquainted and all that, maybe you can
explain some things? Like, how the hell are we going to Northrend? I assume you’re not gonna fly us all the way.”

Nadel snorts at the idea.
“Certainly not. I believe that would take too much time and be very inefficient.”

Thariss shrugs.
“Would be cool.”

The drake stares at her silently for several seconds before she responds.
“…I think we all value speed over aesthetics.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“At any rate, come with me. I will show you our mode of transport.”

She gestures with her hand and the rest of the group follows, while the mounts stay where they are for now. She guides them to an area behind some rocks and bushes, where the trio can see something on the ground. It appears to be an array of glowing purple and pink runes, drawn in patterns that none of the other women really recognize. For Riv, it is easy to detect the material used to create them, as her body is connected to the same essence – the arcane.

“This is a complex series of arcane calculations and magical formulas, which will allow us to temporarily create a stable portal directly to Northrend”, Nadel tells them. “Our destination will be a few kilometers outside of Coldarra.”

The trio is both astounded and confused at this thought. They aren’t mages, but this still sounds strange to them.
“Uh, really?”, Riv asks. “But didn’t you say that Malygos had created disruptions in the ley lines, so that people can’t teleport?”

“Yes, but I was speaking of mortals.”

Stella walks in on the other side of the runes and looks towards the group.
“We of the blue dragonflight are capable of seeing the magical ley line system of Azeroth, to feel it within us, if we’re close enough. Even if someone tried to disrupt it, we can still detect its presence no matter how weak it is and trace it back to the source. The spell we’ve crafted will circumvent the disruptions when it is cast, although only temporarily and for a short time.”

Nadel nods in agreement and positions herself opposite her sister.
“When the portal is summoned, it will last for no more than ten or twenty seconds at most, before this pathway breaks apart. We would have to paint a new set of runes, if we wish to go back the same way. This is why I left Stella here, to protect them. It took us a few days to craft this set of thaumaturgical alignments and…well, I didn’t expect the Scourge to arrive during that process.”

“Can we bring our mounts?”, Riv asks.

“Yes, you can, and you’ll probably need them. Northrend is big and we do not recommend travelling on foot. Get yourselves ready and we shall depart.”

Riv, Thariss and Rax gather their gear and their mounts, making sure that they have everything they need. They realized it’d be a long journey after they had discussed what would be required, which is why they packed extra food and clothes; not just for themselves, but the animals as well.
Riv is a little concerned about how Razz will react to the cold, as he is much more used to warmer climates. Sure, he’s been to Khaz Modan, but can that terrain even compare to Northrend?

When they seem to be ready, Nadel and Stella close their eyes, while they prepare the necessary spells. Pink and purple lights begin to emanate from their hands and in the air, the trio sees how various strange symbols and markings simply form out of nowhere. These objects are not static, but float around the group, as if drifting in the same direction as the wind or potentially some other natural current that they cannot detect.

Eventually, the two drakes throw their hands forward and the collision of their joint magic creates a small shockwave of air, like the center of a storm. Everyone not just hears, but sees how a crack is created in front of them, opening up a tear in reality. It’s hard to see exactly what type of landscape there is on the other side, but there is one element they can clearly distinguish – snow.

“Go, hurry!”, Nadel shouts.

After a moment or two of hesitation, everyone leaps into the portal – Rax first, followed by Riv and Thariss. The drakes go in last. All of the mortals pray to their various beliefs that they’ll be alright.

The journey is bumpier and less pleasant than other rides like this that they’ve endured before, but it does seem to work. In general, going through portals can be a strange experience and it’s not something that any of them do very often, but at least it’s not a lengthy process.

The mortal trio is practically spat out by the magic on the other side, falling into a heap of the white substance with their mounts. The drakes are somewhat more graceful.

Before them, plains of snow and tundra extends for miles.

“Welcome to Northrend.”

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, if you read the character list from the first chapter, then you knew that Stellagosa would appear here. I mean, I couldn't have an Azurewing family drama without her, right?
The Scourge’s choice to attack the major factions of Azeroth was a rather peculiar one. Not only did the undead fail with doing much else than cause minor structural damage and a bunch of deaths at best, but the act has attracted a huge heap of forces from the south, who have chosen to invade the shores of Northrend, in order to stop them once and for all. One of the foremost groups that leads this charge is of course the most recently forged one, the Argent Crusade.

After Ashindra decided to join this new organization, it didn’t take long for her to be assigned into a position and receive a location to go. Melia was being shipped to Northrend and she requested for Ash to be transferred into the same unit, something that neither the elf nor their superior’s protested. The priestess convinced Ash to enlist in the first place, so it seemed rather unwise to split them up now when they’re going into battle.

After travelling to the eastern coast, their unit was placed into one of the ships that was leaving and sailed to the north. This is where they can currently be found. It’s a pretty big boat, meant to hold a lot of people, but due to the size of the Crusade’s forces, a lot of them have had to share cabins. This included Ash, but she was actually in luck – Melia agreed to share hers with the paladin.

Ash’s initial reaction was, of course, a little bit of embarrassment. They have spent over a week or maybe more together, sure, but sharing sleeping arrangements? At least they wouldn’t be resting in the same bed. Melia didn’t seem to mind, however. She enjoys the company, especially during a long and dreary journey such as this one.

It’s still quite difficult for Ash to decide how she feels about the matter. She hasn’t spent much time around humans in years, but Melia has been so nice and accommodating. She’s often in a good mood, positive and even pretty cheerful. It reminds Ash of…well, her past self. That’s another aspect which Ash fears – what if she’s simply staying close to Melia to rediscover what she has lost? That wouldn’t be fair. If they are to build a friendship, it should be based on their mutual interactions, not for selfish reasons.

It has been a while since Ash sailed anywhere at all, so when she wanders over the deck on this day, she feels rather unsteady. She has never gotten seasick, as far as she knows, and for now, this doesn’t appear to have changed. Perhaps she’s just nervous. There are a lot of new aspects around her, after all.

Her foremost worry right now is her appearance. She was allowed to keep her armor and weapons, but the other stuff she received from the quartermaster back in the Chapel, makes her feel awkward. Does this even suit her?

After traversing the ship and wandering through a tight corridor with a lot of other people nearby, she eventually reaches the shared cabin again. It’s not the biggest room in this place, far from it, but it could be described as cozy. No more than their beds and some small nightstands can fit. Before she enters, she takes a deep breath to prepare herself. Inside, Melia is currently sitting on her bed, drinking tea from a mug, while she scans some type of map with her eyes that she’s holding with the other hand. Once she notices Ash’s entrance, she smiles and looks up.

The stance Ash walks inside with is rather stiff. She clears her throat and then straightens the item that hangs over her chest – an Argent Crusade tabard.

“So, uh…how do I look?”
Melia surveys her appearance and the smile widens with every second. Ash thinks it’s a delightful sight.
“Like a confused and lost puppy.”

Ash’s eyes move around in a perplexed fashion.
“…is that good?”

Melia starts to giggle without explanation, before she collects herself again. She lifts a hand and moves it in a circle. Ash follows the silent suggestion and slowly spins around, hoping that she hasn’t put this on in the wrong way. She doesn’t usually wear tabards.
“You look great. Like a true Crusader.”

With a heavy sigh, Ash closes the door and proceeds to her own bed.
“I’m not sure I feel like one.”

“No? I figured you would, since you’re a paladin. Your type usually fits in here, no matter where they come from.”

Ash doesn’t tell her outright, but for various reasons, this still feels…new. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to describe it as a reset, one that has been delayed for too long.
Once she gets seated, she crosses her legs and rests her hands in her lap. The armor is currently placed in a neat pile on the floor.
“To be honest, I think you belong here more than I do, and not just because you’re human. I’ve seen how the others look at you, how they treat you. They recognize you as one with experience.”

Melia reaches back with her hand to grab her ponytail, resting it on her shoulder instead and strokes a few fingers over it.
“Well, I have been with the Dawn for a few years now.”

Seeing as how she was involved with the attack on Naxxramas, this wouldn’t be so strange to conceive. Melia must’ve been active for quite a while.
“Have you been with them since the last Ashbringer?”

“No, not quite that long.”

“Oh. Did you not live in the north, then?”

“I did.”

Ash suddenly both feels and looks a bit awkward, and she scratches her cheek in thought.
“Actually, now that I think about it, I haven’t asked much about your background. Maybe I should’ve done that before.”

Melia chuckles.
“That’s fine. It’s not like I’ve pried much either.”

“Where are you from?”

Before she responds, Melia gestures at the nightstand nearby.
“I brought some thistle tea and crispbread from the kitchen. You can have some, if you want.”

Not only is this true, but it appears she brought two mugs as well.
“Oh, thank you.”

While the paladin pours some for herself, Melia begins to work through her memories.
“I’m from Stratholme, born before things fell apart. Haven’t had a proper home for a while. Guess you could say it’s what the Dawn became after I joined them.”

Ash hesitates now and feels even worse than before. The fate of that city hasn’t escaped her.
“Ah…I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—"

Melia holds up a hand to gently prevent any remorseful offer.
“Don’t be, not your fault. Humans were the ones who made your people suffer anyway, so I should be the one to apologize.”

After she has prepared her drink, Ash leans back and rests the cup between her legs, letting the heat of it thaw her for a few seconds. The winds at sea can be quite relentless.
“Have you always been with the church?”

The priestess shrugs and slides further back into the bed, leaning against the wall.
“Yeah, pretty much. It’s been a tradition in my family for generations, so I was introduced to it early on.”

“Your family?”

“Yeah. My mother was Bishop Reliena Haven.”

Ash widens her eyes in surprise.
“Oh, wow. Wasn’t that…a position of leadership?”

“In that district, yes. She was in charge of the Temple of Light, in Stratholme.”
Her eyes drift to the floor, as she pushes her knees against her chest, fidgeting with her own mug.
“I remember spending a lot of time on sermons and holidays within the church, sometimes even travelling with my mom to other places of worship, when they needed her help or guidance.”

“Did you ever feel uncomfortable? They must’ve expected a lot from you, with a parent like that.”

Melia tilts her head back and forth, as she ponders this notion.
“Sure, it was kinda difficult at times, I guess, but not as bad as you think. My mother was very understanding and careful. I was all she had at home, so she wanted me to feel loved and grow up in a place filled with joy.”

“Hmm. What about your father?”

Another sensation ignites in her now and Melia furrows her brow, while she turns her face away.
“I…I dunno. My parents never got married and my dad left mom when I was very young.”

“I see. Did he not stay in Stratholme?”

“Not really. I don’t think he was even born in the city, but he did live there for a while. He moved pretty much immediately after they separated, and she never liked to talk about him.”

Ash nods and thinks it’s probably best to leave this topic behind.
“I understand. What about Reliena? Is she with the Crusade as well?”

From this angle, it’s hard to spot exact details, but Ash is pretty sure that she can detect signs of sorrow, even if Melia tries to hide it.
“She’s not. Mom, she…she stayed behind when Arthas came with his troops.”

Well, this just keeps getting worse and worse. Ash feels like she’s digging further into the pit of
misery with every question, which is certainly not what she wanted. Why does she keep being such a gloomy presence? She holds up a hand, to cover her eyes. “Oh, Light…I’m so sorry. You have my sincerest condolences.”

When their eyes meet again, it’s clear that this is a difficult topic for Melia to speak of, but she still tries to swallow and offer a small smile in return. “It’s…yeah.”

She glances to the side, seeing her bag lying on the floor not too far from Ash’s armor. She moves over to it, opens it up and fishes something out. What she fetches is a fairly small mace. It seems to be made of steel and it is in fine condition, possibly newly polished. There are two symbols engraved in thin pieces of gold on opposite sides – one shows the mark of Lordaeron and the other belongs to the church. “This is an item that my mother used. It isn’t strictly a weapon, but more of a tool that she utilized for blessings and Light-based rituals. She called it ‘Sinfall’. She didn’t give it to me and it wasn’t something that I received until a few years later. Someone from the Argent Dawn had managed to retrieve it and when he heard I joined the organization, he gave it to me. It’s…all I have left of her.”

Ash studies the item from afar, seeing it’s almost gleaming appearance. There’s a small presence of the Light emanating from it, displaying its internal strength. “It’s beautiful. She must’ve been remarkable for using such a tool. Did you join the Dawn directly after…what happened in Stratholme, then?”

Melia shakes her head and places the mace on the bed next to her. “It wasn’t around by then. I did sign up a few months after it was formed, though. I had nowhere else to go, but I still wanted to help, to protect people like mom used to do.” She slowly strokes a couple of fingers along the hilt of the mace, even if her gaze seems to be far away from here. “Been involved with the fighting against the Scourge ever since, in as many battles as I can. I was promoted to Lieutenant during the Naxxramas campaign and they transferred this rank when we formed the Crusade.”

“I see. You must be ready to take revenge then as well, for all you’ve endured.”

Something quite troubled comes over Melia at that comment, and for a couple of seconds, she can’t decide whether she should say something or not. “No, that’s—…” She faces Ash again. “I’m not here for vengeance. I’m fighting because the Scourge must be stopped, so that no one else has to experience our tragedies.”

Once more, Ash hesitates. Can she really say the same, that she’s not involved for selfish reasons? “That’s…admirable.”

“Anyway, enough about me. And you?”

“Huh?”

“Where are you from?”

Ash looks a bit confused as she shrugs. “Uh, well, I think you know I’m from Quel’Thelas.”
Despite the solemn nature of the topic she just spoke of, Melia’s positivity seems to return, and she smirks slightly, while rolling her eyes.
“Tsk. You don’t say? And here I thought you hailed from Stranglethorn!”

The paladin appears even more bemused at this comment.
“Uh…”

“That was a joke. Your land is pretty big, Revenor. Just saying ‘Quel’Thalas’ doesn’t tell me much.”

Ash reluctantly scratches the back of her neck.
“That’s true. Have you…ever been there, though?”

“Of course. A couple of times, in fact, on church business. We weren’t allowed to go into Silvermoon back then, but I’ve visited the south.”

Ash now looks rather intrigued and she nods slowly.
“Oh. Okay, did you ever go to Tranquillien?”

“Yes, I did! Nice little town.” She smiles and absentmindedly strokes a few fingers around her lips.
“I adored the chapel they had there. So peaceful and ornate, almost magical. It was also the first place that mom allowed me to drink alcohol, when they gave us Brightsong wine. I was uh, thirteen, I think.”

This reminiscence makes Ash mirror her expression.
“I agree, it was a great place. Tranquillien is…erm, it’s my hometown.”

Melia views her with even more interest than before.
“Really? Huh. Well, guess that explains why you’re so nice.”

“Yes, I did! Nice little town.” She smiles and absentmindedly strokes a few fingers around her lips.
“I adored the chapel they had there. So peaceful and ornate, almost magical. It was also the first place that mom allowed me to drink alcohol, when they gave us Brightsong wine. I was uh, thirteen, I think.”

This reminiscence makes Ash mirror her expression.
“I agree, it was a great place. Tranquillien is…erm, it’s my hometown.”

Melia views her with even more interest than before.
“Really? Huh. Well, guess that explains why you’re so nice.”

“Not everyone is, but…thank you.
I used to be a priestess as well, before the Scourge came. Once my people formed the Blood Knights, I was one of the first who joined, out of necessity.”

Melia nods with a measure of understanding.
“I heard how tough it was after all that destruction. You must’ve had to do a lot of things to survive.”

Ash peers down into the beverage within her cup, her mind drifting away.
“More than you know.”
Forebodingly mute, that’s how some of the group would describe this region. This isn’t a trait aimed at the lack of sound, colors or movement, but how still, slow and distant everything feels. It’s a fairly open zone, with only the occasional hills and caverns, large patches of long grass, fields with geysers and, naturally, snow. There are no forests, no major mountains outside the ones separating it from other parts of Northrend, and very few settlements, most of them built recently by southern factions. The wind carries an unease with it, an unavoidable chill that grasps not only at their skins, but practically penetrates their bodies and minds. Death’s looming presence is beyond the physical.

The group of five women arrived somewhere in the center of this region when they were ejected from the portal, greeted by nothing and no one, except a fierce gust and snowflakes trickling down from the sky. They rode towards the northwest, with Nadelgosa taking her seat behind Rivaryn again and Stellagosa sitting in front of Raxeen, with the draenei’s arms around her. It appears at least the younger drake is having a bit of fun with this particular arrangement.

“Borean Tundra”, the older drake explains, “that’s what they call this region.”

Riv’s emerald eyes scan the immediate surroundings, with the geysers not too far to the east being the most interesting element to her. Comparing anything here to Quel’Thalas is almost absurd. “Who does?”

“I believe it may have been named by the tuskarr. They are the foremost denizens of this land, outside my own.”

Rax arches her brow confusedly, as yet another word she hasn’t heard before is spoken. There really are a lot of oddities on Azeroth, huh? “Tuskarr? Who or what are they?”

“A fairly peaceful walrus-like people that live along the southern coastlines of Northrend, mostly in small villages. The majority are fishers or hunters.”

“They call themselves ‘kalu’ak’ in their own language, don’t they?”, Stella points out.

“Ah, yes, that’s correct. I haven’t had the chance to speak much with them.”

“Are these kalu’ak the only presence outside dragons in this tundra?”, Rax inquires.

Nadel quickly shakes her head. “Definitely not. Though the region may seem sparse from this angle, many people call it home. Magnataurs, Drakkari trolls, taunka, snobolds and murlocs also inhabit this land.”

They hear a dissatisfied groan from Thariss’ direction. “…crap. Not murlocs. Let’s avoid those slippery bastards if we can.”

Rax raises a hand to stroke one of the tentacles hanging over her neck in thought. It occasionally wriggles in reaction. “Hmm, fascinating. Are they all friendly?”

“No, they are not”, Nadel tells her without hesitation, “but we aren’t here for them anyway.”

Riv glances over her shoulder at the drake.
“What about the Scourge? Do they lurk here too?”

Shortly after, she feels how the grasp on her waist grows a bit tighter and Nadel’s expression hardens.
“Yes, but not in this particular area. They can mainly be located to the south and the east. For now, I would suggest we avoid those directions.”

None of them are going to argue with that assessment. Their goal, for the time being, is to help the drakes and hopefully succeed with this rescue mission.
The further northwest they ride, the more another piece of local landscape becomes unveiled, although most could already see it earlier. It can be described as the only mountainous section of the land, which for some reason lies closest to the sea. High and sharp peaks filled with snow and ice display themselves, almost discouraging approach. Unfortunately, that seems to be their destination.

“What is that strange mountain?”, Rax asks. “It almost appears to rise out of nowhere.”

Nadel looks in that direction, recognition pervading her gaze.
“It’s not just a mountain, but an island. It is our ultimate goal – Coldarra.”

Now that they know, all mortal eyes turn to face and scan it. There is some doubt building due to the fact that they can’t see any obvious paths inside.
“Island, huh?”, says Thariss. “Doesn’t seem to match the rest of this place. Did it drift down here from somewhere else?”

“Actually, no. The island itself was always there, but it was altered by Lord Malygos and other blue dragons long ago”, Stella explains. “It was created to become the main lair for our people, to protect our eggs, artifacts and secrets.”

Nadel raises her hand, pointing upwards.
“Do you see the lights at the top? I believe your eyes can spot the arcane traces, Rivaryn.”

They follow her instructions, but it’s difficult for the other two to witness much, due to a thick mist surrounding that height. The blood elf, however, after narrowing her eyes, does manage to note the tinge of magic.
“Yeah, I think so. It’s very faint.”

“I suppose it’s still too far away to observe the details, but what you are seeing is the top of an ancient ice fortress that was constructed in the center. It’s held together by immense flows of arcane streams and magical runes. It’s meant to be a focal point of sorts, to control ley lines and enchanted fortifications. With it, Malygos can alter the land and shape reality. It’s called ‘the Nexus’, and it extends deep underground. One path even opens to Malygos’ personal pocket realm, the Eye of Eternity.”

Thariss turns to her with a highly skeptical gaze.
“Hope that’s not where you plan to take us.”

Stella smiles at her.
“That would be a very foolish choice. For our interests, the lairs beneath the ground is more crucial.”

“Indeed, for we’re certain that Deradgos is held within one of those underground chambers”, Nadel clarifies, “though we haven’t been able to pinpoint his exact location. We do know that our people keeps an arcane prison down there, for particularly dangerous foes. I haven’t visited myself, but
grandfather informed us.”

Their mounts have slowed down somewhat, to make the conversation a bit simpler to conduct. For now, they do follow a marked road, but will have to divert from it eventually. “The Horde and Alliance, are they also here?”, Thariss inquires.

“Yes, but due to the size of this place, it may be hard to see from here”, Stella responds. She points towards the west. “The Horde built their fortress in the center of a large quarry. They call it Warsong Hold.”

Now that they look in this direction, the group does see what she means, as a stronghold distinguishes itself on top of a hill, a few miles away. The spikes and jagged outlines are designs that they recognize from Orgrimmar. “Huh. Impressive that they managed to build something so big this quickly”, Riv comments.

“Last we heard, they seemed to have trouble with an infestation of underground nerubian lairs.”

“…nerubians too?”, Thariss asks and then shivers. “Did I mention that I already hate this place? My people have legends about the cursed nature of Northrend, but now I’m actually starting to believe them.”

“So do my people”, Riv confesses. “Though the sin’dorei were here only a few years ago, while chasing after Arthas.”

Nadel doesn’t look particularly impressed by their beliefs. “Your myths are merely superstitions. This land has more variety than it may seem, but the Scourge’s arrival has destroyed much history and opportunity.”

Shortly after, Stella continues her explanation. “Further to the south, by the coast, you’ll find the Alliance expedition. They built a place called Valiance Keep and we believe they have similar problems with the nerubians, as well as other undead. Curiously, the Scourge’s resistance is mild at best. They could send legions to destroy their enemies, but haven’t so far.”

Another sharp wind washes over them and Thariss’ ears fold closer to her head. She’s considering putting on the warm earmuffs she brought for this purpose, to prevent potential future illness. It’d be unfortunate to get frostbite this early. “Both sides were pretty quick to build strongholds, huh? Wonder if they aim to stick around after this war is over, since they put so much effort into it.”

“They are not the only ones”, Nadel comments and gestures ahead. “There’s an area to the north of us called ‘Amber Ledge’, where the Kirin Tor have a minor outpost, together with the red dragonflight. They haven’t informed us exactly what they’re doing, but we assume they’re spying on Coldarra.”

“Really?”, Riv asks. “Does that mean they’re going to help us with this little endeavor?”

Nadel’s response is delayed for a second or two, before she shakes her head. “No, that won’t be possible. It’s not that we would refuse their aid, but when we made contact with them, both the mages and the reds rejected our offer.”

“Why?”

The older drake looks into Riv’s eyes for a moment, before she diverts her own. She doesn’t respond. Instead, this is left for a hesitant Stella.
“They didn’t agree with our idea and said it would be unwise to proceed.”

Up until this point, no plan has really been described to the team, only the purpose of their visit. Suddenly, all of them detect hints of reluctance worming its way into their chests.
“…uh, why do I feel like I’m not gonna enjoy this?”, Thariss asks.

Nadel shuts her eyes and exhales audibly.
“Look, it’s not that we haven’t considered the risks and the potential hazards of this excursion. The red dragons are simply…unwilling to take chances for our kind, which is unfair. They claim it is too hasty, but I disagree.”

Rax glances between both drakes, and even if both appear to be determined, their presentation leaves much to be desired.
“Now that we have almost arrived, perhaps you can describe this strategy of yours? It would be preferable to know what we are getting ourselves into, before we actually infiltrate the island.”

The older drake looks directly at the paladin now.
“That’s not the issue here. We aren’t going into Coldarra and you can’t enter it anyhow. Not without flying.”

Thariss blinks in a perplexed fashion.
“Wait, what? If we can’t get in, how are we supposed to rescue your brother?”

“The only path into Coldarra for mortals, outside of flight, used to be a bridge built over the waters of the Westrift, called the Frostbridge by the tuskarr. It was destroyed by Malygos’ subordinates at the start of this conflict. Stella and I already factored this into the plan before we came to you. Instead of trying to ship you one by one into hostile territory, we’re aiming for a section to the north, where you’ll find an open field filled with snow and ice. It’s a place where young whelps are usually allowed to take their first flights outside of Coldarra. The plan is simple, although I understand if you don’t agree with its capability. There are some caveats involved. Do you remember the artifact you helped me obtain back in Outland?”

Riv and the other mortals inclines their heads in acknowledgement, though the hunter answers for them.
“Of course, it’s difficult to forget. That was probably the most dangerous mission we got involved with over there.”

“Well, while it was not the original purpose of the device, I have decided to use it in this instance. We are going to perform a trade – we will give Malygos’ loyalists the artifact, in exchange for Derad’s release. It contains a lot of valuable knowledge, so it will be hard for them to refuse. I know a spell that is used as a type of magical flare, which will attract attention from one of the sentries, who will fly over to investigate.”

“So…you want to negotiate?”

“Precisely.”

“And what if they don’t want to?”

She gestures between the three mounts.
“That’s where you come in. A sentry may be quite capable in a fight, but if we all work together, we can capture it and use it as further leverage. It’s also possible that the red dragons change their minds if they see us accomplish something like this.”
The conversation is instilled with temporary silence as all three mortals ponder the nature of this suggestion. The drakes don’t have to access mindreading abilities to observe the building uncertainty in them.

“Hmm…I think I see the reds’ angle now”, the hunter remarks.

“Well, it is certainly…a plan”, Rax adds.

Thariss snorts, not necessarily in a mocking fashion, but still highly doubtful.

“Yeah, a fucking stupid one.”

Nadel scowls towards the kaldorei.

“How rude. I’ve given it quite a bit of consideration, you know. This is the only way.”

“Are you sure? I mean, if the blues meet us with like, an entire squad, you do realize they can just arrest or kill everyone, right? We can take one dragon, sure, but we’re fucked if we have to face a whole legion of ‘em.”

“Yes, thank you, I’m very much aware of the situation”, Nadel comments annoyedly. “I don’t have many other solutions to this dilemma, though. We can’t actually break into the prison, as there is far too much security for our small group to handle.”

Stella clears her throat to get a word in.

“The chances of several dragons flying out to meet us is quite minimal. It’s rare for our people to break protocol.”

“Uh, unless they assume it’s a trap, you mean”, Thariss points out. “If I was them, that’s what I’d prepare for.”

Riv tries to take a moment to think about the plan, running her hand in under the blankets strapped to Razz, to stroke his scales. The two are closely connected and can partially share emotions; he’s likely sensing her anxiety, which makes him antsy.

“This is far from what you told us back in Darkshore and I can’t deny that I’m very skeptical…but we did agree to help. We’ll assist you, as long as this is done carefully.”

Nadel exhales in relief, while Stella smile.

“Thank you”, the older drake tells them. “Seriously, we are very grateful. Before we begin, I suggest we get a night’s sleep once we arrive in the correct area. I also have some defensive spells to prepare, just in case.”

She goes quiet for a couple of moments, but her eyes move around searchingly, as if there’s another perspective to tackle. In the end, she realizes that she can’t ignore it and turns to face her little sister.

“Stella, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do this, but I don’t think we have a choice. You have to remain outside of the meeting.”

Stella widens her eyes in sheer shock.

“What?! Why would you say that now, after all this time?”

“Because the risks involved makes this a dangerous situation for you. It’s better if you hide.”

“But…we’ve done everything together up until now! You can’t just suddenly exclude me!”

“I won’t exclude you, I just don’t want you to get hurt. You aren’t as experienced in combat, after all. And if I fail…someone has to bring back word to grandfather.”

The younger drake is confounded, not having expected this sudden change of plans. They were the
only two Azurewing dragons prepared to do everything in order to save Deradgos and now Stella can’t go? This is not something she can accept.
“No!”, she exclaims while frowning. “I won’t just sit by and let another one of my siblings get arrested! I’m going with you, Nadia!”

The older drake sighs and her shoulders fall, discouraged by her sister’s ardent resistance.
“Stella, please, do as I say. I’m your older sister.”

“That doesn’t give you the right to order me around!”

“I know, I know, but this is for the best.” She looks at the younger drake with a gentle, practically pleading gaze. “Please, don’t fight me on this. Grandfather would never forgive me if anything happened to you on my watch.”

Stella doesn’t simply surrender without at least offering an intense glare, to display just how much she disapproves of these words. In the end, she jerks her head away in an almost furious manner.
“Fine, have it your way, but don’t expect me to like it. You can’t stop me from waiting nearby, though, and that’s what I’ll do. If they take you…”

Nadel wishes she could reach out and touch her sister, but the distance between the mounts are too far right now.
“Then you will find help elsewhere. I trust you, Stella and all I ask is that you do the same for me.”
For Ashindra, the emerging disorder was almost immediate, sneaking up on her with frightening efficiency.

Once the Argent Crusade had reached their destination in the north, most of the ship clusters separated, to be more manageable, aim for different objectives and shores to prepare their invasion. The region they chose to launch this campaign on was apparently called Howling Fjord, a name with eerie implications.

The vessel which Ash and Melia sailed with shifted further east, towards a location that members of the Horde had dubbed ‘Vengeance Landing’. Rumor has it that the Forsaken subsection prefers to go their own route in the quest to defeat their irrefutable nemesis, rather than follow the recommendations of the Warchief. The Horde as a whole does have inherent problems with discussions of unity and hierarchy, which makes this theory fairly plausible.

Already before anyone can disembark, a recognizable noise echoes over the span of the craft strolling across the waters, which sends unease into the hearts of its crew – the alarm bells are ringing.

Sprinting to the deck and turning their attentions towards the coast, they can spot the enemy waiting, thankfully lit up by the sun’s omnipresent rays. The undead legions are charging and harassing…well, another group of walking corpses, but of a friendly sort. Well, friendlier, at the very least.

Thoughts of leaping into the sea are instantly discouraged by all personnel with the knowledge of the local climate and environment, which spurs the summoning of a slower alternative. Smaller boats hanging off the hull are dropped in the ocean and all available soldiers reserve as many seats as are viable. Once a craft gets filled, it darts towards the beaches, merging with the wave of eager landing parties.

Even prior to arriving at the dry and frozen earth, several crusaders jump off their vehicles and begin wading through the now no more than waist-high waters. Battle shouts and courageous cries erupt from their throats, letting their enemies know that righteous demise is impending.

The majority of the boat Ash sits on disappears into this avid charge, but she lingers, hanging back for a few additional moments. She needs to gather the mental supplies that she keeps around specifically when dealing with the chaotic intensity of combat. She has to scrub any doubt, all traces of hesitation and misgivings to strike.

Unfortunately, her comrades won’t permit a lengthy delay and that’s probably why she feels a slight, albeit firm, nudge right on her back, pushing her into the sea. With no other option, she begins her own approach, stumbling through the wet terrain, while she loads all spiritual and physical capacities into the mode of war. It’s not until her belt resurfaces that she can fumble for the weapon in its sheath and extract the enchanted blade. Over the flat ends, one can spot inscriptions marked in Thalassian.

The more foothold she regains, the further her speed increases and adrenaline gradually overtakes her mental faculties. With the free hand, she reaches for the spiked shield on her back and holds it as an unbreakable bulwark. If she were a mere warrior, this would be as far as her preparational efforts would go, but there’s another angle to Ash’s character, one that slumbers patiently within.

She prays to the entity which has recently reestablished her faith, asking the Light not only for...
guidance, but assistance. She begs it to infuse her equipment and strengthen their destructive proficiencies.

It responds with zeal, materializing a faintly visible aura around both the longsword and the shield. On the weapon, this is situated primarily on the sharp edge, that which shall cause devastation; the yearning it builds silently calls out for the shattering of undead abominations, pleading for Ash to let it purge their unseemly existences. The nigh divine powers of the Light also capture her shield in its grasp, of course, becoming an added layer of defense, should she find herself in a problematic scenario at a later date.

As she advances, Ash tries to give herself an internal note to watch for the tabards of the Banshee Queen, their allies. It would be rather regrettable if she unintentionally struck down their temporary partners and caused a political disaster. Not to mention the guilt she’d have to endure upon realizing she killed an innocent being, reanimated or not. She will concede to the argument that it becomes somewhat difficult to maintain awareness, as her mind begins to fill with one overpowering desire – eradicate the Scourge.

She launches her body into the fires of battle and her very first act is to raise the shield and block a fairly sizeable skeleton that swings a large and sturdy hammer in her direction. The collision of their tools sends vibrations through her arms and torso, but while this should be discouraging, it instead increases her resolve, hardening her mind for the situation she has plunged into. Ashindra Revenor the fighter awakens, and she turns the clash around, bashing the creature’s chest to stagger it and then lifts her heavy boot to kick her foe away.

Almost immediately following this act, her sword seizes its first victim by cutting down a ghoul with a spinning slash, severing its rotten skin and letting it drop to the ground. Most blades would likely do no more than expose the entrails, but thanks to the presence of the Light, the desiccated flesh appears singed, charred to the core. Another undead beast unsuccessfully surges towards her from a separate flank, but she reflexively swings the sword in this angle with impressive precision, enveloping a reanimated hound in the Light’s judgement.

Obviously, Ash is not alone in her slow stride forward, as many more brave combatants follow a similar pattern. Next to her, she can spot an orc and two humans on one side, with a tauren, night elf and draenei combo on the other. All of them struggle ardently, almost with a layer of desperation, to stem the tide and simultaneously gain ground. A strenuous task to say the least, but if there’s one thing they are most passionate to accomplish, enough to stare death in the eye, it’s a confrontation such as this and the inevitable end of the Scourge.

Initially, Ash has no problems imitating the same fervor, fighting with ferocity and unyielding devotion, but the longer this persist, the more her concentration dwindles. Images of the past infects her mind and obscures her thoughts. Out of the corner of her eyes, she suddenly witnesses old allies running for their lives, hears the unmistakable noise of terrified screams in the distance and choking growls slither up from behind, even though her back should be free.

Sweat pours down her brow, her throat dries up and she detects the skulking grasp of fear snaking around her courage, with an unambiguous intent to choke it. She flinches, loses her focus and inadvertently positions herself in a perilous condition. A voice begins to whisper poisonous truths into her ear, telling her that she’s alone and abandoned. Rivaryn is not here, Vestarial is gone and Quel’Thalas shall burn. She might as well surrender, for she will find nothing but dismay and annihilation in this future.

Becoming too distracted by whatever psychological effect that ails her, she doesn’t note how an
undead unit charges towards her, being on the brink of striking. Luckily, help arrives at an opportune time. A barrier of Light suddenly forms around her, sealing any gaps in her defenses. As soon as the undead’s tendrils attempts to lash her, they are instead forced to retreat, as the touch of the smiting flames produces agony beyond comprehension. It gets no reprieve, no opportunity to escape, as a purging pillar of holy energy soon crashes down on top of it, shattering its existence.

The abrupt nature of this rescue startles the paladin, unshackling her consciousness once more, as she tries to recover her focus. A familiar voice echoes behind her.

“Braktog, don’t pull ahead of the rest so rapidly! Ishvaala, shut that breach to your right! Rhyta, step back from the front and let the heavies take the brunt of the assault! C’mon people, huddle up, or they’ll split and trap us, one by one!”

Shortly after, the priestess reaches Ash’s side and plants a careful hand on her shoulder. Her gaze scans the elf’s body, searching for wounds, but none are blatantly discernible.

“You okay, Revenor?”

The paladin is panting, her knees bent somewhat, and she has to lift her arm to wipe some saliva that escapes her mouth.

“Yeah, I’m fine, I just…” She pauses, hoping to catch the attentiveness that slipped away. Get ahold of yourself, Ash. Don’t lose it now. “I wasn’t ready for the cold.”

Melia’s expression can, at best, be described as skeptical, but she doesn’t question the excuse at the moment.

“Okay. You wanna guard our rear? I can reposition you if-“

“No”, Ash interrupts, recuperating some confidence. “No, I can do this.”

“Good. I know you’ve got some command experience and I’m gonna need you to recall some of that right now. I’d appreciate it if you could assist me.”

Ash turns, directing her eyes into the much more compassionate ones of the Lieutenant. She inspects them, making sure that the presented belief is genuine. It would be impossible to state with absolute certainty, but she’s willing to claim that there is some measure of faith on display. That’s all she requires.

“I’ll do my best. Just give us a strategy.”

Melia’s lips curl into a smile and she pats the paladin’s back, an indication to return into the improvised post reserved for her.

“Alright, crusaders, gather up!”, she shouts. “Let’s show these monsters what we’re capable of! Thoradin formation, now!”

The sin’dorei hurries up to the front, knowing what this tactic entails. All close combat defenders, those who can take a heavy barrage and still endure, join Ash’s location while raising their shields. Two humans, two orcs, a tauren and a troll is the team that positions itself as the outermost barricade, to weather any oncoming assaults. Behind them, four archers, three spellcasters and a duo of druids unleash a rain of havoc. Arcane bolts, volleys of arrows, spears of moonlight and fire tempests are all lobbed across their protectors or somehow hurled directly from the heavens. Meanwhile, Melia and a second priest reinforces all the living in their vicinity, crafting Light-based domes, defensive parameters and imbuing their allies with enhancing blessings.

All across the battlefield, the encounter shifts in the Argent Crusade’s favor, as virtually all squads copy this most effective tactic and drives the undead menace back in the shadows of Northrend’s interior. Dozens are obliterated in seconds.
It would appear that the Scourge does not really operate with any fundamental plan in this particular clash, outside of the apparent hope that sheer numbers shall prevail. This notion is most obvious when all of them simply storm their foes, to seize any opportunity to bash, claw, strike and gnaw, rather than utilize a level of guile.

In a straight battle of strength, this idea might have met with some success, should magical, spiritual or divine aid not be accessible. Unfortunately, unification of a whole variety of schools, especially the Light, is one of the Crusade’s foremost assets. They are built with the express intention to utilize any means of defeating their overwhelming enemy, which makes the Scourge’s retort appear rather meagre. One may wonder if this is all they have to offer, or if this might be a mere ploy.

Ash won’t deny the presence of turmoil in her heart, perhaps a measure of stage fright. Her unit had come together a few times during the journey, wherever they had enough space, in order to rehearse each member's abilities and test their merits. Sadly, in those meetings, she was always hesitant to speak. She felt like an outsider, one who had swooped in from nowhere and couldn't simply assume that she would gain a place without striving to earn it. Could they ever appreciate or even come to accept her role?

Fortunately, all such fears were unfounded. Together, here and now, they stand tall against any and all opposition. All doubt and misgivings are forgotten, and they assist each other whenever trouble arises. It boosts Ash’s spirit to witness any of the adjacent crusaders stepping in to reinforce areas where their companions falter. Thanks to this revelation, she collects enough resolve to issue commands of her own. This is an especially useful element when they notice how a trio of abominations charges in their direction, making the earth rumble.

“Shield bearers, form up on me! Shape a joint barrier and I’ll bolster our resistance!”
They obey her orders and as they all converge in the center, she lowers her sword, shuts her eyes, clenches her fist and calls upon a familiar entity.
“Light, I beseech you to aid us in our struggles. Bless our shields with your empowering embrace and grant us your unyielding perseverance!”

Whether based on the prayer or Ash’s own internal energy, the Light listens and its essence gleams onto every protective object in the abominations' path. The undivided display is steady enough to block the incoming impacts, preventing their thrashing from even creating a single dent. Following this feat, the ranged and the close combat heavy hitters unleash their countermeasures, sundering their relentless attackers.

This process doesn’t stop here, as they utilize the same method yet again, and then another time after that. Each achievement stocks Ash’s mind with not only self-esteem, but relief, which grows and flourishes.
When the battle is finally over, and a resounding victory has been accomplished, she is almost on the verge of joining the cheers and triumphant battle shouts that erupt in joy that they have established a first foothold. The best she can offer is a smile.

Suddenly, it’s like she’s part of something again, a cause worth fighting for. She can get used to that pride.

Chapter End Notes
Yup, Riv's team is on the opposite end of Northrend. I guess we'll see if their journeys happen to take them any closer to each other, huh?
Uncaring and all-encompassing gales thrust against the team as they all rise from their slumber, gaining an acute reminder of their surroundings. Barring the dragons, winter is not a favorite season among any of the gathered women, which makes the choice of travelling to this location very unfortunate. Northrend is seemingly locked in a perpetual state of icy storms and frigid days, only made worse by the nagging sensation that death looms nearby.

Rivaryn’s team had followed Nadelgosa’s instructions, travelled to the colder north of the tundra and searched for a suitable spot to prepare their unpredictable encounter with the drake’s distant relatives, or whatever one might call them. This particular task couldn’t be deemed as difficult, but the innate nervousness that it conjures prior to arrival is what plunges them all into a troublesome state.

After a quick breakfast, the group sends an unwilling Stellagosa away, telling her to observe the proceedings from afar and only act if absolutely necessary. The mounts, including Razz, go with her. She could be a second contingency plan, in case everything goes wrong, though it’s unlikely that would change the process by much. If these tough mercenaries and one drake can’t deal with their foes, then how would Stella’s interference alter the equation whatsoever? Doesn’t mean she wouldn’t try, of course.

Once the lure is planted, they wait, though not an incredibly extended amount of time, for one target does undoubtedly emerge, no more than ten minutes later. Above the peaks of Coldarra, they spot a sentry descending in their direction, unwittingly dipping into what might be a most vexing day, where a cage could be its end, should it choose to decline any offers.

The mercs consider themselves to be even more fortunate, due to the fact that the sentry which glides into position is a drake, not a full dragon. Should expedite any hostile operations. It’s not like a fully grown one would’ve been entirely implausible for the group to seize, but their chances now are unmistakably higher. That the scaled creature has grown wary is an aspect they all acknowledge, practically being able to detect by studying the hastened wing beats, the squinting and the circling that follows from above.

When Rax glances sideways, she notes how Nadelgosa’s brow is furrowed, her fingers moving in a potential sign of anxiety. Being closest to the friendly drake, she takes one step towards her and speaks quietly.
“Is something amiss?”

The silence between them lingers for a few seconds, with Nadel’s gaze still fixated on the sentry. She eventually shakes her head.
“No, it’s nothing.”

The sentry lowers itself to a landing zone about twenty meters away, but the heightened alertness lingers.
“I recognize the essence of a fellow member of the blue dragonflight”, the other drake tells her in a draconic tongue, “but why have you brought mortal intruders into our lands?”
Nadel assesses the scents in the air, the excreted pheromones which indicates a male. She clears her throat and steps ahead of the rest, placing her as the primary target. She speaks in Common instead. “Greetings. My name is Nadelgosa and I am here to bargain. I wish to have my brother, Deradgos, released from his arcane cell in the depths of the Nexus.”

The response from the sentry is delayed, the wings on the back displaying minor tentative flaps. “I…don’t know either of those names”, he admits.

“Deradgos was one of those who attended Malygos' council gathering weeks ago, representing the Azurewing dragons.”

Comprehension now dawns on his features. “One of the traitors? You want to free a turncoat from the dungeons that he rightfully belongs in?”

“Stop that!”, she objects. “I will not have such slander attributed to my brother! He’s an honorable and compassionate dragon, and only declared what he believed to be a wiser conclusion to our current dilemma. Imprisonment was harsh and unjustified!”

The sentry emits a light hiss. “I don’t agree, but it’s your prerogative to believe what you wish. We won’t exonerate him simply because you begged, however.”

Nadel sighs and rolls her eyes, trying to contain her indignation. Whomever this is, he probably won’t be convinced by her shouts. “And I wasn’t implying that you’d have to. I did say I would bargain and I’ve not come emptyhanded.”

She lifts her hand, summons the arcane into her fingers and unveils an object that lands in her palm, which reveals a unique appearance – a small light blue cube with black lines constantly altering directions across its length and orbs in all colors of the rainbow drifting around it. Transparent, nigh incorporeal in design. “This is an ancient artifact, crafted by the senior and venerated dragon lord Senegos. As his granddaughter, it is currently in my possession and if you are willing to work with us, this trade can occur without issue. In fact, we can make sure you’re the one that gets to deliver it to lord Malygos, which I’m certain will garner his favor.”

Without his knowledge, Nadelgosa keeps her other hand behind her back, suffusing her fingertips with arcane runes as she prepares potential countermeasures, just in case he decides to flee or strike against them. Not an inconceivable choice, if this sentry is impudent enough.

At first, he stares eerily silent for several moments, making the group wonder whether he actually understood the question or if he’s merely contemplating every angle in this offer. Takes a bit of time, but he does eventually come in for a mental landing. “That is quite a beneficial deal in the eyes of the blue dragons…but an unacceptable conclusion.”

“What? How could you-“

Without warning, he slams his front claws to the ground, digging them into the snow, before Nadel has a chance to retaliate. Suddenly, most of them sense an impending surge of a familiar spell, not too dissimilar from what they experienced previously. Of course the blue dragons would have neutralization procedures in place, snares to catch unsuspecting fools that dare to tread into their territory.

Out of the blue, one might say, one dragon, four dragonspawn, another drake and a tall drakonid teleport in, their sapphire-like scales of different shades glistening in the light of the northern sun.
As the group instinctively retreats, the large hulking drakonid steps forth, holding a long, sturdy and sharp spear in his clawed grasp. The tips of his thick horns practically glisten, and his glowing white eyes scan them with excessive layers of suspicion and skepticism, nigh accusingly, as if he has already delivered a verdict. Eventually, they stop on Nadel.

“I received news from one of our sentries that someone requested the release of a convict?”, he asks, the deep and gruff voice having a slight echo to it. “I am Warden Kaltor, head jailor of the blue dragonflight’s incarceration efforts.”

Well, seems like they inadvertently caught the big fish when they threw the net. Or perhaps it would be more prudent to state the opposite, at this rate. They are undeniably outnumbered here. Nadel herself is baffled, though more so at the accomplishment than the reveal. “What? No, that’s…that’s impossible! This drake couldn’t already have sent word. A spell wasn’t even cast!”

Kaltor snorts, a heavy, sharp and mocking noise. “You assume we don’t have precautions in place for this exact outcome? We are at war, little whelp. Scheming wretches like you are precisely what we have to be ready for.”

The mortal group look especially unnerved by this discovery, Thariss most of all. “Didn’t I say this shit would happen? Pretty sure I did. But does anyone listen to me? Fuck no.”

Cordial discussion is now more crucial than ever, in hopes of getting out of this ordeal unscathed. Nadel takes a deep breath and conducts another attempt. “If your sentry truly warned you of this meeting, then surely he would’ve told you that I merely seek to negotiate. I have an artifact I wish to trade, in exchange for my brother’s life. It’s a fair deal, in my mind.”

The Warden slowly paces over the area where his troops are gathered, eyes trained on the drake. “Deradgos, the male who opposed Lord Malygos’ righteous call to action? You think we would release him for the meager price of a simple rudimentary trinket?”

Nadel gasps in embellished offense. “Trinket? How dare you?! This is a priceless device, invented by Senegos himself, unmatched among our kind!”

Kaltor halts and corrects his pose, straightening his back. “If that’s the case, then I believe we should simply confiscate it all.” He slams the spear’s blunt end into the snow and his affiliated dragonkin immediately spread out to surround the group. He raises his nose into the air and sniffs. “Ah, I can smell the stench of magical residue. Did you think we would not uncover your plot, whelp? To fight your own kind – that’s a punishable offense, you know.”

With a growing frown, Nadel snaps her fingers and transfers the artifact away to wherever she summoned it from. The rest of the team gets into battle stances, but haven’t yet drawn their weapons. Will that even work against these fiends? “This isn’t justice”, the drake asserts. “You can’t detain me like this, for doing nothing wrong. I was merely trying to defend myself.”

“Irrelevant. You were preparing to commit violence against one of your own and I am now witness to this heinous act. You will not elude righteousness, delinquent.”

They gradually try to back off, though there isn’t a lot of places to run. It’s very feasible to assume that the dragons are faster than each of them anyhow.
Nadel shuts the distance between herself and the mortals, and while still viewing her compatriots, she whispers to the mercs.
“I’m going to spring my trap. That should give you the opportunity to escape.”

The elven duo, while worried, doesn’t protest. Rax is not on the same page, looking at her confusedly.
“What about you?”

“I’ll stay and cover your backs. Go with Stellagosa, try to find some way to contact other allies.”

The draenei stares at her and displays a scowl.
“Unacceptable.”

Nadel faces her, looking right into the white eyes and wonders what the paladin is trying to convey. Why does she even care, after their last encounter?
“Well, too bad. There are no alternatives.”

“Says you.”
Rax suddenly strides forward and unsheathes Kerastha Rakkan. The dragons observe how light begins to churn in her gauntlets. Having sparred, fought and trained with her on numerous occasions, Riv and Thariss recognize what it indicates, and they close their eyes.
“Stay back, miscreants! I am Raxeen, Vindicator of the draenei people. An attack on me will mean war with beings beyond your feeble comprehension.”

Kaltor views her with both disbelief and amusement, releasing a small derisive laughter.
“You think your measly threats scare us, mortal?”

“Clearly, you are blind to the purging capacity of the Light. So be it.”

She promptly lifts her hand up, in line of sight of everyone involved and unleashes a piercingly bright flare. It is so intense that it disorients and temporarily blinds everyone who so much as faces that direction. Essentially, that includes all of the dragonkin, but not the elves. Seeing the opening, both of them turn and dash at the highest speed they can possibly muster, running towards the area where they know an ally is waiting.

Stellagosa, having not directly seen it, leaps out of her hiding spot and swiftly transforms into her drake form. She comes surging to the rescue and the duo immediately jumps onto her back. The drake doesn’t hesitate or wait, switches to the opposite direction and darts through the air, flying for safety. Razz, Ilca and Rax’s saber do their best to follow.

Once the dragons finally regain their eyesight and watch what happens, they can see the figures disappearing in the distance.
“They’re getting away!”, one dragonspawn yells. “Quick, after them!”

“Don’t bother”, Kaltor informs his troops, halting their departure. “We have who we want and a mortal captive as a bonus. If they are smart, they won’t oppose us.”

As the blue dragons gradually closes in, Nadel and Rax back into one another, but realize that fighting here is futile. The drake frowns in disappointment.
“I told you to flee.”

Rax sheathes her weapon.
“And leave you behind? I will not repeat your mistake.”

“…you’re a fool.”
“I guess that makes two of us.”

Chapter End Notes

_Takes a fool to recognize a fool, right?_  
_Originally, I was gonna have Rax cast that magic purging spell she used back in "The Promised Land", but I figured it would be a bit too OP to knock out like, almost a dozen dragonkin. Besides, it wouldn't stop them from chasing after Thariss and Rivaryn._  
_However, *Blinding Light* is a pretty basic paladin spell that seemed much more advantageous in this occasion. Well, at least to let her friends escape. I believe Rax also used this spell against the gronn in the last fic._  
_Now Rax and Nadel will have to share a cell. HOW INCONVENIENT. I can't foresee any awkward situations deriving from this._
A guiding soul

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Howling. Yes, Ashindra can see where that section of this region’s name derived from. Even outside of the uncompromising and deafening chaos of battle, the fjord is a tide of turbulence, a source for much disconcerting and unidentified noise. She wishes she had the ability to block it out in some fashion, to stop her imagination from going astray and ponder the morbid consequences which might await them. Sadly, her mind isn’t quite so flexible. All she can do is endure and that, at least, is an attribute she has in abundance.

After the fight on the shores of eastern Northrend, the righteous stride over the continent did not end. The Argent Crusade left the Forsaken troops to their own devices and charged into the next Scourge stronghold. A second battle ensued no more than a day or two later, as they kept trying to seize ground. Compared to the landfall, this conflict was less efficient and included more casualties. Seems the undead menace aren’t completely without tactical adaptability. Though, thankfully, they did achieve victory, even if it was hard-earned.

Due to the debilitated status of their forces, they’ve had to slow down and erect a camp. During this process, people like Lieutenant Melia have had to focus on what some may deem to be their main purpose and utilize their healing spells.

Ash won’t lie – she does find it fascinating how the priestess can be so capable at commanding troops in battle, while constantly lingering in the rear of the squad to provide support. Then again, perhaps that’s an advantage? She is less likely to fall and can make assessments about endurance from a distance.

At this time, Ash is standing in the periphery of the camp, having accepted a guard shift. This type of responsibility was, technically, beneath her when she was a member of the Blood Knights, but this is a new Ashindra. She isn’t really bothered by a task which involves nothing but standing around for a while.

Though, saying that, she isn’t doing an exemplary job. She finds herself somewhat…distracted by other elements. If one were to inquire, she would definitely deny the claim; emphatically so.

The medical tents have been assembled in the middle of the area, which isn’t too far from where Ash is stationed and with Melia still performing her own duties, the blood elf gets the chance to watch her, even if from afar.

She observes how the human uses her connection to the Light on some soldiers that are lying on makeshift beds constructed from sheets and pillows. Once they’re healed, Melia speaks to them for a little while, likely giving advice. There’s a nigh constant gentle smile adorning her lips, both cordial and thoughtful.

This very moment, it seems she jokes a bit with a dwarf, who laughs loudly and pats her arm, making her grin in return. A similar event transpires a few minutes later, this time with a night elf. Melia just generally appears to exude a friendly aura, one that people swiftly take to. Not even Ash can deny the appeal, the desire to be in her company.

Just like on the ship, the paladin can sort of notice hints of her old self in Melia, a factor she could never willingly admit. Then again, was she ever so comprehensively adored in this fashion?

Unfortunately, in her enthusiastic pursuit of her own interests, she completely fails to realize that she has been staring and not accurately performed the duty that she was assigned, which is quite a slipup. This doesn’t become apparent to her until Braktog, a large orc in her unit, approaches. He
nudges her arm, taking her out of the trance she fell into.
“Hey, you wanna switch?”

Ash just barely winces and turns towards him. She clears her throat and rectifies her position.
“No, th-that’s alright.”

The orc folds his arms, amusement materializing on his expression.
“You sure? Most sentries should be watching the perimeter and surroundings, not the infirmary.”

Ash blinks, acknowledges the fact that she’s facing the wrong direction and then scratches her neck. She’s starting to feel kinda foolish.
“Uh, perhaps you’re right. I…could use a break.”

“Hah, thought so. Get some rest, Revenor.”

Ash double-checks that she’s wearing all her gear and then departs from this location. Despite the feeling that she should probably heed his advice and go relax for a bit, maybe get something to eat, she still instinctively wanders towards the sickbeds. She’s drawn to them, without explanation. She stops a few meters away and waits for a minute or two, as Melia treats another patient. Once the human stands up to go wash her hands in a water bowl, Ash makes her move.

“You’re very versatile. Seems your skillset is remarkably diverse.”

Melia blinks confusedly at first, before shifting into a joyful expression as she sees Ash.
“Ah, it comes with the job, really. Been honing these abilities since I was young.” She steers her eyes to the water and makes sure that her hands are properly cleaned.
“My mom adhered to a strict policy of discipline and support, that those with our capabilities should focus on bolstering others around us.” She gains a wistful look.
“Maybe the brazen warrior rushing headfirst into their next foe or the zealously shouting paladin spouting their righteous creed won’t openly admit it, but they need us, more than they realize’. Just one of her nuggets of wisdom. Well, bitter advice, anyhow.”

Ash chuckles, an act she rarely performs nowadays.
“She had a point, I think. Your mother was very wise. I remember people of my own Order who used to profess similar opinions. And you’re certainly well-liked too. There’s hardly a person here who doesn’t end up with a smile after you’re done with them.”

The human dries her hands with one of the nearby towels and displays mild tinges of shyness.
“Heh, well, another element of my profession, I guess. Everyone likes a healer.”

Not untrue per se, but Ash still keeps reservations regarding such a statement.
“I dunno, I think it’s more than that.”

Melia steers her attention fully to the elf now.
“Like what?”

Ash looks at the other woman’s face, studying the visage, especially the eyes, and shrugs.
“There’s something about you. You’re…radiant, somehow.”

It’s unclear if that came out in an unintended fashion or not, but Melia definitely hadn’t anticipated that type of response. She tilts her head with avid interest.
“Are you flirting with me, recruit?”

Ash’s initial reaction is to be very confused, not quite getting it. This subsides rapidly, and she
recognizes how her words could be interpreted this way. It makes her blush.
“I, uh… I’m not sure.”

Thankfully, Melia doesn’t take it too seriously. She giggles and gently pats Ash's shoulder, though she does show a modicum of embarrassment. Maybe she wasn’t so unmoved after all?
“Thank you, Revenor. So, you’re free, I guess? You wanna help me out for a while? I could use an assistant.”

The awkward tension in the air is soon replaced by a growing hesitation.
“What? Erm, I don’t think it would be wise to include me in your task. I can’t do much.”

Melia dismisses her concerns with the wave of a hand.
“What? C’mon, that can’t be true. You know a couple of healing spells, don’t you?”

“Yes, but… I’ve never been particularly proficient with them.”

“Bah, it’s not that difficult. You just need to know where to push.”

“You say that, but…”

Any further complaints are quelled by Melia wrapping fingers around her hand.
“Come, let me show you. I know you can do it, with the right instructions.”

Ash’s reluctance increases by the second, as her inherent self-doubt urges her to decline.
“Lieutenant, it would be foolish to risk someone’s life with my inadequate qualities. I don’t—”

The priestess smiles and pulls her closer.
“Call me Melia. Now, follow me.”

She doesn’t wait for Ash to issue any additional misgivings, as she starts to drag the sin’dorei away.
“We won’t practice on anyone critically injured, of course. I’ll find an apt trial for you.”
Despite her disinclination, Ash allows herself to be taken away. Their target for this endeavor is a female tauren, who lies bandaged on a bed under the open sky.
“This one has lacerations on her leg, which a healer could close.” She veers to address the tauren.
“Soldier, do you mind if my friend here attempts to treat your wounds? She’s inexperienced, but I want to give her an opportunity.”

This woman shakes her head and tries to correct her position.
“Not at all. But you’ll be overseeing the procedure, right?”

“Of course. Don’t worry, I’ll be here.”

Together, the two shorter women kneel, and Melia discards the temporary bandages, exposing the grisly interior.
“They look gruesome, I know”, she tells Ash, “but that’s just the surface. It’s nothing fatal, though a helping hand could get her back on her hooves a lot quicker. Critical injuries are far more complex and slow to mend, requiring more equipment and concentration, but a cut like this is exactly where the Light can be highly effective.” She throws a cursory glance towards the elf. “Sit down and remove your gauntlets. Best to put your weapons away too.”

Ash does as she’s instructed, but injects another piece of information first.
“Uh, does this require intricate spells? I only know basic healing flashes.”

“That’s fine, a simple one should suffice.”

When her hands are free, Ash slides closer, shuts her eyes and calls for the Light’s rejuvenating
gifts. Illumination does appear in her grasp, though the actual magic isn’t very effective. She tries her utmost, practically strains her mind, but not much changes. 
“Hmm. Think I felt a slight sting, but that might just be the pain”, the tauren explains.

Ash exhales, lowers her hand and lets her shoulders slump. 
“I knew it would end this way. I told you I can't do it.”
She feels a sense of internal failure, shame. Could it be that the Light hasn’t fully forgiven her for the transgressions of the past? She was never a competent restoration-based priestess to begin with.

Melia watches her, eyes filled with sympathy, as she touches Ash’s arm. 
“You might not be in the right state of mind. You're doubting your own capacity. You fail because you believe you will.”

The paladin faces her with an incredulous gaze. 
“How can that be? I meditated on the Light, begged it to assist me. There was no response. It doesn’t serve me in this way. It never will.”

The smile offered by Melia now is a patient one. 
“That’s probably not the optimal approach”, she infers. “I’ve always found that praying to the Light makes your mind struggle too ardently. It makes you lose the required serenity. You know what you should do instead? Think of a person, a memory or a place that makes you calm, grants you some of that tranquility.”

Ash’s eyes dart around perplexedly. 
“...and what would that be?”

“I dunno. It’s your head, right? Anything you find soothing, really, that brings you hope and relief. Give it a try.”

Despite believing it’ll end in disappointment, Ash heeds the guidance and resumes her work. She searches for anything in her head, any morsel that her mind would be willing to share that could ease the tension. She feels like minutes float by, until she stumbles into it. A quick flashback comes to her, unexpected and inescapable.

_Eversong Woods, southwestern coastline, on a sunny day. A pensive wind brushes against her skin, a remote song of birds entices her ears, though does not draw her from her position next to a thick and sturdy tree._
_She stares out at the ocean, the vast field of blue, which has no answers for her. She folds her arms and her eyes continue their distant feature. A disquieting knot prods her chest, a sensation of remorse. She did something wrong, tried her best but didn’t succeed._

_The person she couldn’t affect? Of course, it’s Vestarial. It’s always her dear sister._
_They had been arguing again, like they do incessantly. This time, however, the conclusion was unusual. Ash admitted that it was her fault, that she made a mistake. She tried to apologize, but it was in vain. Vesta didn’t want to hear her excuse, assumed that Ash was being arrogant and simply left. Regret eats at Ash’s heart and she wonders what she can do to set this right. There has to be something…_

_Luckily, her hunt does not even have to commence, for she detects a presence in the vicinity, hears the feet stepping on the grass and the crunching of fallen sticks. Looking over her shoulder, Ash spots, to her surprise, how her twin comes walking. Her expression is ambiguous, her ponytail is_
flung over her shoulder and there’s some form of item hidden in her grasp. Vesta briefly glances towards Ash, but doesn’t stop.

Ash is hesitant to begin with, unsure if she should utter anything. But if her sister chose to come here, maybe there is a chance? “Vesta, I…”

She lingers in uncertainty for too long and Vesta doesn’t wait. Instead of lashing out, however, she tosses one of the object she was holding – an apple. Ash just barely catches it, fumbling for a second or two. When she gets ahold of it, she looks at her sister bemusedly, as Vesta strolls up to a nearby precipice of the hill Ash is located on and sits down. As her other hand rises, the older sister notices a second apple, which Vesta starts to munch on.

A war of reluctance and hope wages in Ash’s heart. Was this a sign, an offer of truce? It usually takes much longer, and she can’t know for sure if this will all end in misery. Nevertheless, she decides to make the mental leap, despite the lack of overt answers. She approaches and takes her seat next to Vesta.

“I’m sorry.”

“I know”, is the short answer. Curiously, it is followed by Vesta placing her head on Ash’s shoulder. “You’re an idiot…but I forgive you.”

Words she didn’t know how much she craved until this very moment. A relieved smile quickly forms, and she wraps an arm around Vesta’s back, as they both eat their fruits in silence.

Suddenly, Ash’s eyes fly open again and to her surprise, the wound has closed. The tauren looks exceedingly pleased.

“Hah, well look at that! Great job, recruit. Didn’t know you had it in you.”

Another who is most satisfied, perhaps even proud, is Melia.

“See? Told ya it wasn’t that difficult.”

Ash finds herself lost for words at first, the whole memory practically having overwhelmed her. And yet she did somehow locate the peace of mind she was searching for, a stillness locked in time. She stares at Melia with a sense of reverence.

“You are…an outstanding teacher.”

Chapter End Notes

_I mean, yeah, of course. What else would give Ash peace? Sadly, it won’t be that easy this time. Although that’s quite a distant event._
Despite an insistence from a wide variety of people across Azeroth, there are a number of differences between the Magisters of Quel’Thalas and the magocratic state of Dalaran. Their perspectives, their knowledge, their methods and their incantations are all somewhat similar, but far from the same. Either side would readily point this out if asked, even more so after the elven nation splintered and changed. The chance of gaining the opposite reaction, however, is minimal, even though there are a number of notable parallels. A preference for tall towers, for example, is an aspect that neither of them can easily dismiss.

Kassari can’t even recall when she was last in a Kirin Tor facility. She remembers coming to Dalaran once or twice during her apprenticeship, but unlike some of her peers, she was never astoundingly intrigued by the city-state. Sure, it was fascinating enough, but the quel’dorei and the Magisters held a much deeper understanding for the ebb and flow of the arcane than the rather human-centric Kirin Tor, in her mind. In their current state, she wonders if that was an opinion born of pride and ego. She may not have been as derisive and conniving as her family, but she was never fully open-minded either.

Times constantly change, of course, and she knows that she must evolve to follow its whims. This is why she felt it was certainly the right decision to come here, to the Kirin Tor outpost of Amber Ledge. The Magisters may have a vast comprehension for thaumaturgical practices and libraries on such matters that are outmatched by none, but she acknowledges the fact that they cannot solve the mystery of the fluctuating arcane alone.

Compared to her previous journey, Kass is dressed in warmer clothes, wearing a set of red and gold robes, but with a warm fur-laced cloak wrapped around her, as well as gloves, a scarf and a cap. Though the latter three items are not currently equipped, as the inside of this tower is insulated by magical means.

She’s standing in a fairly small office of some kind, on the tallest level in the tower. There are tomes, books, scrolls and spellbound items sprawled all over this room, but her focus is on the table at the center with a large map placed on top. On the other side of table stands a human, an older man by the look of his pale wrinkled skin, his shoulder-length grey hair and grey goatee. Archmage Berinand, he called himself. That’s another peculiar aspect, really – it’s very plausible that Kass is older than him, unless he has enhanced his natural age through spells, and yet she is still far away from a Magister’s title.

“Fine, so penetrating the blues’ defenses directly won’t work, but have you tried other methods?”, she asks. “I would suggest utilizing a triangulation technique. If applied properly, it can destabilize the arcane barrier they’ve erected and corrupt their foundations enough to slow any reconstruction efforts.”

The older human, wearing long purple robes with the eye of the Kirin Tor at his chest, folds his arms and sighs.

“We’ve attempted that, yes. They don’t just have a barrier around Coldarra, but a chain of sensor runes that can detect intrusion. We managed to initiate the procedure, but weren’t fast enough. It took too much time and they intercepted us.”

“Hmm. Well, maybe your organization has too slow incantations. I could give it a try with
Magister enchantments.”

Berinand rolls his eyes.
“Arcanist Silvershroud, do you truly believe you can outmatch them? I understand your disbelief in us, but this is the blue dragonflight we’re talking about. They used magic before we even had written language.”

Kass furrows her brow and starts to bite at her lip, but has to admit defeat in this instance. It’s probably true that a mere Arcanist couldn’t singlehandedly surpass dragons that are so intricately interwoven with the ley lines of the world.
She is on the verge of pouting at this stage, when she turns to face the third denizen in the room, which happens to be her strong and loving girlfriend, Khroga. Ever since the two became one, they rarely leave each other’s side and Kass often looks to the orc for support and comfort. In this case, however, the shaman can only offer a smile and a shrug. Oh well, at least that expression makes her feel better.

“I suppose I will acquiesce to your point”, Kass confesses, “but we can’t give up. There has to be some way to circumvent it. The ley lines must be restored, or we’ll never be able to cast portals again.”

“And I’m not here to disagree, Arcanist, but let me reiterate – the sole plan we’ve concocted so far that comes even close to solving this issue, involves sending a team to infiltrate the Nexus. The problem lies in finding not just willing participants to take the risks, but capable individuals that can achieve our goals.”

Kass lifts a hand to pinch her nose, looking troubled.
“And whomever does this will be too exposed. The blues will swarm them in a matter of seconds.”

“I’d be willing to volunteer, if you need more people”, Khroga informs them. “I’m not exactly the infiltrator type, but I’ve certainly got experience with dicey scenarios.”

The elf immediately veers to her girlfriend and her eyes begin to shimmer with further uncertainty. “I’m…not sure that’s wise. I think it’s best if you stay with me.”

The two women gaze at one another, and while Kass’ words aren’t unwarranted, it’s fairly obvious to both that her opinion is based on the fear of endangering her girlfriend and not a logical assessment.
Before they can discuss the matter further, however, they hear a bit of commotion from the corridor outside the room, as if someone is attempting to push past the guards that protect the door.
They can hear loud voices, but it’s difficult to determine an identity.

With a flurry of astonishment, they see how a pale elf invades the room through a teleportation spell, though the Kirin Tor guards are soon after her. One might assume it’s a quel’dorei based on the blue eyes, but the long azure hair flowing behind her creates other assumptions. Her arms are seized by two humans, but she still tries to struggle.
“Let me go, dammit! I demand to speak with Archmage Berinand and I will not take no for an answer!”

Both Khroga and Kass are rather surprised by the appearance.
“Wait, is that…a blue dragon?”, asks the mage. Kass cannot just feel this aura, but see it through her eyes that are attuned to the arcane. No elf, even the most talented Magister, would exude such a natural haze of magic.

“No need to worry”, says Berinand calmly. “I know this one. It’s Stellagosa, one of the non-hostile
members of her flight. What I don’t understand, though, is what she’s doing here, seeing as how we rebuffed her and her sister’s last suggestion. Or is there a new foolish idea in the making?”

His words would indicate that he’s conversing with his guests, but the tone is definitely loud enough for the drake to overhear. She’s already annoyed by the fact that she’s being physically held back, but this attitude merely helps to exacerbate her aggravation.

“I’m standing right here! Don’t pretend I’m not, Archmage!”

She’s about to make an additional statement, but that’s when two more people walk in after her. One of them speaks up.

“Kass?”

The ears of the Arcanist perk and she glances towards the doorway, before widening her eyes at the revelation.

“Rivaryn!” She rapidly discards all notions of formality and immediately approaches her sister to embrace her. The hunter returns the gesture, naturally. “What are you doing here?” Once she peers sideways, she spots another familiar figure. “Oh, Thariss, you’re here too.”

The kaldorei smiles and shrugs.

“Aren’t I always?” She waves her hand at the shaman across the room. “Hey Khroga. You’re up in all this cold nonsense too, huh?”

She chuckles.

“Obviously. What would the Silvershrouds be without us?”

The bewilderment has now transferred from the guests to Berinand himself.

“So, can anyone tell me what’s actually going on here?”

Kass clears her throat and corrects her robes.

“Oh, of course. Archmage, this here is my older sister Rivaryn and her girlfriend, Thariss. They’re fighters, mercenaries and good people. Uh, not necessarily in that order.
We worked together back in Outland.”

Suddenly, her senses notify her of an aspect that is awry.

“Wait, aren’t you missing someone? Where’s Raxeen?”

Riv’s ears tilt down in mild sorrow, while Thariss scratches the back of her own head.

“Uh, yeah, about that…”, says the warrior.

“She’s in trouble”, states Stella. “A real one, this time. Raxeen and my sister were both captured by our dragonflight. They’ve been brought into the same prison as my brother. We need your help to free them.”

Berinand stares at her in a confounded and irritated fashion.

“Wait. Do you mean to tell me that you went through with this foolish plan of yours after all?”

The drake stares at him with most dissatisfied eyes.

“We did, but I take umbrage at anyone calling it ‘foolish’.”

“Too bad, for I can assign no other description. Not only has your sister gotten herself captured, but she has victimized another poor innocent soul.”

“Yes, fine, I realize that this is an unfortunate scenario and it wasn’t an actual element of our plan, but…the events during the outbreak were too chaotic to predict.”

The human sighs heavily at this news and rubs his eyes in an agitated fashion.
“And you are surprised?” He soon steers his attention to the guards and dismisses them with a quick wave. They let go of Stella, who sullenly caresses her wrists. “We did warn you that it would be virtually impossible to anticipate every contingency. It’s why we rejected your proposal. Why didn’t you listen?”

Stella frowns and crosses her arms. “If that is the case, then shouldn’t you have aided us to begin with to increase our chances, rather than dismiss us out of hand?”

“Quite the opposite. I’d say this blunder proves our assessment. Or do you expect me to change my mind?”

“What’s done is done, Archmage. But we have created the opportunity you doubted. This is why we have to go save those two, now more than ever!”

Regrettably, the skepticism previously offered to her from the Archmage doesn’t diminish now. “I don’t wish to disappoint you too early, but the answer will very likely be the same. The Kirin Tor can’t risk its current preparations for the sake of a few trivial drakes. I’m sorry.”

A gasp is emitted, one of both anger and shock. “Trivial?! How dare you!? That’s an insult to our dignity and identity! We gave you valuable information when we first arrived, as a sign of goodwill, and this is how you repay us?!”

Before things get out of hand, Kass interferes. “Let’s slow down the bickering, shall we? I’m not at all informed of this situation, so I’d appreciate if someone brought me up to speed.”

She’s not the only one with questions. Both Thariss and Riv seem a little confused. “Uh, yeah, I’m starting to get kinda leery as well over here”, says the night elf.

“Are you saying this was part of your plan, Stella?”, asks Riv.

The previously fierce determination that the drake had showed now evaporates a little, but she doesn’t respond. The human snorts. “The sisters duped you, did they? Why am I not surprised?”

Despite his reluctance, Berinand gestures for everyone to approach the table again. He relays the entire story regarding Malygos’ summit, the rebuke from the Azurewings and Deradgos’ arrest, before getting to the main problematic factor. “Only a week or two after this event, lady Nadelgosa and lady Stellagosa came to us with a proposition. They believed that they had a solid plan for how to free their brother and offered it to me and the rest of my mages at this outpost. Regrettably, their idea was reckless and unreliable, so we had to refuse them.”

Stella looks hesitant, though not staunchly opposed to description. “I…disagree. It was hazardous, but not reckless. Not the strongest one, but still a plan.”

Berinand snorts. “Is that so? And I suppose the fact that getting these two women’s friend imprisoned is just an unfortunate miscalculation that couldn’t possibly have occurred otherwise?”

The young drake glares at him, but stays silent again. “You see, Nadelgosa and Stellagosa had an enchantment crafted from intricate calibrations and coalesced rare materials which connects them, allowing the two to sense each other’s presences. The older sister approached us together with Stellagosa and presented us with a proposition – if the Kirin Tor seeks a way inside the Nexus tunnels, we can open the correct passageways from the
prison. Nadelgosa would get herself imprisoned, but by utilizing her sister’s link, we could teleport directly to that location and free their brother in the process, while sabotaging for the blues. However, this spell can only be unleashed past the defense barrier, so a large-scale operation would still be required.”

This piece of news appears to capture Kass’ interest, whose eyes shimmer intriguingly.

“Really now?”

At the same time, it also shocks both of Stella’s comrades.

“What the fuck?!” Thariss exclaims. “This wasn’t what you told us!”

The drake wasn’t ready for this outburst and she flinches slightly, while raising her arms. Her expression displays shades of guilt and remorse.

“P-please, don’t be angry. I…I sincerely apologize to you. I wanted to tell you, I did! But Nadia… she insisted we had to stay silent. She knew you wouldn’t approve and might try something foolish to stop her from sacrificing herself.”

Riv rubs her chin in thought, seeming less outraged than Thariss.

“Well, evidently, she was correct.”

“After the Kirin Tor refused to cooperate, we needed mortals as bait, so that we could ensure that my sister would be taken into the depths of the prison. But we genuinely didn’t intend for Raxeen to be apprehended with her.”

Thariss scoffs and scowls at the drake.

“Well, you fucked up there, didn’t you?”

“Hmm. I am also disappointed that you omitted the truth, Stella”, Riv confesses, “but we can’t ignore that Raxeen made this decision on her own. Nadel was telling us to get out.”

This argument impedes some of Thariss’ indignance.

“Eh, true, I guess. She didn’t know this was under false pretenses, though.”

“Where is this prison?”, Kass wonders.

“It’s supposed to be underground”, Riv clarifies, “beneath the surface of Coldarra, or so we’ve heard. It’s connected to some sort of network called the ‘Nexus’, apparently.”

This little detail is what intrigues Kass. She strokes a hand thoughtfully over her cheeks.

“To the Nexus, you say? What a coincidence – we’ve been looking for a way to access that facility.”

They hear how Berinand exhales.

“Now hold on just a minute. This arcane prison is nowhere near the wing which we want to penetrate. This complex is almost completely detached and the few links that exist are minor arcane lines, to share power. You can’t physically access the core from the prison.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve viewed the blueprints. It was provided to us decades ago. The Nexus network is extensive, with multiple branches and facilities, but the core structure is beneath the main fortress at the center. The prison is in one of the side wings and to protect the cave system from being completely infiltrated from below, each section is separated, with only arcane coils installed in between. They operate under the same power grid, but you can’t access one wing from another.”
Kass considers what she’s being told, brushing her fingers over her lips as she ruminates on the information.
“So, this prison has nothing of value? No interesting mechanisms or weaknesses that we can exploit?”

Stella now resumes her scowling.
“It does, actually. Doesn’t it, Archmage?”

The response from Berinand is delayed, and he nervously strokes his beard, no doubt due to knowing that the drake is correct.
“I…didn’t say it was worthless. Yes, certain minor controls and command devices can be acquired, though nothing that can help us disable the disarray in Azeroth’s ley line system overall. Such powerful instruments are solely available in the core.”

Kass turns her gaze down, towards the map, and runs her fingers over the view of Coldarra. It isn’t very detailed.
“But then the question is, could this prison provide us with an opportunity to disrupt the outer defenses of the island?”

Before the human can even think to respond, Stella interjects.
“Undoubtedly, yes. It’s true that nothing critical is found down there, but as the Archmage so accurately identified, the various wings do share a power network.”

“That is…not false”, Berinand reluctantly concedes.

“Then isn’t this exactly what we’ve been searching for?”, Kass inquires. “If we access the prison’s energy output, we can cause a disturbance in the defense grid. This could grant us an opportunity to dispatch more people and plant a concealed base inside of Coldarra itself.”

The Archmage still has an abundance of misgivings, observed through his skeptical shrug.
“It is plausible, but you’re forgetting that the defense barrier is still active. Any team that try to break it to reach the prison will be noticed instantly.”

“Can’t you create a diversion, though?”, Thariss wonders. “If one team infiltrates, another can try to steal the blues’ attention.”

“Yeah, that seems like the easiest route”, Khroga agrees. “The Kirin Tor has a bunch of red dragon allies, right?”

Berinand places a hand along his cheek, tapping at it with his fingers as he ponders the prospect.
“Well...none of this is impossible, sure, but it’s merely the first stage. Whomever we send would be at risk, both dragons and mortals. And entry to the prison-”

“Can be achieved using my enchantment, like we discussed”, Stella interrupts. “Although uh, I will admit that a few complex thaumaturgical calculations will have to be employed. I might need assistance.”

“I’ll help you”, says Kass. “If you, me, Thariss, Riv and Khroga act carefully, with perhaps a bit of aid from a Kirin Tor squad, we could break in, produce a malfunction in the system and escape, before most of the blues even notice we were there.”

Khroga nods.
“Teleport inside, fight our way to the cages and then split up, where one half frees the captives and the others locate a source for the energy.”
“Not easy, but doable”, Riv assents.

“Not to mention that the prisoners themselves will be most eager to assist us”, Stella points out. “Our brother is not helpless. In his proper dragon form, he’s a powerful and dangerous foe. Though he may be injured at this time…”

“And let’s not forget Rax’s affinity for the Light. She’s able to purge magic, if given enough time to prepare.”

While she’s not entirely opposed to this debate, Thariss looks a little sullen. “Still not sure I feel comfortable ‘bout it, though. I mean, we were tricked.”

“That’s…very true”, Riv concedes. “I won’t pretend that I’m not upset. But I wonder if this will truly help us.”

“It won’t”, Kass insists. “I realize that I do not have all the facts in whatever happened during this debacle, but I can assure you that Raxeen will remain jailed unless you act.”

She doesn’t seem particularly pleased with this outcome, but Thariss sighs and raises her arms in defeat. “Yeah, yeah, you’ve got a point.”

Stella approaches Thariss and gingerly caresses her arm. “I swear, upon both mine and my sister’s honor, that we will find some way to make up for this. Nadia may not have expected this result, but she won’t let it stay ignored.”

The women in the room all seem to be heading towards the same conclusion and they have arrived at a stage where they believe this might be an operation they can succeed with. Unfortunately, Berinand is still dissatisfied with the direction of the discussion. “I’m sorry to say that I remain unconvinced that this is worth it. At best, we may get more casualties in our midst and no more than a very shaky chance at temporarily disabling their barriers. If we fail, not only will we lose a substantial number of operatives, but the blues may attempt to track down Amber Ledge. The red dragons would probably withdraw their support if this mission goes amiss.”

After the acceptance that was growing, disappointment now materializes among the group, as they had been hoping everyone was on the same page. The only one who refuses to curb her expectations is Kass, who attempts to push. “Can you really afford to delay, Archmage? Sitting around here and spying until an opportunity might one day present itself in the unknowable future will not be enough. What happens if the blues succeed before we do? The Magister Order sent me here to investigate and they would demand that we pursue a solution if its within our grasp. If not, they will question our partnership.”

Berinand squints at her and places his hands on the table. “Are you blackmailing me, Arcanist?”

Kass straightens her back and moves her arms behind her. Riv gets to view the confident and proud posture of her younger sister, one who dabbles in the circles of power quite often. It’s a side that the hunter has never shared. “It’s a gentle reminder that my organization has offered your city-state aid on numerous occasions in the past, through resources and expertise, Archmage.”

In spite of all his questions and hesitation, Berinand relents. “You can be persistent to an infuriating degree. Fine, the Kirin Tor will commit forces to this task,
but only once. If it fails, you can forget any further chances.”

Even if he isn’t satisfied, Stella unmistakably is, and she smiles as she approaches the other mage. “Thank you, miss Kassari. Your support means a lot to me. The Azurewing Repose won’t forget your kindness.”

Riv mirrors the expression and squeezes her littler sister’s shoulder. “Yeah, thanks Kass. I’m glad you’re here. Hadn’t anticipated it, but we couldn’t do this without you.”

In response, Kass hugs her sister once more. “I’d never abandon my sister or your friends. Besides, I won’t let Malygos think he can toy with us forever. We will break his hold on this world.”

Chapter End Notes

If you recall in the earliest stages of Ashindra's half of the story, Kass was going to investigate this very subject for the Magisters, so yeah, obviously she came here. And yes, this is pre-establishing of the Transitus Shield, meaning this mission helps them with planting it.
Penance

‘Relentless’ wasn’t really a term that Ashindra would’ve initially ascribed to the Argent Crusade, based on what she had seen of their organization back on the eastern continent, but it is evident to her now that perspectives change once you traverse the concepts of battle and retribution. The army of Light, that they can undeniably be deemed as, move ever closer to the heart of Northrend, towards their ultimate goal far in the north. It’s already unnervingly cold where she is. What will it be like up in those hellish fields of ice and death?

For now, thankfully, they’ve had to quell their expectations and enthusiasm. Both the Alliance and Horde, who are here simultaneously, have not just ran into problems with the Scourge, but also each other. Apparently, they will not waste a single opportunity to fracture possible alliances, in order to gain what meager leverage is accessible. While the majority of the crusaders would no doubt prefer to leave the children to their squabbling, the leaders know better. They’ve dispatched a few detachments to either side, with the ostensible goal to promote peace.

It’s nonsensical even to Ash that either of them would allow this dispute to exacerbate and corrode their footholds, especially out here where death lurks beneath every shadow. Perhaps that’s giving them too much credit, as it appears they will not relax. Could peace be nothing more than an illusion, a pipe dream? It’s of course their prerogative if they wish to embrace oblivion, but she always figured they were a bit brighter than that.

Meanwhile, in the current camp that has been erected, Ash is enjoying a lunch break with her squad, even if it might be generous to claim that the paladin is present in whatever conversation ensues. Her eyes are drawn to a different sight, that of their leader. Melia rarely just unwinds it seems, for she constantly tests her limits in order to aid other members of the Crusade. Ash has seriously begun to contemplate if she’s somehow a blessing sent by the Light itself.

Today, the Lieutenant is holding some kind of prayer circle with a bunch of people, hoping to raise morale after recent losses. Humans is the predominant race among the attendants, but a few dwarves, high elves and even a couple of blood elves have joined her as well. While Melia would happily invite anyone, the other races tend to focus on their own beliefs, and she would not begrudge them this choice.

One might assume that Ash sits with them, but that would be an erroneous supposition. Instead, she watches them from afar, munching on a piece of hardened bread and preserved fruit. Occasionally, she washes it down with a cup of wine that she was granted by a generous soldier. Not an Eversong variety, but she won’t complain. She may be seated in the unit’s company, but their discussion is no more than ambience to her. Braktog, the orc that she has somewhat befriended, jokes and quips with his fellow troops, which for now is a tauren, a draenei, a troll and a kaldorei. But he is not oblivious to her lapsing presence.

He redirects his eyes towards her, easily discerning what or who has captured her attention. The more time they spend together, the further Ash appears to be captivated with the human. “Hey, Revenor”, he says. “How’s the grub?”

Ash can’t ignore when her name is spoken, but she struggles to conceal her avid fascination for their commander. She likes these people, but still feel a little awkward while chatting with them. Only Melia receive her sincerity. “It’s decent. Equally edible as it was yesterday.”

“Heh. Just edible, huh?”
“Well, the bread could be less stale, and I wish we had a wider assortment of available fruit, but I wasn’t expecting a buffet. The wine is nice, though.”

He chuckles, but not mockingly.
“Could always go talk to the mages, if you want. See if they can’t conjure a feast for us.”

She swiftly shakes her head.
“They need to preserve their stamina and mana for future battles. Anything else would be a waste.”

“Fair enough. What about getting a bowl of the soup that chef made?”

Ash slowly steers her gaze towards the vestiges of a cooking fire, where a large black pot is still suspended, its surface having stains of the brown and yellow liquid that previously trickled down during the boiling process. It’s presumably lukewarm by now. The elf grimaces in an overtly disinterested manner.
“I’ll…pass. That swill was vile when I tried it two days ago. I’ll settle for solid food.”

He emits a short laughter, a rumbling sound. From what she has experienced so far, this orc is easy to entertain and quickly finds joy in most scenarios, no matter how dismal.
Another idea suddenly emerges in his mind and he skids closer to speak to her in a quiet and smug tone.
“Maybe you should talk to the Lieutenant, see if she’d like to share something. You looked pretty…thirsty when you ogled her earlier.”

Ash widens her eyes and her cheeks redden to unveil the agitation and embarrassment that develops inside of her. She’s not sure she has ever spent time with someone so bawdy.
“…excuse me?! I…I don’t know what you’re implying here!”, she states in a mildly indignant fashion.

Braktog merely grins back at her.
“Yes, you do. I’m not blind, Revenor. I don’t know jack shit about elven dating rituals, but any idiot can identify a lovestruck fool.”

She’s not sure what to tell him. Ash hasn’t been able to ascertain her own perspective on the matter and her heart never maintains one position. Is there a craving embroiled in this jumbled situation or does she just covet familiarity?
Either way, she’s not going to be goaded into revealing her innermost predicaments. She swiftly shifts away from him.
“I assure you that my interest in the Lieutenant is purely out of friendship, nothing more. She’s a good person and I admire her.”

She’s relieved when he decides to retreat, holding his hands up in the air.
“Alright, if you say so. Not gonna push ya or anything.”
His statement is unambiguous, but she listens to his tone, easily distinguishing his disbelief. He’s confident that there is more and nothing she says can convince him otherwise. What does he know anyway?
“But you can’t pretend you aren’t intrigued by whatever they’re doing over there. You’re a believer in the Light too, right?”

Hoping to soothe her racing nerves, she grabs another bite of the bread. Her parents always lectured her to not speak with her mouth full, but she doesn’t care.
“Certainly. It is our savior from the darkness, the comfort in the face of devastation.”

“Then why don’t you join ‘em?”
She falters at first, for his statement, while terse, is not wrong. What would be so awful about accompanying a new friend in seeking solace? “Because…it would be unwise.”

Her reply is puzzling to him and he tilts his head slightly, arching a questioning brow. “How so? Are you not allowed?”

“I am.”

“Is there something in your faith that prevents you?”

“Not exactly, no.”

The orc raises his arms in befuddlement. “Then what’s the problem?”

Ash sighs heavily and gingerly gazes towards Melia again. “It’s…a complex issue and I don’t really want to get into it right now. Suffice it to say, it’s better if I maintain distance. They don’t need me barging in.”

Very few answers are offered, so it’s not at all strange that the orc is so perplexed when he looks at her. However, in a very timely fashion, they notice how Melia takes a short break after the latest verse is finished and uses it to glance in their direction. Delight glimmers through her eyes and she gesture with a hand for Ash to come over. The blood elf hesitates, momentarily trapped in indecision, but eventually chooses to shake her head. Melia nods in acceptance, not wanting to force the issue.

“Seems like someone doesn’t agree”, Braktog is quick to point out.

It’s irritating how insistent he can get to interfere with concerns that are not his, but Ash makes the smart move and ignores him. She has landed on an option and she won’t be dissuaded from this route, no matter how convoluted it is. Her tension eases once he resumes his conversation with the team.

That said, the little sermon finally ends minutes later and as Ash has conveniently finished her meal, she approaches, much to Melia’s contentment.

She detects the speeding of her heartbeats once more and scolds herself. She’s not getting giddy already, is she? “Your flexibility seemingly knows no bounds, just like I presumed. Can even oversee whole sermons without missing a beat.”

Melia giggles and shrugs, trying to make it casual and not conceited. “It’s what happens when you’ve got experience. After so many years with the church, it’d be pretty stupid if I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“Fair point. Have you received actual training, though?”

“Oh yeah, definitely. Mom used to instruct me how to conduct them in an official capacity since I was a kid and I’ve attended more than I could count. Think she always planned for me to inherit her position. Used to quiz me during dinner after the occasional service.”

A fleeting and pensive smile forms on Ash’s lips and she crosses her arms. “Sounds like you’re more qualified than anyone here.”
“Heh, doubt that’s true, but I guess I can’t deny that I’ve got skill. Some of the soldiers spoke to me and they apparently recognized mom’s name. Plead with me to hold a few group prayers. I wish I didn’t have such a bleeding heart, but I can’t dismiss an earnest request like that.”

Ash dips her head out of respect.
“An admirable sacrifice. Just another piece of evidence what a great person you are.”

Melia is amused by the praise, and she doesn’t discard it, though it clearly makes her feel a tad coy. Soon after, she gently nudges her shoulder into Ash’s side.
“Hmm. If you’re so eager to laud my actions, why didn’t you come over, huh? There was space for you too, you know. I’d have welcomed the company.”

A tentative pause follows this inquiry. Ash diverts her eyes and rubs her neck.
“I uh…I noticed, but I didn’t feel like I belonged in that crowd.”

An unexpected reply, as Melia appears fairly confused.
“Why not? Wait, did it have something to do with the other participants? If you’re afraid that the high elves will make a big deal of your presence, you shouldn’t worry. We actually had a few blood elves there too and-“

“No, that’s not it”, Ash interrupts. “It has nothing to do with their stances or perception. I simply…” She swallows and squirms a little, languishing in insecurity. “I just don’t belong. It’s…personal.”

Her discomfort does not escape Melia’s notice and concern washes over the human. She plainly wishes to dig for conclusions, but reins herself in. This isn’t her territory to seize.
“Well, I wouldn’t be so arrogant as to extract the truth from you, but…is there anything I can do to help?”

At first, Ash lifts a declining hand.
“No, I….” She halts. This reaction was reflexive, a reception she’s been honing for months now and it has possibly become ingrained in her soul. But Melia is not like many others. She has an intrinsic appeal and a spirit that radiates with kindness. Perhaps taking a risk isn’t always foolish? She takes a quick look around the area and gathers enough courage to dare question her own doubt.
“Actually, Lieutenant…”, she starts quietly.

“Melia”, the human gently corrects her.

The paladin’s bright green eyes swerve towards the tender grey ones of the priest and she inclines her head in recognition.
“Melia, do you…do you believe that transgressions of the past can be forgiven? Can crimes of severe degrees ever be absolved?”

Melia is surprised by such honest and yet vague notions of something being flawed in the paladin, an inclination that practically seeps out of Ash. A huge array of queries form in her mind, but digging into them while the paladin exposes her heart would be wrong.
“Erm, yes, I do believe it’s feasible, if one is willing to seek penance and atonement. Redemption won’t come by itself. The guilty must commit and make great efforts to achieve it.”

Ash’s gaze is fixated on her for several intense moments, but eventually drifts elsewhere. She nods slowly.
“I agree, but the road to that goal is not just long and arduous, but one I’m not sure that I could orient myself in.”
Almost every word she speaks conjures another mystery and Melia now has to know. Unfortunately, she never gets that far.
“Lieutenant Haven!”, a firm and ardent voice exclaims. “There you are. I’ve been searching for you.”

The two women immediately turn to the voice and Melia is surprised by the appearance of the older man that approaches. His grey hair and beard flutter in the wind and his golden armor gleams in the faded sunlight.
“Highlord Fordring?” She rarely gets an audience with their commander, due to how busy he tends to be, but she catches herself in her negligence and salutes. Ash follows suit.
“What can I do for you, sir?”

Tirion offers an ephemeral version of the same greeting, but he seems to be in too much of a hurry to let it linger.
“Is your unit in good condition and fully prepared?”

“Of course, sir. Always.”

“Excellent. I require a skilled squad such as yours for an important mission. Some of our people recently got lost in a Scourge tomb to the north of our current location. They were on a vital quest, to acquire an artifact which I believe will be of use against the nerubians. They haven’t returned, and I fear what might’ve befallen them. This is a dangerous assignment, so I do not wish to make this a command, but…”

Melia slides her arms behind her and straightens her stance.
“I understand completely, Highlord. My team volunteers.”

Tirion looks most pleased.
“Splendid! I knew I could count on you, Haven. I shall speak with two more squads that I hope will join you.”

In the meantime, Melia glances sideways at Ash, displaying a faint smile.
“Unless you’ve got objections, recruit.”

Ash clears her throat in a bashful fashion.
“None, Lieutenant. But…are you sure you want to bring me on a task this crucial?”

“What kind of question is that? There’s no one I’d trust more at my side.”

The candor and vigor with which she speaks sends a tingling sensation of elation into Ash’s chest and this reaction is exhibited over her lips. They can do this, together.
Clipped wings

During her relatively lengthy life, Raxeen has witnessed a wide assortment of prisons on a whole array of different worlds. Torturous dungeons, austere boxes, contaminated pits, pocket realms saturated with harmful energy and more. Her own people have maintained a few on their various vessels, though such holding cells would likely be deemed as far more merciful. She has visited, raided, liberated, shattered and blessed such facilities, each action depending on the nature of the world and the location. What she has never experienced, up until this very day, is to be detained herself.

The type of jail which the blue dragons utilize can’t really be called unique, though definitely unusual. Not too many of the species she has encountered throughout her travels employ such highly concentrated magical power in their cages. She can feel the arcane residue in the air before they’re exposed to the sight, practically smell it. Thariss has described it as a distressing, nigh unnatural stench, while Rivaryn has the opposite response, finding the fragrance to be refreshing. Rax is somewhere in between, identifying it as acute and unmistakable, though not necessarily unpleasant. Like certain spices she has savored.

A short time later, as she is guided into the bowels of these underground tunnels, the lights begin to manifest before her, in shades of purple and pink. Rows upon rows of carefully conjured barriers have been cast outside of regimented and simplistic cubicles. It’s not just horizontal, but vertically too, as there are multiple levels. These are not mere physical lairs, but contraptions forged through a combination of sorcerous energy and finely crafted metal. The ‘doors’ are made of arcane power, but does that make them more efficient or vulnerable to malfunctions? It likely depends on the foundations of the spellcrafting enacted to summon such pens.

Nevertheless, Rax and Nadelgosa are marched through the long and thick corridors, their footsteps – or hooves, in Rax’s case – emitting overt echoes. Their wrists are of course handcuffed and tied to chains, more items devised from enchanted means. Kaltor, the drakonid and apparent Warden of this containment zone, walks in front of the two, but he’s not alone. Several dragonspawn flank them and even what they assume is a dragon in elven form treads behind them, probably as a final safety precaution. Rax is unsure whether she should be flattered or not. Do they perceive her as a dire threat or is this standard procedure?

Along the way, Nadel remains silent for almost the entire trip, with her head and shoulders slumped. She’s not even trying to scour most of the cells, but the reason for this negligence soon becomes evident. Suddenly, she lifts her head, swerving towards a specific direction where she detects a familiar source of life. Rax glances at her companion and studies the intensity, before she too veers to examine what the drake has discovered.

In one of the enclosed spaces at the bottom, they spot a male elven form, but slightly less pale than Nadel. He has long azure blue hair, which hangs in a disheveled state over his shoulders and back. He wears a set of black cloth pants, but his upper body is bare. Contrasted with some of the other captives, he is not permitted to roam, as his arms are held up in chains in opposite angles and he’s sitting on his knees.

“Deradgos!”, Nadel yells and severs the previously rigid path, by rushing up to the cage. The dragonspawn all clench their fists and sharpen their demeanors even further, but Kaltor lifts his hand, sanctioning the break in protocol for now. Nadel runs all the way to the magical field that shimmers between them, but she doesn’t touch it, as she realizes it’ll presumably discharge a
counterspell of some kind if she tries.
“Oh, brother, what have these fiends done to you?”

The older dragon emits a pained groan and soon stirs from his unruly rest. He’s not necessarily broken, but clearly not healthy either. His body is marginally bruised, and he appears weaker, somewhat diminished. Once he lifts his eyes, the little sister notices that they’re bloodshot. He looks at her searchingly and perplexedly.

“Nadel?”, he asks in a raspy voice. “What are you…doing here?”

She exhales and shuts her eyes.
“It’s…a long and complicated story. I wish I had better news for you, but my rescue attempt was… inadequate. But don’t worry, we-“

Sadly, before she can continue her tale, a heavy and clawed grip seizes her shoulder.
“That is enough”, says Kaltor. “Communication between prisoners is not allowed. Get back on the road, traitor.”

Nadel glowers at her jailor, but just prior to leaving the vicinity, she calls out for her brother one last time.
“We’re going to get you out of here, Derad, I swear! Please, endure it for just a little longer!”

When Kaltor shoves her back into position, she almost stumbles to the floor, but is thankfully rescued from such a demeaning fate by Rax, who blocks the fall with her body. Despite a modicum of embarrassment, Nadel accepts the assistance and straightens her posture. Without missing a beat, she steers a fierce glare towards their captor.
“What in Norgannon’s name have you done to my brother?!”

The Warden, callous as ever, turns his back to her and continues his stride. He does show her enough courtesy to reply, though.
“Your duplicitous kin was a rather abrasive captive. He did not stay put as he should and kept making inane attempts at escape. Pointless and foolish, of course, but the techniques he employed were clever and effective. He knew were to poke and prod, just enough to test the framework of our cells. To prevent such folly from being exploited once more, we had to teach him a lesson. He has now been completely confined and restricted, and shall remain as such until he knows his place.”

Nadel listens to the explanation with horror in her chest. When she looks at him next, there’s not just disappointment in her eyes, but revulsion.
“Is this what our people has become now, Warden? Torturers and crooks, ones who torment our own kind?”

Unfortunately, Kaltor is not ashamed by his acts, quite the opposite. He faces her with equal animosity.
“We do what is necessary to survive. If some lowlifes didn’t betray all that we stand for, this wouldn’t be required.”

“We are better than to adopt such atrocities! The only traitors here are you and your lackeys, you hypocrite!”

Eventually, an appropriate cage is allocated for them – not all too immense space, but certainly sizable enough for a drake, even more so when she’s in a humanoid shape. Once more, she’s rudely thrust forward by the physically larger creature, though he doesn’t chain her up, not yet. What he does select to do, however, is grant her a cellmate.
“Put the mortal in here with her. No point in wasting another slot on it.”

Rax is instructed to enter with less force and though there doesn’t seem to be any other
compartments with two convicts, it doesn’t really matter all too much. They’re built humanely enough to be viable for at least half a dozen beds.
While the paladin stops on one side, Nadel stands on the other and crosses her arms when the handcuffs are dispelled, and the barrier is established.
“Hmph”, she blurs. “What’s this? Don’t have enough rooms in your chamber of torment, brute?”

The Warden snorts at her in an amused fashion.
“You misunderstand, whelp. This is part of your punishment. If you are so adamant to defend your pitiful mortal allies, then you shall be trapped with one. I shall return later to…facilitate your needs.”

As he and his staff depart, Nadel indignantly strides up to the arcane barrier.
“This isn’t over!”, she yells. “You will pay for your crimes!”

“The only misdeed here is yours, traitor. You shall languish here in regret for the rest of your existence, while Lord Malygos reshapes Azeroth.”

And with that, they’re out of audible range. Nadel huffs and kicks angrily at the floor, both infuriated and frustrated. She had hoped for a spot closer to her brother, but it seems Kaltor had added this in his equation and therefore stripped her of such a comfort.
His presumption regarding her feelings was of course faulty, for she won’t wallow in remorse or the quality of her company. No, if there’s one element of distress, it’s probably the image of her brother being chained, and how she’s helpless to stop it.

In the meantime, Rax diverts her own gaze to their surroundings, while she stretches her arms. They did get to keep their armors, but their weapons have sadly been confiscated. Not that it would matter much, for not only is the enchanted barrier remarkably robust, but she can also detect a muting function in this room. A nullification field of some kind must have been implemented in the walls and floor, to restrict the usage of spells. Lashing out against the door would be futile.

Instead, Rax strolls up to a wall and slides down against it, attempting to find a moderately sufficient seat.
“I have to say, when I left my looping regularity on Draenor to visit Azeroth, I never anticipated that my journey would make me a prisoner. Certainly eventful, but I had hoped being locked up was a distant risk and not an inevitability.”

With no other avenues to pursue, Nadel shifts her grievances towards the draenei, as she grows a bit vexed with Rax.
“Don’t look at me like that, damn you. You were the one who was careless, you know. I never meant for you to become a captive as well. You should’ve listened to my advice when I told you to get out.”

Rax watches her with puzzled eyes and strokes some of her hair behind an ear.
“Pardon? I do not quite understand what you are implying here.”

Nadel sighs in faint annoyance.
“Must I spell it out for you? All of this?”, she gestures around the cell. “Getting captured? It was always part of my plan.”

“What? You intended to be jailed all along?”

“Of course.”

“That sounds rather…stupid.”
The drake rolls her eyes and strolls closer to her fellow inmate, so that she can lower her voice. “You have the wrong idea. We had it all mapped out. The plot we approached the Kirin Tor with, which they sadly rejected, involved trying to discover Deradgos’ exact location. Stella and I can circumnavigate the internal defense system of this island with a special enchantment, which she and I co-crafted. We are now intrinsically connected, though it will fade with time.”

Rax listens carefully and folds her arms. “How far does this…enchantment extend?”

“Stella can sense my location with a quick perception spell and with increased arcane energy input, as well as some thaumaturgical calculations, she can teleport here directly.”

Quite a clever way to infiltrate, even though it’s risky. Rax still seems skeptical. “So, Stellagosa can get inside this lair? And how exactly is that beneficial to us? I doubt she and my friends can easily defeat all the guards by the three of them.”

“They won’t have to. I am sure that he Kirin Tor now won’t be able to resist the lure. Those mortals want, more than anything, to sabotage Coldarra, so that they can plant a foothold here. I did not mind aiding them with this endeavor, as long as they helped us save Derad.” She takes a deep breath and shakes her head. “Unfortunately, they were shortsighted and refused my offer. Thought this plan was too reckless, that it would expose the reds and Kirin Tor to my brood. When we decided to leave, they even tried to prevent us, but my sister and I escaped.” She shifts her eyes to Rax. “And that is why we approached your team.”

With what she has said so far, Rax senses how the qualms begin to eat at her. “To trick us, you mean?”

Nadel wishes to oppose this accusation, but hesitates. It wouldn’t be fair to so ardently reject this conclusion. “Well…yes, there was an element of trickery, but nothing nefarious. We needed your assistance, so that our fellow blues would be convinced by the imperative danger I posed to them. Why do you think I set up a trap that they could detect so effortlessly?”

That the drake sounds fairly confident doesn’t really satisfy Rax, but she holds any scolding remarks back for now, until she has comprehended the full situation. “And why would that have mattered?”

Nadel gestures at the arcane field. “This specific section of the prison is where the traitors and least trustable captives are sent. To be sure that they would allocate me here, they would have to see, without question, that I was affiliated with mortals and not just here to save my brother.”

Rax exhales and shakes her head. “Nadelgosa…”

“Yes, yes, I know what you’re going to say. We kept you in the dark and I am not entirely proud of this, but trust me when I tell you that this plan did not involve you or your friends getting captured. I secretly instructed my sister to fly you and the others out after I sprung my trap, which she could’ve done with a little bit of difficulty. She can last for shorter journeys with three passengers, such as to Amber Ledge.”

Rax suddenly lifts her hand to cease any further explanation.
“Nadel, this is folly. Why would the Kirin Tor help you now? They have already turned you down once.”

The drake snorts and turns to the exit.
“Because they can’t stop us anymore. The option I offered them has now been deployed and either they take the only viable alternative that anyone has come up with, or they languish in failure.”

“And you think that will prevent them from refusing?”

Nadel shrugs nonchalantly.
“Oh, they might still do so, but they need every advantage in their war and this is their one chance. ‘Take it or leave it’, as they say.”

It’s a little ironic that Nadel would ooze with such confidence while she’s trapped in a prison cell, but Rax will admit that her audacity is…refreshing. And also a tad disheartening, of course.
“So, we were just collateral damage to you.”

Some of her determination disperses and she looks down with a hint of remorse.
“No, I…Raxeen, I didn’t… It is…regrettably that you had to be so altruistic. Again. I swear, I didn’t intend for you to get sealed in here with me, but I had to do everything in my power to save my brother.”

“And in your haste, you allowed us to get embroiled in your problems.”

The guilt in her increases and her shoulders slumps.
“Yes, you have a point. I realize that this may have been…callous to a certain extent and I probably should have provided you with the truth. I simply couldn’t be completely sure that you would have given us a chance, unlike the Kirin Tor. Not after, you know…”

Their last encounter did end abruptly and Nadel was of course to blame for it. However, it isn’t possible to ignore the fact that she does radiate with a poignant measure of regret here. Perhaps she’s telling the truth. Rax wants to be angry, but…
“What you did was hasty and aggravating, for involving us without relaying every detail. But, I suppose that I can see where you are coming from.”

Nadel suddenly blinks and steers a surprised gaze to Rax.
“So…you agree with me?”

“Not entirely, but mostly, yes. At least you did this out of self-sacrifice, to liberate your brother. I can respect such actions. As a paladin, it is often our standard way of operating.”

The drake is a little unsure, for she had almost anticipated a fight, but this is not what she’s getting. Maybe she had judged too early once more.
“I…thank you, Raxeen, for understanding. And I uh, I apologize for getting you into this mess. When we get out, I will reimburse you properly.”

Rax watches her curiously and a faintly amused smile appears.
“As long as we find an exit, perhaps it will be worth all the trouble that you pose."
Compared to many previous days in the cold north, Amber Ledge is today actually astir with activity, both among the members of the Kirin Tor and the red dragons. The majority are getting physically and mentally prepared for the high priority mission they’re soon going to launch, and not only do they need to ready themselves up, but the mortals have to assure their dragon allies that this is a viable alternative. Some of them disagree, which is not a tenable scenario. Everyone has to be united, in order to achieve their goal.

Kassari, who has been spending most of her time inside the tower since this disorder began, now walks outside to bathe in the rays of the sun and get a bit of fresh air. To protect them from external threats and direct attacks, Amber Ledge is enclosed with an arcane barrier that distorts the sight around it and makes distant discovery difficult. To enhance the well-being of the denizens, it is also insulated to stave off the cold.

The Arcanist’s goal is the field nearby where she can spot two figures standing together, sparring with one another – Thariss and Khroga. Despite the hectic deliberations between the two factions, it appears that this duo may still be the loudest party around. Unsurprisingly, they’re not in full regalia or anything, nor are they using proper weapons, but practice tools. Thariss is garbed in a short-sleeved black shirt and blue shorts, while Khroga uses a red tank top and black leggings.

For a short while, Kass halts, folds her arms and observes the clash. She notices how Thariss is the one to perform most of the thrashing and offensive progress, which isn’t baffling. Not only is the kaldorei more experienced, but her style of combat as a warrior is far more suited to such close confrontations bereft of magical intervention. However, that doesn’t last for very long. Suddenly, by employing an impressively clever spell that vents lightning from her feet, Khroga drives Thariss back, without necessarily hurting her. The warrior is surprised as she staggers and has to defend herself from the assault that follows, but she keeps it at bay with her shield. As a brief pause ensues, she doesn’t seem angry. Instead, she starts to laugh.
“Not fair to just bust out new tricks like that, Steelfang!”

Khroga flashes a small grin, rests the wooden axe over her shoulder and the other hand on her hip. Kass inadvertently bites her own thumb, as that brazen pose is...enticing.
“You never mentioned any rules against the elements.”

“Should’ve been implied!”

Once the battle dies down a little, they both note how the mage comes walking in her loose robes, with her hands held together.
“What’s this, huh?”, she asks. “I wasn’t told there would be a contest. Don’t tell me you’re showing off for my sister, Thariss.”

Thariss smirks at the blood elf.
“Showing off? Tsk. I never have to do that.” She lifts her strong and muscular arms that are currently exposed, and flexes. “Not with guns like these.”

Kass rolls her eyes, while Khroga snickers softly.
“If that’s meant to tempt me, you’re woefully mistaken about my interests.”
That said, the pose itself isn’t one she’d contend if another woman struck it, such as the one she
strolls up to now. She approaches her girlfriend, snakes her arms around Khroga’s neck and pulls her into an avid and deep kiss, feeling the tusks poking her cheeks a little. When it abates, she affectionately caresses the orc’s jawline.

“Try to be careful, okay? Don’t want you to get injured before the actual mission has even begun.”

The shaman snorts amusedly, lowers the training axe and holds an arm around Kass’ waist. “Your fussing is sweet, Kass, but unnecessary. Getting the blood pumping before a real scrap is always a plus.”

The elf shakes her head in a slightly resigned fashion. “Agree to disagree, I suppose. Don’t blame me if you hurt yourself.”

“You won’t kiss it better, then?”

Kass can’t prevent the smile that forms now, and she raises her hand to playfully grab Khroga’s nose. “Don’t take cues from Thariss, please.”

“Okay”, the night elf yells from her position. “She’ll love it, trust me. Ask Riv.”

Kass sticks out her tongue towards the warrior, before she turns to a separate direction and strides to where she spots her older sister. The hunter, in spite of Kass’ prior belief, is not actually a member of the audience, for she is busy with other matters.

As Kass approaches, she beholds how Riv is sitting on the grass with a bunch of tools in her hands and around her vicinity, while she tinkers with some kind of… device. The younger sibling has no idea what any of it constitutes. What she can discern, however, is the slumbering shape of Razz next to his companion.

The raptor reacts to Kass’ proximity, like an innate alarm, but when he notices who it is, he settles down and doesn’t even get up. Kass smiles at him and reaches out with her hand, ensuring that her arrival is approved. He sniffs it, before nudging his nose in a permitting manner. She has started to get along with her sister’s new fascinating pet since their interactions back on Outland and when she strokes his scales, he shuts his eyes and enjoys the ministrations. Not quite like patting a lynx or hawkstrider, but she wouldn’t claim it’s unpleasant either.

Two days have gone by since the mercs and the blue drake burst through the doors of the tower and Kass is dissatisfied with how little time she has had to spend with her family member, when she’s so close. Better make up for it now.

“Hey, Rivaryn”, she utters in Thalassian. “How are you holding up? Stellagosa gave me the full account earlier and it sounds like your team was exploited quite unfairly.”

In the meantime, Riv’s emerald gaze is strictly fixated on some detailed calibrations, tweaking the position of some items with a screwdriver. “True, I guess, but I’m not angry with her. She told us everything and it appears that they genuinely didn’t intend for Raxeen to get embroiled. Everyone makes mistakes. And hey, at least we have a plan now, right?”

Kass nods and brushes her fingers along the back of Razz’s neck and under his jaw. “We do, but we shall have to wait and see how viable it is. I inspected the details of this enchantment that the drake sisters have administered.”

“And?”

“It does seem legitimately potent and powerful, though I would say it requires some adjustment to
be activated.”

Riv temporarily diverts her attention from the contraption to her sister, while running the back of
her hand over her forehead, to wipe away some of the sweat. She tends to keep her bangs free of
the ponytail, but at the moment, all of her hair has been retracted, probably to let it remain
unstained. Due to the relative warmth in here, the hunter has opted for a disposable grey t-shirt and
black short pants.

“So, how it’ll work? Will we just end up right on top of them, or…?”

Kass discard such thoughts with a swaying of her head.
“No, that won’t be—…well, perhaps it might, but with some precise revisions, we can make sure
that our landing party materializes nearby. The blues must have a corridor outside the cell.
However, like we previously discussed, we still have to physically get past the outer barrier. It
blocks our passage too fiercely otherwise. In fact, this is paramount for our escape too.”

“Mm, good point. I get the feeling that penetrating the prison won’t be the difficult part. Getting
out, once we’ve triggered all of the alarms, seems more dangerous.”

“Not entirely incorrect, but I sense the opposite is much more plausible. After we’ve sabotaged the
defenses across Coldarra, teleporting everyone out will be elementary. Compared to the initial
infiltration, the coordinates won’t have to be as meticulously pinpointed. Though, I imagine we
will still require the blues’ assistance, as they can circumvent the fortifications with more
proficiency.”

There are no overt signs in her voice, but a wry smile still slides onto Riv’s face.
“Jealous?”

Kass narrows her eyes.
“Stop it. Look, I know that I do have some of our family’s pride in me, but it can’t be hurt so
effortlessly.”

Riv’s smug expression does not evaporate as she shrugs and returns to her task.
“If you say so.”

“…don’t give me that.”

“Not giving you anything.”

“It was implied!”

“It wasn’t.”

Kass huffs, but attempts to curtail her indignance before it becomes a problem.
“At any rate, it’s clearly a risky plan and I understand why the Kirin Tor initially refused. Now,
though, Archmage Berinand is coming to terms with the necessity.”

“Only because you mentally pounded him, I bet.”

During the majority of this conversation, Riv has been plying her second trade, spinning, twisting
and fine-tuning various cogs, nuts and bolts. As she has a minimum amount of knowledge about
engineering at best, Kass has to inquire.
“So…what are you doing?”

“I’m applying an energy filter to compensate for the fluctuations in the output manifold, because
the coolant coils can’t limit the transmission stream which is discharged in the core and that might jeopardize the integ—“

Kass quickly lifts her hands.
“Stop, stop, stop. I meant…what is it you’re actually holding in your hands?”

Riv blinks perplexedly as she glances down at it, realizing she hasn’t explained her activity.
“What? Oh, right. Uh, I’m crafting a Pole Reversal Translocator.”

“…a what?”

The hunter holds up the thick disc-like object, which currently has its chassis open and the internal components unveiled.
“It’s based on the configurations of certain magical goblin-based explosives, which functions to increase and decrease energy flow. I believe if I apply this to the prison cell’s outer shielding, it’ll expedite the disabling process, so we don’t have to scour the facility for the controls.”

Kass has now fully shifted to her sister and her arms are skeptically folded.
“…from explosives, you say? Isn’t that…dangerous?”

“Well, yes and no. It’s not a 100% risk-free, but it could be worth a shot. At the very least, I feel like we should bring it, in case things go south.”

The mage is ambivalent to this proposal, although she doesn’t want to staunchly object to her sister’s gadgets. She has shown to be capable before.
“Hmm. Okay, I’ll authorize it. Just be cautious.”

Riv beams as she hears those words, nodding eagerly.
“Thanks, Kass.”

“I will admit that I still do not altogether comprehend your newfound fascination for this technology. It’s so…crude and unreliable all the time.”

Her sister shakes her head and returns to previous efforts.
“You’re wrong about the second, but the first part is sort of who I am. Not merely right now, but always.”

Kass considers protesting this notion at first, but then discards it and snorts softly.
“A prudent statement, I’ll agree with that much.” Her eyes scan their surroundings with unease and then lets them drift towards the door.
“Wouldn’t you prefer to sit somewhere else?”

“Why? What’s wrong with the grass? It’s soft and there’s no snow under the magic shielding.”

The mage sighs in discontent.
“This is a newly purchased set of robes from Dalaran, Riv. I’d like to avoid dirtying it.”

Her sister hadn’t quite expected that complaint and tilts her head back to laugh.
“Oh, you’re such a city girl, Kass.”

This makes the younger elf pout and ever being the contrarian, she won’t let that slide.
“Am not!”

She fervently seeks a suitable spot, to prove her sister how flexible she can be.
“Changed your mind? Here, let me help.”
Riv extends her hand, but Kass vehemently declines. “Ugh, no! I can do it on my own, thank you very much. Don’t want your greasy hands all over me.”

After finding a feasible location, she gets seated; albeit not prior to correcting her robes as to expose as little of it as possible to the greenery, which takes a couple of seconds. “You really are fussy, huh?”

“Shut up. And you are as greasy as a dwarf. In fact, I think you always were, in a way. I did enjoy jaunts in the woods too, but not like you. Always crawling through the mud, digging in the dirt, marching on rainy days.”

Her expression grows somewhat distant, wistful, as she considers it for a second. Her complaints suddenly wither away. “I…kinda miss those moments now. More innocent times.”

It’s hard to miss the solemnity in Kass’ voice, deviating some of Riv’s focus, even if only temporarily. “Yeah. Feels like another lifetime.”

While Riv continues to tinker ceaselessly, Kass stares at her with pensive eyes, contemplating how separated they have become. Not emotionally anymore, but physically. There’s a whole ocean in between. “Riv, after this is over, you don’t have to leave for Kalimdor again”, she infers. “You could come home to Silvermoon, hang out in my apartment. I can’t even recall if you’ve seen it yet.”

A smidgen of tension manifests in Riv, though she tries to keep it in check. “Uh, yeah, I dunno.”

“If you don’t wish to return to the Farstriders, I could recommend your services to the Magisters. Perhaps we can acquire an investor for you. After all, you’re one of the few active sin’dorei engineers out there.”

Due to how earnest it sounds, Riv confines some of the severity of her aversion. “Thanks for the offer, but…it’s not for me. I don’t belong there anymore. My place is with Thariss and…well, I truly adore Kalimdor. It provides a new type of peace that I haven’t found anywhere else.”

It’s unavoidable, but Kass displays some distinct disappointment, even if miniscule. At least she’s not angry. “I see. I…I think I get it. I know I scared you off in the past, by being so harsh with you after…you know. Really wish I hadn’t exploded now, because except for our uncle, you’re the one I was closest to. The only ones not interested in the power struggle.”

She may be getting a somewhat rose-tinted view, influenced by nostalgia, but Riv won’t rebuff the attempt at compromise. To ease the pressure, she places a hand under Kass’ chin and tilts it up. “Hey, this doesn’t mean we’ll never see each other again”, she reassures. “As a matter of fact, I’d love for you to come visit us some day. You’ve hardly spent any time in kaldorei lands, right? There’s so much history and ancient magic that is bound to captivate you.”

Kass gradually opens her misgivings to the idea, though it’s curbed by some instability. “Are you certain that the government would allow a Magister to enter, just like that?”

Riv sports another smile, instilling them with some hope. “Don’t fret. Thariss’ mother is a priestess of Elune and I can talk to her. She’d permit my family to
visit, I’m sure.”

“Hmm. Okay, I… think I’d like that. I’d love to discover where you roost now.”

After planting a tender kiss on her sister’s cheek, Riv removes her hand and straightens her position, but the gentle expression soon disperses and is replaced by surprise.

“What’s wrong?”

Riv has to raise her hand and stifle a laughter.

“Uh, nothing! You just have um, a little… you know…” She gestures at her own chin.

Kass blinks in a bewildered manner, before realization inserts itself. She touches her chin and finds a black substance on her fingers afterwards. Riv accidentally smeared some grease on it.

“…oh, you dolt! Look at me! It’s all over my face now!”

The hunter giggles and turns away.

“Sorry, Kass. I didn’t mean to!”

The younger sister could act in a more dignified fashion during this predicament, as expected by a Magister… but to hell with it. She pouts and frowns.

“You’re not getting away with this.”

She promptly pounces on her sibling, tries to wrestle her down and find avenues to tickle Riv. The hunter squirms and her laughter rise in volume, but she can’t escape.

“No! Mercy!”

“You shall have none!”

In the distance, both Khroga and Thariss cease their sparring and begin to smile, being glad to hear and notice how the sisters get along, in a way. Both of them chuckle to themselves as the big raptor abruptly pushes his nose into the elves, wanting to get involved with the game.
For the first time since their arrival in this strange and frozen continent, Ashindra feels as if she’s getting a little in over her head. It’s not as if she has been persistently in control of her emotions up until this point, but this assignment is shrouded in instabilities. Sadly, withdrawing now is not an option.

Her squad, led by Melia of course, is prowling in the shadows outside an entrance to some sort of old vrykul crypt, not too far due east of a fortress, Gjalerbron. They’re taking cover behind a cluster of rocks, observing the open and empty entrance. The height of it is almost surreal, far above most human and elven architecture. Although, as they have already fought the enormous humanoids up here a few times so far, it’s not entirely unexpected.

Melia frowns as she stares at it, but not so much due to the design. It is the aura which surrounds it that captures her interest.

“I can distinguish the corrupted necromantic energy seeping out of the doorway”, she notes quietly. It’s like a foul stench that invades her nostrils, making her shiver. “Has to be the right place.”

She turns to the sin’dorei, who is sitting on the ground not too far from her.

“Ash, can you perform a detection spell for us?”

Paladins, being the hunters of tainted menaces and evils, have more practice with directly sensing such creatures. Ash nods and does as she’s told. She shuts her eyes, puts a hand to her plated chest and prays to the Light. Like a hand snaking around her throat, the truth is revealed to her almost instantly.

“Yes”, she states as her eyes reopen. “The Light has unveiled a whole heap of them. We’re facing a big crew inside.”

The human inclines her head, seeming satisfied.

“We’re on the right track then.”

They are not the only two here, of course. Braktog, who’s a bit behind these two, looks at their commander with curious eyes.

“Hey, LT, did the Highlord explain what in Grom’s name we’re actually looking for? Some kinda trinket?”

Melia shifts in this direction, facing the rest of her squad, including Braktog, and at least eight more people.

“We’re after a tome, actually, crammed with critical knowledge. It allegedly contains markers with locations for fonts of power that belong to the Lich King, which are specifically tied to the nerubians. If we can find and dismantle these objects, we can weaken his hold on the entire continent.”

“Or so the Highlord believes, anyway”, says Ash, espousing some skepticism.

“You don’t think it’s true?”, asks the orc.

Ash inhales slowly and shrugs.

“I don’t know. Can anything that severe truly exist? That seems like a foolish weakness.”
“Maybe”, Melia agrees, “but the sources that Fordring acquired predate the Lich King’s arrival and is tied to the Nerubian kingdom. He has only exploited the fonts to extend his reach. The Highlord had faith in the veracity and he did entrust us with the success of this mission.”

Ash pushes some of her red hair aside and exhales through her nose. “I…will admit that my knowledge of Northrend is lacking, so I’ll defer to your judgment.”

Before the discussion can progress, they spot movement on the other side of the nearby road, which is thankfully another Argent Crusade squad. This one is led by the group’s overall commander – Captain Gryndar Deepreach, a stout and confident dwarf. He displays a few hand gestures for Melia, a signal that they should regroup. Seeing no other alternative or reason to oppose the idea, she follows the order.

Together with a third squad, the team meets up with Gryndar behind an array of tall trees. The man himself is a paladin, former Knight of the Silver Hand and is equipped with a suitable heavy plate armor. Both his thick beard and long hair are a deep chestnut brown and he strokes the former now, while he speaks. “Have ye performed yer assigned tasks?”

“Yes, sir”, Melia responds, “but we saw little of note. Seems clear.”

“Same here”, admits the third leader, a male tauren Sergeant.

“Aye, it’s similar across the board, apparently”, the Captain asserts. “Sounds to me like this ruin is ripe for the taking, then. We should proceed immediately. As commanding officer, my team and I will enter first. Lieutenant Haven, yer team will back us up and Sergeant Proudbluff, ye’ll go last. Maintain constant sight on the perimeter and vicinity, and try to cast and recast various detection spells. Any questions?”

The majority of the gathered troops have nothing to say, but Melia folds her arms, looking just a little bit troubled. “I don’t think so, sir, but I’d like to at least recommend caution. We don’t know what’s awaiting us and the Highlord has already lost one squad.”

Gryndar snorts and swirls to another direction, facing their destination. “I’ve fought undead for years, Lieutenant, and the Horde before that. I’m not shaken by a wee bit of wreckage.”

Melia opens her mouth, but no protests exit. Instead, she gives Ash a quick glance – which the paladin shrugs at – before she sighs. “…yes sir.”

“Squad, form up on me. We move in two minutes, unless the situation changes.”

As they’re about to advance into their intended target, Melia turns to view her squad. “Ash, as our most defensively inclined and experienced soldier, I want you at the front. Try to coordinate with the other shieldbearers, if necessary.”

The elf briefly bows her head. “Of course, I’ll handle it.”

“Ishvaala and Ra’tol, I want you to reinforce Ash’s position. Braktog, assist them with your axe where you can. The rest of you, try to maintain distance and get as many shots in as possible, but avoid getting too close. We have to minimize casualties. We don’t want a repeat of the last assault,
because we can’t rely on backup here. Oh, and one last thing…”

She closes her eyes and lifts her hand. Near instantly, a glowing essence ignite in her hand, filled with benevolent power.

“Go with the fortitude and valor of the Light.”

Everyone has to take a deep breath, as energy bursts into them. Their spirits are raised, and everyone senses a surge of rejuvenation. Priestly blessings are an enjoyable experience to receive. For Ash, it’s particularly so when cast by Melia.

The stride into the ruin progresses quickly after entry, and for the first time, the group gets to witness vrykul structural design. Large, of course, but also thick and sturdy. Lots of stone on the floors and roofs, but most of the pillars and support columns are made of dense wood. There are decorative elements too, but mostly in the shape of inscriptions along the walls, with iconography and languages that none of them really comprehend. It feels ancient, but who can tell for sure?

Interestingly, the initial level is not just empty of objects, but of people too. No one waits for them here and it is not until some in Gryndar’s squad finds a specific element that they understand why – stairs. Not just one set either, but three levels. It appears that the facility descends into the depths of the earth. Seeing no reason to ignore it, the Captain orders a plunge into the darkness.

The further they go, the more this place seems to transition. Most of it is still explicitly in vrykul architecture, but additions of another origin begin to crop up. Could this be nerubian?

It is eerily silent for a time and the only light that they have is a few torches and mage illumination spells that the groups can provide on their own.

Eventually, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the first ambush occurs. In the first bottom floor corridor, the group is attacked from two flanks by undead – skeletons and ghouls mostly. Luckily, because of their long experience and expertise against such creatures, the crusaders handily dispatch them all. The team’s morale is heightened further by the fact that no one gets killed or even injured, so efficient are their maneuvers.

“Well done, everyone!”, Gryndar announces afterwards. “These fiends finally get to taste what it means to properly fight the Crusade. Onwards! Time to crush them once and for all.”

After another few minutes, they soon enter an area filled with passages, abandoned storage rooms, centers for praying and potential research chambers. Perhaps ‘crypt’ wasn’t the best description of this complex after all.

Their courage is also marginally hampered by the fact that they discover something in one of the side rooms during their search – the bodies of Argent Crusade soldiers. Very likely the first team that Tirion sent, which is clearly smaller than this one. Melia tries to examine them with her gifts, but in vain. They are all long gone.

A second ambush happens in this very section, which once more is handled with impeccable mastery. The foes are the same as before, but the size of the undead forces is moderately larger, which appears to avail them little. Despite Gryndar’s soaring confidence, Melia begins to grow worried.

“Captain, I’m not sure how to interpret this. I think something is going on”, she posits. “Feels like…I dunno. Like the Scourge is herding us.”

Some of the Captain’s enthusiasm is impeded, but not entirely. At most, he’s a bit skeptical. “Well, it’s not impossible, I guess, but I honestly dinnae care. If the Scourge are foolish enough to face true Crusade warriors, then let them be idiots. They cannæ stop the Light from illuminating our way to that tome.”

A few people emit short cheers, to show their excitement and agreement. Sadly, his impudence
becomes his downfall. It’s after a short journey down to one last floor, where they seem to have ended up in a library of some variety, that the real plot is unveiled. Suddenly, as they stride into its center, now moving with less attentiveness, their enemies pour out of the shadows. Except for the packs of undead they previously faced, they are joined by vrykul magic users and nerubian allies.

Their foes strike from three angles now and as the Captain leads from the front, he is sadly one of the first to fall. He is assaulted by a particularly large scarab-like entity and gets pierces by its huge claws. In a last-ditch effort, he unleashes all the power he can summon into his foe, which fatally wounds it, but does not prevent his death.

Melia widens her eyes as she witnesses his end. “Captain!” She grits her teeth as she’s both angry at his recklessness, but also distressed by the flood of panic that sweeps over the team. There is only one solution – she must curtail the chaos that wishes to ensue.

“Crusaders, hold your ground! Reconvene on me! Sergeant Proudbluff, reinforce the gaps at the front! Ash, execute Anvilmar formation!”

“Yes, Lieutenant!” Ash replies and decides to lead the bulwark, making sure that no undead pour through, and at the same time give opportunities for their ranged fighters to get precision shots at their foes.

“L-Lieutenant, we’re being overrun!”, a gnome mage informs her. “Should we retreat?”

Melia, together with a Forsaken soldier, drags one of their injured back, so that she can heal this person. While she focuses her abilities on this aspect, she also tries to survey the area quickly, get a feel for their situation. Is it worth departing now, to salvage their troops, or should they push on?

“No, we have to stay! We came here for the artifact and we must at least make an attempt. We can do this! Vigilance and ferocity, people! Don’t give up!”

She halts her healing for a moment and conjures a powerful blessing, one that she can at best cast once per few hours. It will drain her energy, but she must try.

“Let yourselves be enveloped in the loving embrace of the Light!”

Every living creature nearby feels their energy and stamina returning, though it does sting a bit for their undead allies.

With another priest and a restoration-minded druid, she coordinates their defenses, restoring and strengthening their forces. Simultaneously, Ash leads the melee efforts, both blocking the charge of the Scourge and occasionally counterattacking.

“Close the gap on the left flank!”, Ash calls out. “Don’t let their appearance deter you! They’re no stronger than we are! Oh, and watch your feet! The bugs will attempt to sneak past us!”

Her advice seems to help, and a lot of people follow it to the letter, reducing defensive breaches. It even goes so well that they manage to make an advance of their own, shoving their enemies back into the shadows.

It is during this streak of luck that Braktog gazes around the vicinity, breathing heavily just after he cut down a fairly sizeable bug. He sees an object lying on top of a table several meters away. His eyes begin to shimmer.

“Hey, I see a big book on that table back there!”

Ash, who’s still doing her best to keep their fortifications intact, glances in that direction. She can spot the skulls and ancient runes imprinted on the front, and compared to most of the contents of this area, it does have a sense of increased prominence. However, staring at it upsets her stomach,
like it makes her somewhat queasy. Is that because of its corrupted origin or is there more to it than meets the eye?

Regrettably and with unusual fixation, Braktog does not wait for confirmation. Seeing as how they’re in a fairly precarious scenario, he breaks formation and rushes straight towards the item and right into disaster. He does not note how some of the skeletal archers has him in their sights and he falls to the ground, severely injured by three projectiles.

“Braktog!”, Ash shouts. “Dammit! Frontline, with me! Rescue that soldier!”

The Crusaders strain the limits of their barricade in order to get to Braktog and pull him into safety, nearly losing another two people in the process. Melia works rapidly to heal the orc and at least stabilize him, but she quickly concludes that he will not be fighting any more in this battle. After she saves his life, she analyzes their altered chances.

Everyone else seems occupied and it’s abundantly clear that they cannot stay here for any extended periods. However, the path to the tome is pretty much unobstructed right now and it lies untouched. Gazing at it, she senses a certain appeal and aura; an opportunity, perhaps even a calling. One person could make it all the way there, with no more than a small risk. Can she really send someone else to do that, though?

She plants a hand on the druid’s arm.

“Cover for me”, she says and rises, preparing to approach their target.

Instead of making a beeline for it, like Braktog did, she sneaks around the back, following the walls and shields herself with a Light-infused barrier. A small number of spiders still note her ploy, but she propels and keeps them at bay with bursts of holy fire and offensive prayers.

She doesn’t know if it’s pure luck or by the grace of the Light, but she somehow manages to make it all the way up towards the tome. She scans the object and ponders what to do with it. It’s pretty large and she does not have any big bags to hold it in. She’ll simply have to carry it in her arms. And somehow, she welcomes that prospect.

It is at this time that Ash, who has been trying to keep her attention in several places at once, spots her leader standing in front of that table. She’s surprised, wondering how the hell the human managed to sneak past their enemies, but this is not her immediate concern. Instead, through a surge of comprehension, she suddenly achieves clarity and disperses the charade. She detects a sinister presence behind the tome – it is not their salvation at all.

“Melia!”, she shouts, but even with the intensity her lungs employ, the priestess does not look at her. The human’s eyes are transfixed on the tome.

With no other option at hand, Ash defies her own previous warnings and leaves her station. She sprints towards the priestess, despite the menagerie of enemies in her path. She lifts her longsword and infuses it with destructive power, slashing ghousls and insectoids apart, bashing spiders with her shield and decapitates skeletons with frantic zeal. The Light supports her, radiating around her like a beacon that both deters and draws the opposition’s attention.

Finally, at the very last second, she reaches out and seizes the human’s arm, swiftly pulling her backwards. Melia only manages to touch the book with the tip of one finger, before she’s dragged out of its proximity.

This is remarkably fortuitous, for Ash raises her shield just in time to deflect a hidden attack – a guileful magical trap is triggered beneath.

Necromantic magic explodes from it, slamming into Ash’s tool. When it fails, a thin and tall nerubian sorcerer appears behind the table, the long malevolent claws trying to dig into them, but Ash protects the squad leader with her shield.
Melia’s eyes widen as the tome evaporates into thin air, snapping out of her trance – it was an illusion all along. There never was a reservoir filled with knowledge, only lies to lure them here.

“Shit”, blurts Melia. She grits her teeth in anger and summons a beam of Light which she discharges at the nerubian, making it screech and flee without delay, getting out of view. After it is gone, she breathes out in relief and plants a hand on Ash’s shoulder.

“I…thank you. I didn’t— I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Ash’s bright green eyes scour the human’s appearance, making sure there are no residues of malicious energy on her.

“You weren't. I believe it was mentally seducing you with a spell. It tricked us all. We have to get out of here.”

“Agreed.”

In their peripheral vision, they now spot more movement and from the roof, spiders begin to descend all over their troops. This is likely why the nerubians allowed themselves to be pushed back, so that they could attack from above.

Melia frowns and summons a larger, fiercer barrier of holy energy.

“Argent Crusade, retreat! Back to the surface!”

The soldiers obey and start to leave, before they’re overrun. There is nothing left to gain here. In sorrow, they are forced to leave their fallen behind.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I can't foresee any bad situations deriving from leaving your fallen comrades to the Scourge!
Also, yeah, had to have a chapter with Ash rescuing her crush
Dismal, dull, absolutely lackluster. A few days have passed and the stay in the blue dragon prison has, without exaggerating, been extremely tedious and dreadful. Nadelgosa has been on extended flights in the past and delved into sections of research where she couldn’t tell the passing of time, but this is different. It’s nonconsensual and enforced. It’s not like she regrets her decision of coming here, but she can’t help getting worried.

What if her sister doesn’t make it? What if Stellagosa fails to convince the Kirin Tor after all? She does have faith in the young drake, despite her protective ways, which is why they executed this plan in the first place, but…

No, she can’t allow hesitation to fester. She has to remain firm and not get mired in doubts and misgivings. They’re going to rescue their brother sooner or later. That was the deal and the plan was solid. It’s a certainty.

…probably.

For the moment, she and Raxeen have attempted to reconcile their differences and to keep themselves occupied, they’ve talked about a variety of topics. Although, both of them will admit that expanding and stretching such endeavors to any tremendous degrees has been difficult. There are simply some subjects, or at least aspects within them, that neither of the two would feel comfortable discussing. Privacy, secrecy, complications or mere embarrassment – there are many caveats. For a few, maybe all four apply at once.

Nadel won’t disregard the fact that the conversation has been enlightening. She has learned more about the draenei and their comprehensive journey, which has been utterly fascinating, more so than she had anticipated. They seem to have a diverse and exceedingly complex history. In fact, their most skilled and talented scholars may know more of the Twisting Nether and the universe as a whole than dragons do. A baffling concept to Nadel.

While Nadel ponders what to say next, sitting on the ground and leaning against one of the walls, she feels how her stomach begins to complain. This heralds a specific hour – feeding time. Their stories take a break as they hear how Warden Kaltor and a few others distribute various bowls and plates into the cells. Obviously, they don’t for a second lower the barriers on any cage, but instead momentarily shift the polarity of the shielding, so that the food can be pushed inside. They do not trust the inmates any more than that.

Once Kaltor and his lackeys arrive at the duo’s cell, he stops and looks practically thrilled. Nadel in particular has apparently become a new taunting target, which annoys her.

“Ah, and here is our favorite little drake and her pet. I hope you aren’t withering away in there, for many years of monotony still await you. Today’s serving is…well, pretty much the same as yesterday’s. I trust you will not be too disappointed that there is no delivery of a ‘feast’. Such pleasures are not for scum.”

Nadel senses how Rax turns to her, giving her a look that says ‘don’t’, and she shouldn’t. She should keep her mouth shut, really, to save her any trouble, but she just…she can’t. Rax remarked earlier that offending her is as easy as angering a talbuk. Prod them just a tad and they’ll ram their horns into you.

“Are you genuinely this pathetic, Warden? Is coming here personally every day to bicker all you
ever do? Don’t you have anything better to occupy your unremarkable little brain with?”

He snorts sharply, but tries to stay stern. “Maintaining and patrolling this facility is my profession, whelp. I am its Warden and that includes involvement in all of its administrative procedures.”

She folds her arms, an insulting plot starting to take shape in the back of her mind. She shouldn’t get excited. Stop, is what she tells herself. But…

“Ah, now I see. This is your entire value. You’re trivial and pitiful, worth nothing more to your superiors than to languish here with the dreg. That’s why you have so much spare time, because your estimated significance is zero. Good to know exactly what type of person I’m dealing with. I don’t believe your insults will bite me anymore, now that I know they’re hurled by a nobody; pure unmitigated waste.”

While she pretends to be unfazed, he isn’t capable of the same restraint. His hands and jaw clench, and his whole body begins to strain, virtually exposing the veins in his muscles. “You know nothing about this place. This is an honorable position!”

“If it was honorable, you would be stationed among the ones who protect essential installations or the egg chambers, not so-called ‘traitors’. Open your eyes ‘Warden’ – you are absolutely bereft of value, the laughing stock of Coldarra.”

She wasn’t sure at first if her intuition had guided her down the correct path, even if she had chosen to follow it, but now, there can be no doubt. As he widens his nostrils, they believe they can see smoke billowing as he huffs. The other guards show hints of fear now, worried that he might punish whomever is within sight for this insolence. Even Rax is getting dissuaded by this and plants a hand on the drake’s shoulder.

“Nadelgosa…”, she whispers.

The drakonid shoves a hand into the wall next to the barrier and glowers at her. “Watch your tongue, whelp”, he nigh shouts. “If you attempt to insult me again, I will install the same countermeasures that we employed in your brother’s cage. See if your tune changes.”

Nadel remains steadfast and she furrows her brow, but her brazen attitude simmers down. “You are vile, Warden.”

“And you belong here, to rot for all eternity. Guards, dispatch only one bowl to this cell. The despicable cur will go hungry today.”

The other dragonkin executes his order and Nadel continues to glare at Kaltor all the while, until he moves to the next inmate and disappears from their view. It is at this point that she breathes out, though not so much from relief as disappointment. “…dammit. That was stupid”, she mutters.

Rax fetches her food and glances at the drake with a bit of amusement, laced with surprise. “It was, very much so, but I commend your courage. You do not cower away from tyranny – I admire that.”

The drake exhales and buries her face into one of her hands. “Thank you. Wish that would solve my hunger, but…I shall endure, I suppose.”

The paladin proceeds to sit down on the same spot as before, right next to her accomplice. She watches the elf-turned drake, who’s now submerging herself into misery over her own irreverence. Pity settles into Rax’s heart. She shouldn’t have to suffer like this for standing up to a bully.
Her gaze falls to the bowl in her hand – the nutritious but bland paste they received yesterday and some magically conjured bread. And a mug of water too, of course.

Instead of taking it all for herself, the draenei nudges her elbow into Nadel’s arm and then offers the bowl to her.
“Eat.”

The drake blinks in surprise.
“What?”

“You should eat. We will share.”

“But…no, I can’t take this.”

“You can.”

Nadel’s eyes travel to Rax’s face, searching it carefully.
“You will go hungry.”

“Not as much as you, if you eat nothing at all. Starving will not help either of us.”

Nadel really wants to object, to push the generosity aside. She made her decision, put herself in this disastrous situation and should suffer for it. But…to do so wouldn’t just be foolish, but also ungrateful. She sighs and accepts her share.
“…thank you; I mean it. I won’t forget this.”

“I know.”

After they start eating in silence and try to regain some energy, they wait and simply listen to the noises outside, to what’s going on around them. Kaltor and the other dragonkin proceed down the line, past every captive in here, until they finally vanish completely. Eventually, any other sound except what they can hear in this cell disperses and they’re given at least a fraction of perceived privacy.

Nadel senses how she cannot hold back any longer. She has to speak, no matter how silly it might turn out.
“I…must apologize”, she states quietly.

Thinking she can predict what’s coming, Rax shakes her head.
“You do not. I do not mind sharing.”

“No, that’s—…” Nadel groans inwardly, more irritated with herself than anyone else. “I…I meant for my mistake. For what I did. For…for trying to wipe your memory all those months ago. I know you’ve said that apologies are inadequate, but…”

The room soon descends into stillness once more and Rax turns to watch her curiously. She wonders what’s running through the drake’s mind, what might have spurred this reaction. Nadel herself is faltering, not knowing where to look or face.
“I’m…not sure what got into my head back then. The idea that a mortal had healed me, had used your Light, or whatever it is you employ to rejuvenate others, was…well, it terrified me. I somehow felt a connection to you, one I haven’t had with anyone else. It was bizarre, unprecedented…abnormal, I thought. Such things have never existed between me and a mortal before. I acted on foolish impulse.”

With no more food to consume, she’s free to shrug and wave her hands around, as she searches for additional answers.
“But”, she continues, “this obviously doesn’t excuse what was done to you, nor does an apology really help to mend your pain. And what’s worse, you were embroiled in even further calamity, in a debacle that has nothing to do with you.”

Nadel’s shoulders slump and she buries her face in both her hands this time.

“I really am a mess, I know. And yet you stepped in to assist me, preventing me from going alone. I don’t…I don’t deserve that level of kindness.”

Insight comes over Rax and she nods briefly.

“It is why you grew angry during our capture.”

“…yes. I’m sorry for that too. I’m sorry for…a lot of things. I still don’t understand why you did it to begin with. You deserve better than to be locked up in here.”

Instead of growing angry or indignant, like she did back in their encounter within Darkshore, Rax becomes contemplative. She turns her face towards the gate, starting to consider her positions and experiences.

“Have you ever lost anyone to the Burning Legion?”

Nadel lowers her hands and looks at Rax with increasing confusion.

“Uh, not personally. I mean, no one that I would deem as important, but I know those who have.”

“I have lost a whole array of people to their murderous ways. Friends, relatives, loved ones – there is nothing they will not devour. Both my parents and brother were swallowed too, long ago.”

The drake widens her eyes in shock, as this reply was somewhat unexpected. She knew Rax had suffered, clearly visible from the glint in those glowing whites, but this…

Her long ears sink out of sorrow.

“I’m…sorry to hear that. Sounds like we’re both cursed by fate somehow. I wonder what we have done to vex it so…”

Rax soon presses on, but her voice is noticeably flat, devoid of the same tenderness that often fills it.

“My brother was not taken from me in the traditional way – he left. He…joined the Legion.”

Comprehension dawns in Nadel now, stronger than before.

“He…he’s a man’ari?”

“Yes, willingly so. And he slew our parents, to strengthen his bond to the fel and demonic power. For a long time, I was trapped in a swamp of doubt, pondering whether I could have ever done more to halt his downfall, to avert the loss of a brother I once loved.” She snorts somewhat bitterly.

“I suppose many would claim that doubt is my second name, due to tragedy constantly harrying me.”

She breaks her introspection and looks straight at Nadel.

“If I knew there was some way to redeem my brother, I would do almost anything. I know what it feels like to make sacrifices for your family, to…tempt fate. If I can improve your chances, Nadelgosa, to save you from my suffering, I will help you.”

Nadel is struck by these words, feeling how they rattle her heart. She’s surprised, not just by the contents, but the honesty flowing from them. They make her swallow, as to not get overwhelmed by emotion.

“I don’t—thank you. Truly. If you ever need help with your brother, I…”

Before she can finish her thoughts, they both overhear a noise in the distance. It’s miniscule at first,
like tiny electrical cracks, but it quickly grows fiercer and louder.
As they move towards the barrier to investigate, a wellspring of magic erupts just outside and a whole team of people land right in the corridor.
“Thariss! Rivaryn!”, Rax exclaims. “And…Kassari?”

“Stella, you came!”, Nadel blurts.

The whole quartet, along with Khroga, Razz and a bunch of violet-clad individuals rises to their feet. Rivaryn flashes a heartfelt smile and rests her rifle over her shoulder.
“Let’s get you two out of there.”

Chapter End Notes

Yeah so, I skipped the infiltration part. I don't think that would be especially interesting or important. The next section is more fascinating - Kaltor's clash with Raxeen and Nadelgosa.
“Ah, finally, the correct location. Kirin Tor, it is high time you prove your worth”, the voice of the team leader, Kassari, echoes forth in the center of the blue dragon prison, on the corridors that are usually reserved for the guards and the guards alone. They never quite expected these types of intruders, though.

“We have a number of tasks to complete and you have to move fast. Mister Moran, secure the hallway to the south with a few of your battlemages. Miss Rhydela, I’m going to need you to locate the control switches for these cages. And miss Delacroix, please, track down the operational mechanisms that can deactivate Coldarra’s defensive barriers.”

Her attention soon shifts to the individuals in their group who are not directly associated with the Kirin Tor.

“Stellagosa, assist Rhydela with her assignment and Khroga dear, I would appreciate if you could protect Delacroix. As for you, Rivaryn-“ She starts, but then grows disoriented, as she doesn’t notice her sister at her side anymore. Glancing around, she spots the hunter already by the prison cell, having commenced her own activity. “…you already have a task, I see. Proceed, I suppose.”

As the sin’dorei hunter approaches the cage, she holsters her gun and extracts a thick disc-like object from her bag.

“Be careful with the barrier”, Raxeen cautions from the other side. “It is quite volatile.”

“Yeah, I go it”, Riv half-mumbles, already too busy trying to configure the tool she’s going to use. She kneels down and attaches it onto the side of the wall next to the barrier, only barely nudging the pulsating purple-pink magic.

“Let’s see. Discharge parameters activated, pulse control set to five, output converter transferred…”, she mutters as she pushes a few buttons and pulls a switch or two on the chassis. “I’d recommend for everyone to give it a wide berth, by the way. This includes the two of you”, she indicates for the prisoners. They accede to her request.

After she pulls the final knob, a red light suddenly begins to blink in the center of it, accompanied by a consistent line of beeps, which quickly increases in pace. She has already turned and sprinted away at that point, getting in behind Thariss’ resilient body a few meters off.

Eventually, the device erupts, expelling a pulse from the middle, like a shockwave that bursts in all directions and explicitly swats the barrier. Not much of a sound is heard from the gadget, but it’s certainly felt in the ground, as it shakes everything within a few meters radius. The cage’s magic flickers for a few seconds and then promptly deactivates completely.

Nadelgosa immediately dashes out of the confinement and rushes up to her sister, who has yet to leave, despite Kassari’s issued orders. Their arms wrap around each other and they hug as tightly as they can.

“Norgannon’s beard, am I ever glad to see you”, the older sister professes. “I wasn’t sure if…”

In reaction, Stella nuzzles into Nadel’s shoulder and slips one of her hands into the shorter blue hair of the older drake.

“Don’t say that! Of course I’d come! I would never abandon you, you know that.” Her insistence and passion falters somewhat, as she realizes another detail.

“Oh, and um… I told our allies everything. I had to.”
Fortunately, Nadel does not seem disturbed in the least, merely nodding curtly. “Don’t worry, I figured you might. It is fine. We will talk this through later on.”

By the opening, Rax soon gets company, as Thariss strides over to her with a specific object in her hand. “You good, Rax? Your hands look a lil’ empty. Found this bad boy while we were teleporting around. Didn’t seem right that these jackasses would get to keep it.”

Elation soars in Rax’s chest as she feasts her eyes on the sight of Kerashta Rakkan. She smiles and fondly wraps her fingers over the hilt. Relief settles into her and she bows her head to Thariss. “Venir tor’ze, my friend. Thank you. I feel whole once more.”

The warrior grins and pats the crystal-adorned shoulder. “Happy to help.”

Almost instantly thereafter, Nadel gains some space for herself and shifts into her gleaming and magnificent drake form, one that Rax in particular looks at with interest. Nadel flaps her wings and bolts over to Deradgos’ cell instead. A saddened quality enters her eyes. “Oh, brother…” She steers her gaze towards the blood elf that is trying to unfasten her contraption. “Miss Silvershroud, can you collapse this barrier too?”

Riv touches the disc, but immediately has to retract her hand, like she was just stung. The item is near scalding hot. “Uh, yeah, if you give me a moment. The coolant process needs to initiate, and I have to rewire the trigger mechanism afterwards. Might take a minute or two.”

“That is unnecessary”, Kass insists. “We don’t have this much time to spare and we won’t have to – we will take the whole system down from the central network. Now that we have the assistance of two drakes and a paladin, this should expedite the process.”

Nadel gazes at her brother again, looking reluctant to abandon him, even for just a few minutes. “Hey, don’t sweat it”, Thariss tries to calm her. “Me and Riv will stick around here, while you guys handle the rest of the compound. Will let you know if anything changes. Uh, somehow.”

A sigh is emitted from her nostrils, eyes not leaving Derad’s kneeling form for a moment. “I’ll be back, Derad, I swear”, she practically whispers. “We will get you out of there.”

And with that, she mentally prepares herself to depart and hopefully solve this debacle before it gets worse…and that is when disaster strikes. Or a spear does, to be specific. Literally out of nowhere, Kaltor materializes, like a shadow looming above her. This is what it might seem like to most onlookers, but not for those with magical aptitude or senses. They can observe the residual arcane energies of his maneuver, even if it is too late to hamper. He teleported inside.

With his spear at the ready, he swings it down in an arch and slashes at Nadel, carving right into the scales of her left flank. The drake growls in agony and hurtles to the ground. “No! Nadia!”, Stella shouts in panic.

Kaltor comes to a halt, slams the bottom of his spear to the ground and snorts sharply, emitting smoke from his nose. Around the same time, the mortal group gets harassed by a squad of dragonspawn pouring out into the corridor, attacking them posthaste. “You despicable wretches!”, he spits at his adversaries. “You thought I would not notice your intrusion into my lair?! I will have your heads for this, all of you!” He twirls his spear in his hand and sets it in a collision course with Nadel’s fallen body. “Starting with you, traitor. I was
instructed to be lenient with our own kind, but jurisdictional powers are bestowed upon me during special circumstances. I will not abide a piece of filth like you to remain alive any longer. In the hallowed name of Lord Malygos and the blue dragonflight, I hereby sentence you—"

He’s just about to let his weapon fly, to descend and impale the drake, when another martial tool darts towards him and intercepts its path – a purple crystal hammer. Kaltor turns and beholds the view of Rax’s infuriated face, her teeth gritted. "You will not have her."

Rax groans as she strives to impede his progress, managing to push the spear out of its vector and then lifts her hoof to kick the drakonid straight in his abdomen. Despite the size, her strength, laced with a touch of the Light’s gifts, is enough to briefly stagger him. Once he regains his footing, he bares his fangs at her. He roars, bristling at her audacity. He does still retreat and commences a circling route around her position, though, spinning his spear all the while.

“And the pet arrives to defend her master! I should have predicted how pathetically simple-minded you mortals are.”

A few meters behind him, Stella transforms into her drake form, smaller than Nadel’s and takes off into the air, passes over the fighters and lands near the injured drake. “Sister, hang on. I’ll take care of you.”

In the meantime, Rax holds her hammer out, physically blocking any roads for him that leads straight to the siblings, glaring so fiercely that she practically appears to glow; retribution incarnate. “And you are a contemptible monster”, she declares, “no better than those who would like no more than to destroy this world. We should all unite to fight the Legion and yet you would rather imprison and torture innocents.”

“Your understanding of our laws is insulting”, he retorts.

She heaves her hammer and sets the hilt within the clutches of both hands. “I need only one mandate – the Light’s grace. Pheta thones gamera.”

“Hah! You think your little sparkles will do anything to us? So be it.”

He doesn’t wait for another reply, but instead lunges straight into her, with his spear thrusted forward. She can’t outright block its route, for this would likely inflict too much damage on her weapon, but she can angle the hammer towards the hilt, to deflect the spear’s edge. Following this move up is another kick from Rax, but without the same strength or agility as the first, he can effortlessly evade it. He spins around and reaches out with his claws to swipe her, but she imitates him by dodging as well.

With this proximity, Rax attempts to charge into him and lets her hammer pursue her, to swing wildly and deliver as much cataclysmic damage as is feasible, but it’s too slow. Kaltor skips away, twists his spear into a curve and lashes at her yet again, which she manages to parry. He makes a bid for further close combat engagement by shoving his shoulder into her frame, but the draenei had in some way foreseen it. She clashes with him head on, utilizing a similar move and pure physical power is not something he can employ to make her budge.

In the subsequent moments, a few blows are traded back and forth – claws from his end, kicks from hers, shallow cuts by his spear and bare misses from her hammer. The farther this conflict advances, the more Kaltor seems to underestimate his adversary’s weapon. Sure, he continuously circumvents her assaults, but he stays way too close, without considering
what kind of impact she can have with one very precise strike.

This is a fallacy she finally picks up the hint from, when she doles out a proper whack. It occurs during one of his many jabs, as he aspires to pierce her body in one of the weaker positions of the armor. She has so far predominantly enlisted Kerastha Rakkan’s hilt in order to block, but this time, she steers clear of her opponent’s tool, charges a hefty spin of her whole body and lets the hammer swing. She gets a lucky strike, bashing him right in his gut.

This is the critical second, the event which provides him with clarity. He practically feels every inch of the impact, like his ribs might’ve been crushed beneath it had she not hit a little below them, but pain does undeniably ripple through his entire essence. Out of fear, he teleports away. Rax keeps a close eye on the whole procedure, but instead of harrying him, she straightens her pose and stalls. She doesn’t know if his reaction was a feint or not. Best to wait and watch, be smart about it.

“You see it now?”, she asks. “You underestimate the potency of the Light – it can purge any foe, any villain. You simply need a righteous cause and the correct application of zeal.”

Kaltor lingers on his knees for a short while, trying to catch his breath and compel the pain to subside. His temporary weakened state is no ruse, though he doesn’t relinquish this fact. He permits her words to cement in his mind, to increase his frustration and outrage. Eventually, he summons a growl, almost a half-roar, as he gets back on his feet.

“I admit, I misunderstood your talents, your capacity for destruction. I held back, thinking I wouldn’t have to expend too much energy to slay a paltry menace like you. But I see now that it was folly. Allow me to adjust accordingly.”

The tip of his equipment flares up with pink light and right away, he blinks out of existence, teleporting once more, without giving her any prior warning. But for a competent paladin like Rax, it isn’t arduous to detect the flow of the arcane from this range, so she simply raises her awareness to track him.

She senses his coming from the left flank and shifts to handle his incursion, but this isn’t an endeavor she can obstruct so easily. Before she has even made a full turn, he’s gone again. He vanishes and instantly reappears on her right. She’s baffled by this speed and is too late to defend herself. She can only recoil, in hopes of mitigating the damage. This reflex is partially successful, as his cut isn’t critically deep, but his spear is now infused with amplified arcane enchantments, so it would not be impossible for him to penetrate her hide in a few additional places, with an accurately controlled stab.

He affords her no respite, no chance to recuperate, as he fades once more. In this third shot, he rematerializes behind her. She turns on her heel to curb his attempt, but she regrettably suffers another cut, this time over her leg. Minimal, perhaps, but it stings.

Thankfully, there’s a limit. Apparently, three rounds are all he can dispense in one go, and in the aftermath, he retreats. Regardless of this fact, her faltering posture inspires him to laugh derisively.

“What’s wrong, mortal? Lost your wind?”

Rax quivers somewhat with her next inhale, but she shifts to glower at him anyhow.

“…meager tricks you have.”

“Meager, huh? Looks to me as if they’re fairly effective, judging by your failing stamina. But if you weren’t impressed, shall I offer another demonstration?”

The recharge timer is not instantaneous, for Kaltor still lingers at a distance, waiting for his reserves to replenish. This ability must drain a lot out of him. Rax seizes that chance and takes a
few swift shots him, smacking Kerastha Rakkan in his general direction, and while she definitely hits her target, he blocks every single one. At one particular instant, as it looks like she’s just about to bash him, he disappears.

After some brief shock, she tries to erect preemptive defenses, but her rate is inadequate. He overshoots her once, but the two ensuing slashes strike true and here, he actually manages to drill into her, beneath the armor.

Rax does not tolerate surrender, nor to let it slow her down, at least not too heavily. Sadly, her counterattacks are futile, for his tactic persists. He constructs a durable barrier to thwart her, until he obtains the opportunity to shroud his existence in a flurry of magic, where he fades into nothingness.

Gradually, the draenei is growing desperate, knowing she can’t last for an eternity. If she could only reach him with one solid hit…

There are certain special techniques that she can brandish in emergencies, like when she first ran into Thariss and Rivaryn on Outland. Trouble is, she needs an angle for this to pan out, and she is not in a pertinent position to achieve it.

To grant herself a breather, time to develop a strategy and to dampen the injuries she’s sustaining, right after his first teleportation, she lifts one hand and says a quick internal prayer. A golden barrier forms around her – the same skill she once used to protect herself from a gronn’s fury with. It is remarkably stable, virtually impenetrable. Very useful in her currently dilemma, as his assaults are hindered. Unfortunately, she knows just how temporary this measure is. She won’t have another chance to use it before the end of this fight. Or before she perishes.

Kaltor withdraws when his mauling proves fruitless, drifts out of her radius and bides his time. He scans her, awaiting a crack in her defenses.

“It seems I’m not the only one with ‘tricks’ and surprisingly robust at that. But I’m willing to gamble that this is a fleeting countermeasure. I still have much stamina left to invest in my own methods, little mortal. Do you truly expect to match me? I am the Warden of this facility and I will not be defeated so easily!”

Rax ignores him, concentrating on mapping out a conclusive maneuver that stands any chance whatsoever to topple him.

Just as the shield loses its power and decays, Kaltor is primed, instantly vanishing again. At this decisive phase, with everything on the line, time almost seems to stand still for Rax. And that’s when it comes to her, slithers into her mind and provides her with an epiphany. There is one golden opportunity, a second when he’s susceptible to a rupture, but there’s a downside to this gambit – it’s risky and will doubtlessly hurt her terribly. But at this stage, what else can she do? Take a really substantial blow or succumb to his might?

Inhaling deeply, she decides to execute her ploy. It commences by essentially faking her state. She has been hurt at this point, but not to the extent where she’s close to dying. As he’s unaware of this fact, she makes her initial moves very slow and sluggish, like she’s not prepared for the incisions and is getting too fatigued to oppose them. The first two thrusts are still small and while they sting, she can endure them. However, her gambit pays off, as her depleted display fills him with courage for the third and final blow.

With boosted imbued strength, he dashes into her, spear held in a low stabbing motion. The tip shimmers with exhilarated arcane potency, which he drives right into the side of her gut. It prevails, boring deeply into her flesh. She had breathed in earlier to brace herself, but it just wasn’t enough to foresee the agony that would ensue. A wave of pain suffuses her, and she nearly wants to cave in, right there and then. It has been years, too long, since she has suffered this type of impact.
Her expression and torment send gleeful chills into the drakonid, who laughs.
“So much for your Light! It is no match for a true warrior, nor is any of your pitiful kind. How
does it feel, mortal, to face the death that keeps hounding you?”

Despite the searing pain, the faltering consciousness and the pressure of the weapon still literally
pushing into her torso, she refuses to yield. She holds onto her stance and completes her plan.
Kaltor soon sees how she clutches the fingers of one hand around his wrist, as he has stepped so
very close to her location and to his surprise, glares at him with ferocious eyes.
“I do not know. Perhaps you will find out for us both.”

Pure undiluted brilliance and power surges through her, as two golden wings emerge from her
back, a manifestation of the Light’s wrath. She lets out a howling battle shout and with enhanced
physical capability, she raises Kerastha Rakkan with just one hand. She sends it swinging, directing
the brunt of her attack beneath his jaw, like an upper cut made of hardened crystal.

The collision is so precise and energetic, fueled by the Light’s rage, that Rax can hear something
cracking in his skull.
Kaltor doesn’t have time for anything. He doesn’t scream or groan or protest, as he hurtles
backwards and bounces away across the hall, immediately knocked out. Watching his immobile
form, Rax doesn’t know for sure whether he’s dead or not, but though she can finish the job, she
chooses not to. She doesn’t have to become like them.

With adrenaline still pulsating through her, she has a small cache of energy left, just barely enough
to wrench the spear out from her body. She emits a muffled anguished cry and unceremoniously
drops it to the floor. Afterwards, she senses how her legs have trouble preserving balance and she
has to support herself against the wall next to one of the cells. She really shouldn’t enact a crazy
plan like this ever again.
Not much of her endurance remains, but she has enough for a transitory pain-numbing prayer.

A couple of minutes later, the Kirin Tor team, aided by the mercenaries, open all cells and
hurriedly portals away with as many as they can possibly amass, before reinforcements arrive. It is
Thariss who carries Derad out, while Riv supports Rax.
Mission accomplished.

Chapter End Notes

Retri pally vs Arcane mage - 1-0.
Technically, mages can’t blink that often in game, nor with such precision, but this
isn’t a game and well, the Warden was more of a battlemage type, so I gave him a few
extra skills. Plus, he’s a drakonid. I mean, not powerful enough to defeat the former
leader of the Shiïhou, but still
And yeah, I skipped the rest of the mission, because it wasn’t really critical for the
purposes of this story.
Expansive, rich, soothing, inviting. Ashindra will begrudgingly admit one aspect about Northrend – the night sky is a beautiful sight to behold, unlike the rest of this sordid landscape. Not only is it akin to an ocean of glittering stars on display, filling her with an unexpected peace, but the fluctuating and rippling auroras that regularly frequent it are magnificent. It is an element she does not remember seeing particularly often down in the verdant Quel’Thalus. Well, previously verdant.

Despite this splendid exhibition of the heavens, Ash only occasionally offers her eyes to its dance. Another item currently craves her attention and she have difficulties with ignoring its tempting call. She cannot stop regularly glancing down at its glimmering metal, sitting comfortably around her arm. She still can't fully believable that she’s been able to attain this status, so soon after joining the Argent Crusade. What’s it been? Weeks? A few months maybe? That sounds like a very rapid process for someone like Ash. A proof of her talents or a favoritism from a certain priestess?

Speaking of her, it is this very individual who now interrupts Ash’s reverie. The paladin is standing at the periphery of the camp that has been erected, including both hers and a few other squads. They’re on a journey towards the northwest of the Howling Fjord, following the coastline, and for once, their surroundings are pleasantly calm and undisturbed.

“How’s that badge working out for you?”

Ash blinks and tears her gaze away from the small object depicting an open golden hand – the symbol of the Crusade – with a star at the bottom which is attached to her arm, and swirls towards the origin of the voice. She sets her sight on a vibrant and striking source – Melia. As usual, the priestess is dressed in her enchanted robes and a collection of fur attachments, to keep herself warm. Ash clears her throat and amends her position, trying to hide the fact that she’s been effusively tugging at it for the last half an hour.

“Oh…good. Very good, actually. Thank you for the promotion. Uh, ma’am.”

Melia beams in response. “You’re very welcome, Sergeant.” She giggles to herself, quickly pocketing the formalities. The two work best when they’re in casual conversation. Even better now that Ash is officially her second-in-command.

“Honestly, you’ve more than earned it at this point, especially back in the tomb. Without you…” Her expression falters. “…there’s no telling how poorly things might’ve gone.”

Ash isn’t quite sure how to address this scenario to begin with. It has been a few days now and she knows that Melia has felt guilty ever since their excursion into the vrykul ruins, even if Ash had insisted that it was useless to dwell on the past.

“How’s Braktog doing?”

Attempting to press her qualms into the depths of her subconscious, Melia inhales slowly. “Still ailing, but healing. Some internal wounds linger, but they shouldn’t hinder his abilities to fight any longer.” The Lieutenant fidgets a bit with one of her sleeves. “He was somewhat reprimanded when we got back to camp, along with a few others.”
This fact hadn’t escaped Ash, despite not being present at the debriefing. It wasn’t a chastising performed by Fordring himself, for the Highlord had already been forced to depart.
“By the Commander?”

“Commander Solegear, yes. Though the blow was of course softened once I relayed the fact that it wasn’t technically his fault, nor anyone else’s, since we were controlled. They chose to refrain from administrating any punishments in light of this. And frankly, he has been much more self-critical so far, beating himself up ever since it happened. Told me he’d pledge to improve and make up for it.” Melia pensively corrects a few stray strands of hair and scratches her cheek.
“I wonder if I shouldn’t be doing the same, to be honest. I was also taken by that nerubian sorcery and I feel…awful. It was humiliating and dangerous.”

While she may not have formulated a protest before, Ash has to intervene now.
“Don’t. There’s no reason you should feel bad. It’s counterproductive and harmful for your development. Learn from this experience, Melia, don’t let yourself crumble.”

Melia’s eyes drifts elsewhere, her brow furrowing skeptically.
“But…”

“And I don’t believe it’s fair to ignore the aptitude in leadership that you demonstrated. Had you not taken charge after Captain Deepreach’s fall, would we still be alive? Personally, I doubt it. Our whole team would’ve perished without you.”

Biting her lip during the description, the signs on Melia’s expression divulges her differing opinion on this matter. She sighs and folds her arms.
“I dunno. I just think I should’ve done better, especially when considering all the days and nights I’ve spent training with the Church. Not sure what my mother would’ve said, had she found out about this.”

“Well, I can’t claim to know your mother’s heart of hearts, as I’ve never met her, but from all you have told me, I’m convinced she wouldn’t be angry, nor disappointed. This disaster could’ve happened to anyone. And in the end, we got out of it, with most of our troops intact to boot. Be proud of this accomplishment, Melia. Don’t second-guess yourself.”

“Which wouldn’t have been possible without you.”

“Well, that’s what comrades are for, no? We’re a team, not a collection of individual agendas.”

Finally, Melia permits Ash’s words to imbue her with motivation and spirit, knowing she can’t get bogged down in the horrors of the past. She has already learned to cope with such daunting elements.
Instead, she shifts back to her Sergeant and meets with the bright green gems.
“Alright, you win. Mind telling me where and how you got so skilled at combating curses like that? You obviously weren’t affected, in spite of looking directly at the damn thing.”

Ash raises her hand to pull and hoist one of her shoulder pads, to rectify its position.
“Nothing overly complex, really. Just what I was taught during my paladin training. Being drilled by Lady Liadrin could be quite…rigorous, but also illuminating. She informed me that, to be a paladin is not simply to embrace the guise of a hunter of evil, but to hone one’s mind, detect its roots and to fight its taint, wherever it rears its ugly head. Physical corruption is possible to detect for anyone with the appropriate tools.” She holds up her hand and gestures with her fingers in a rotating motion.
“To me, it has a certain…tang, aroma perhaps. Makes the hairs at the back of my head rise and
bristle. It can be sensed in all manner of twisted beings. The undead’s necromancy is undoubtedly the most prominent, I would say, though I may be basing that on purely personal experiences. Then there’s of course the duplicitous void of the old gods, which is not too far away in terms of energy, but with separate and distinct components. And…”

She’s just about to transition into the next phase of her explanation, when her own memories curtail her headway. Old thoughts that refuse to leave her be, distinguish themselves in the haze of her mind. She receives a sudden, almost visceral flashback, like she’s reliving the same moments, the same emotions, but in more inscrutable ways. Disgust, thriving hate, a rush to annihilate… “I’m not a monster! I’m still your sister, Ash! I always will be, and you have to listen to me when I say that I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you!”

Ash becomes outwardly distant and quiet, making Melia observe her curiously, since the elf has literally halted in the middle of a sentence. Melia has witnessed a similar faraway look before, but not this acute. Hoping to bring the paladin back to reality, she decides to continue the conversation. “Well, either way, it was impressive. Kinda wish I could do stuff like that myself.”

Her endeavor bears fruit and Ash twitches, shaking herself out of her daydream. Or nightmare. She sweeps her vicinity with startled eyes, but then emits a mild cough, pretending like it was nothing. “Uh, well, if you so desire, I could tutor you. I have a few neat tricks in my repertoire that anyone with an affinity for the Light should be able to learn.”

The proposal is evidently welcome, judging by Melia’s pleasant smile. “I would enjoy that very much. But, this might require for us to hang out more than we do now. You’re okay with that?”

“Certainly. Why not?”

“Huh. Intriguing. Didn’t know if you’d be okay with the idea of us increasing the number of hours we spend with each other.”

Ash blinks and in her bewilderment, she looks for an excuse. “Um, well…I just want you to be better prepared.”

Melia’s derived entertainment from this situation grows and she tilts her head, casually strolling into Ash’s personal space. “Hmm, I wonder. In fact, come to think of it, you were pretty hell-bent on protecting me down in the darkness, if I recall correctly.”

It’s relatively hard to deny this suggestion, though Ash is reluctant to let the truth slip out of her. She swallows and averts her eyes. “Not more than usual.”

“The soldiers told me that you broke formation and cut down undead with an impressive display of passion and mastery.”

“I’m…a paladin. It’s what I do.”

“Interesting excuse.”

It’s actually quite silly that Ash would ever get nervous by these types of circumstances, as she used to be deemed as fairly charming in her younger years. And yet now, she’s nearly speechless. Deflection is the sole option she has. “Ahem. So, uh…do you know anything regarding this new region we’re travelling towards?”
Melia snickers at this strategy and eases up on her ‘onslaught’.
“Only a little. Dragonblight is what they call it. It’s where dragons go to die.”

“Oh. Well, that’s…depressing.”

“Heh, in a way. But also a little poetic. They say that the oldest of dragons are drawn there, an
intrinsic desire to lay their bodies upon the frozen wasteland and be entombed in the frost’s
hardened embrace.”

Ash dips her head sideways in an acknowledging fashion.
“When you put it that way.”

“The Commander had a specific location for us in mind, a tower known as the Wyrmrest Temple,
near the center. We’re supposed to rendezvous with some dragon forces at its base. Apparently, the
Scourge is launching an increased offensive on it and they need reinforcements.”

The paladin merely nods at first, trying to imagine what it would be like, more than the details of
the mission itself. She taps at her chin in contemplation.
“Hmm. Thinking back, I don’t know if I’ve ever encountered a friendly dragon in my life. I recall
fighting them in the Second War, but that was different.”

“Well, they’re our allies, so you better be on your best behavior.”

Ash looks at Melia, both seeing and hearing the amusement in her voice. Ash elects to play along,
showcasing an overly crisp salute.
“Yes, of course! I shall be most respectful, Lieutenant.”

It pans out and Melia laughs softly.
“You’re cute sometimes.
Alright, I guess that’s enough for today. I’m gonna go grab a few winks of sleep.”

Ash inclines her head and rests her hand down on the hilt of her blade.
“Do so. I’ll take the first watch, ensure everyone stays sharp.”

“Ever the diligent soldier, huh?”

“Vigilance and discipline are important ideals.”

Ash seems fairly content about the ending of this talk, that they could both relieve a few tensions
and concerns. This is why she turns away, but she just so happens to underestimate Melia, who
doesn’t leave immediately.
“And Sergeant?”

Ash glances over her shoulder.
“Hm?”

Once she faces the priestess, Melia is already right next to her, too close for Ash to recoil or
escape. She lifts one hand with remarkable speed to the elf’s opposite cheek, just prior to leaning in
and tenderly planting her lips on the one within reach. A wave of warmth and almost electrifying
thrill flows through Ash’s body. The texture of the human’s lips is satisfyingly soft.
After detaching from the cheek, Melia pushes her mouth to the adjacent ear, a hot breath hitting it.
“Thank you”, she whispers.

Ash is left blushing profusely as Melia wanders back to her tent, the paladin’s hand touching and
lingering on that spot for at least a minute.

Chapter End Notes

*Will I ever be done torturing Ash about Vesta? I'm not sure*
Warmth, soft seats and a tasty meal. For some of those within these sturdy walls, it feels like an eternity since they last experienced such concepts, essentially since leaving the shores of Kalimdor. The tundra all around them isn’t exactly known for its hospitality and the chills in Coldarra were somehow more penetrative, virtually digging into the bloodstreams. To sit here now in a comfortable chair, not all too far from an actual fireplace – or a conjured one at least – is surprisingly soothing, almost intoxicating.

After the success in the Nexus’ prison, the group managed to just barely escape with the prisoners they liberated, letting the red dragons fly them back to Amber Ledge. Due to all the arcane protections around this area, and the increasing presence of other dragonflights, it appears that the blues are not ready to head outside of their lair to fight. Not yet, at least. That doesn’t just give the inhabitants some leeway and breathing room, but also chances to plot for future strikes.

Such ideas are something for another group, however, not Rivaryn, Thariss and Raxeen. After they’re done here, they will likely head elsewhere, explore more of the tundra and find other people to pay them to do something useful. They’ve had enough of fighting dragons for now. Riv is confident that her sister’s ingenuity and passion will be a boon to the Kirin Tor’s end goal, so she has no qualms about leaving its fate to Kassari.

Currently, they’re enjoying dinner together, while discussing future plans for other sections of this continent. Rescuing prisoners, Deradgos in particular, may have been their initial intention for travelling, but now that they’re up here, might as well assess the progress of the war against the Scourge. However, these actions are interrupted by a knock on the door. Rax turns to look at it, but isn’t about to get up. She’s comfortable where she’s sat.

“Enter.”

The doorknob shifts around and the item its attached to slowly opens up. Before this act is finished, they hear how someone clears her throat on the other side.

The person unveiled to them is an azure blue-haired elf, someone who has become very familiar to them at this point. Compared to the leather armor she wears most of the time, she has opted for a shirt and some pants in pale blue, green and white colors.

“Good afternoon. I hope I am not disturbing you in any way.”

Thariss lifts her fork to point at the drake, but her mouth is full of food, so her words are delayed. Before she has a chance to vocalize them, Riv rolls her eyes and plants a hand over her girlfriend’s lips.

“Don’t speak while you’re eating. It’s impolite.”

With mischief in her eyes, Thariss tickles Riv’s side, compelling the hunter to let go and free her pathways.

“Manners are for suckers, babe.”

“I’ll be sure to let your mother know when we get back. Anyway, no, you’re not bothering us, Nadelgosa. We were just discussing Northrend and where we should go after this. How’s your injury?”
The drake offers a tentative look, perhaps not having foreseen this inquiry, that they would even care about her health. A hand instinctively reaches for her side, where bandages are attached underneath. It was unknown whether such a measure would be of any assistance, but they chose to employ it regardless.

“It’s…mending. Stella advised me to secure an increased amount of rest, but I find myself too uneasy to sleep at this time.”

“Well, still sounds like a wise suggestion, but it’s up to you. Is there something we can help you with?”

Nadelgosa quickly shakes her head.

“I believe you have helped me more than enough already. I simply came to express my gratitude for all your efforts and to tell you that I’m extremely pleased that everything went so well. My choice to approach you was somewhat…abrupt and shrouded in dishonesty, but you surpassed all of my expectations. It means a lot to me.”

Riv offers a smile in return.

“Hey, no problem. It was nothing special. Well, I mean, it was not an ideal situation and we do wish you had informed us beforehand of all the details, but we got out of it.”

Now that Thariss has finally swallowed all of her grub, she makes an addition.

“Plus, we got paid, a real exciting tussle in the depths of a blue dragon dungeon that we’re definitely gonna tell stories about, a free meal and beds to sleep in. It was worth it, mostly.”

“We’re also glad that no one got hurt to any major degree. Getting the prisoners out unharmed felt good. Well…you know, outside of their prior injuries.”

Nadel inclines her head.

“You will get no argument from me. I am profoundly relieved and immensely grateful, which I’m sure is a sentiment shared by everyone involved. We will not forget this. All three of you have clearly shown to be friends of dragons, the blues who don’t follow Malygos most of all.”

“Let us hope that stays intact”, Rax assents. “Having blue dragons as allies in the future could be tremendously valuable. I am sure we can accomplish much good together.”

“The feeling is mutual.”

After she’s done with her initial speech, Nadel clears her throat again and her gaze falls to the ground. She slips her arms behind her back and her expression makes her seem a bit embarrassed.

“Now, I was wondering if I could possibly borrow Raxeen for a few minutes. I wish to speak with her. Erm…in private.”

Rax blinks confusedly to begin with and gives her companions a questioning look. She should’ve expected the smug expressions she gets and therefore sighs as she slowly stands up.

“Yes, I suppose I would not mind.”

As the two leave the room, the elves wait until they’re just by the door.

“Have fun”, Riv calls to them.

“You kids go easy on each other, alright? No wild thrusting”, Thariss jokes. “Remember you’re both still injured.”

Rax glances over her shoulder and frowns somewhat, before she shuts the door rather firmly after her. During the subsequent trek, she does have to be a tad cautious, disclosing a light limp.

On the way to the other room, Nadel stops to let the draenei catch up.
“Oh, that’s right, you sustained a substantial blow from the prison warden. Has your condition improved?”

Trying to forget the night elf’s insinuation, the paladin offers her a small smile.
“Yes, I am doing better, but still sore. The Light’s power and the local medic have taken care of the worst effects, but I might need a few days until I am fully restored.”

Nadel’s gaze is stuck on the area where Rax was pierced, staring at it with absent eyes, until she’s ready to respond.
“Mm. I…am glad that it was not fatal.”

“Hah, I certainly agree. That warden was…effective, but I have survived worse.”

They enter a bedroom together, resembling the quarters they just departed, albeit slightly smaller, as only Nadel and Stella rest in here. It’s pretty neat and tidy, but presumably due to not being much in use. The drake has probably not done much beyond sleeping.
Once they stop in the middle of the abode, Nadel tries to mentally prepare herself in some way, for whatever it is she had in mind, but she is quite hesitant. It appears Rax will have to go first.

“How is your brother faring?”

Seeming to alleviate some of her concerns, Nadel looks up to face the other woman directly and nods mindfully.
“Alive, but ailing. His rate of recovery remains indeterminable and we’re debating where to go from here. They were not kind to him in that cell and it’s difficult to estimate how much they broke. He took a lot of damage on multiple stages and I…”
She furrows her brow and clenches her hands.
“I still can’t believe they’d do this to one of their own. I can comprehend why they’d be convinced that capture was necessary, due to Malygos’ decision, but torture? That is…deeply disturbing”, she says, more fiercely than she intended.
Folding her arms carefully, as to not strain herself, Rax displays a slight scowl of her own.
“We are in alignment on that front. This is not a justified act to perpetrate, even in war, without good cause. What they could have possibly hoped to achieve by doing so to someone who has no worthwhile information to provide, I do not know. I hold no regrets for assisting you and your people, and I am satisfied to have taught this Kaltor a lesson.”

“I’m relieved to hear it, though he may nurse a grudge, if he yet lives.”

Rax snorts amusedly.
“Oh, I hope this is the case. If he does not forget me, then he will also recall what happened the last time he made the foolish mistake of standing in my way. I would be delighted to repeat the lecture, if it did not stick after our first bout.”

Nadel can’t help but smile somewhat, despite her seemingly nervous appearance at this time.
“That would be…inspiring to watch.
As for Deradgos, he hasn’t said much thus far, but once he awakens, I know he will want to thank you and your friends personally as well. We owe you a lot.”

“Well, you did technically pay us already, so I do not believe any favor is required.”

While this seems to be her angle, Nadel does not quite concede. She opens her mouth to say something, but then wavers again. She starts to fidget with the bottom of her shirt.
“I…did not call you in here to discuss my brother specifically, even if the subject at hand is
related.”

“I figured as much. You could have done that in front of the others.”

“Of course. The true reason why you’re here is because…well, we never fully concluded our conversation down there, did we? I meant to articulate a more coherent explanation for my outburst in Outland, but it became mired in self-pity, I suspect. I…have never had such a close connection, permitted a mortal to peer into the depths of my soul.”

Rax’s face takes on a separate aura, steeped in both solemnity and inquisitiveness.

“I did wonder about that. It remains perplexing to me. All I did was utilize a healing spell.”

“To me, it was much larger. I was dying at the time, which weakened my innate defenses. I felt your magic, your essence, entering me and how our energies collided. It was…a profound experience.

Maybe it is not quite the same in your eyes, but for someone like me, who is so surrounded by magic at all times, it is a different sensation.”

“But the Light is not-“

Nadel raises her hands to interrupt Rax.

“Yes, I know, the Light isn’t the arcane, but there is still a certain relationship between them, and that is what brought our…bond to fruition. I was worried you might use it against me, which I obviously shouldn’t have. I see now that you’re not that kind of person.”

She takes a deep breath and defies her own doubts, so that she can peer into Rax’s eyes again.

“Do you think there’s any chance at all, that you can find it in your heart to forgive me?”

Oh, that’s correct – she never did absolve the drake of guilt, did she?

The draenei searches Nadel’s gaze, seeing the flickering conviction and the hope that she clutches so dearly, not wanting to fully indulge in it, if Rax chooses to turn her down. Despite their clash on Outland, Rax feels there is no need to prolong this conflict. She smiles towards the other woman.

“Absolutely. You are a compassionate and likable person, lady Nadelgosa and even if I do not approve of your actions the last time we met, I know you never meant to cause harm. I forgive you.”

Finally letting that breath go, Nadel’s shoulders slump, as if an immense weight was just relinquished and this notion is soon replaced by joy instead.

“Thank you, Raxeen. I truly mean it. I am honored beyond words for this opportunity, and I promise I shall not squander it.

However, I hope to go even further. If you would allow me to, I wish to grant you a special gift.”

That makes her a little bit more suspicious, which is why she raises her brow.

“…another gift?”

“No no, not like that! This is no blessing, but a proper reward. If you choose to accept it, you have my solemn vow that you will approve of the advantages it provides.”

It’s not like she wants to dismiss the drake out of hand now that things are going so well, but she also can’t deny the tinge of reluctance that swirls in her gut, warning her not to trust like this again.

“Well, I…”

Trying to appear as firm and honest as possible, Nadel puts a hand to her chest and bows her head.

“Please, I swear upon mine, my brother’s and my sister’s lives that this time I am telling you nothing but the truth. I only want to do this right, to remedy the damage I inflicted, for all you’ve
Nadel makes sure to maintain eye contact, to show her sincerity and even if Rax isn’t exactly telepathic, she can practically sense the candor. “Ah, alright, I will trust you”, she says while giving in.

The drake’s lips shift upwards and she gestures with a hand. “Follow me.” She takes Rax with her towards the corner, and a slim box that she picks up from the floor, which was hidden at the side of a desk. From it, she extracts what looks like a necklace, with a silver chain and a small gemstone hanging at its center. It’s very reminiscent of a gleaming sapphire, but with a tiny red pearl inside. “This is an Inter-Physical Essence Transceiver. It has another name in draconic, but it has been crafted and used by our people for a long time.”

As Rax takes it, she gently strokes her thumb over the gemstone, studying it carefully. It is pretty, she’ll say that much. “Transceiver? What does it do?”

“First of all, it has some of my essence inside of it – no, not blood, but hair – which had to be infused into the center orb. Secondly, if you wear it, that would make it possible for you to detect my organic signature. And…well, I would be able to sense yours too, since it mentally binds us together.”

“Binds…us?”

Nadel nods slowly. “Yes, although only temporarily, as it is removed as soon as you take the necklace off. Our spirits will be interacting in a sense and while you wear it, you can simply think of me, which I will be able to take as a warning. If you are ever in need, all you have to do is call using this item, and I will come to your aid, no matter what it might entail.”

Even if she is far too young to have ever been to Argus, Rax has heard of and witnessed similar devices among her people. Not precisely this type, but certainly concepts that resemble them, as she knows the power of magical crystals. Still, this is quite astounding. She views it curiously for a few moments, staying silent until she can locate something of worth to say. “Hmm. That is very…intriguing. And I only need to think of you? Nothing more?”

“Correct. It would be like…sending out a flare, I guess, an indication that my presence is required.”

When Nadel speaks of it, she sounds moderately excited, almost proud. She obviously thought this was a very clever and useful gift, and Rax will agree that it likely will be. But, there are also other aspects at play here. “Well, in that case, we might have a problem. There is potentially a risk that you will be called more often than you wish.”

Nadel transitions from satisfaction to confusion. “…what? Why would that be…” It only takes a moment before she understands, as Rax’s eyes shimmer with intent, and Nadel clears her throat awkwardly. At the same time, Rax starts to smirk. “Oh, I see. That erm…is a valid point. Perhaps we shall have to work out some kind of code, for when you really are in trouble.”
“So, if I just want some company, I cannot wave you over?”

Nadel is starting to look embarrassed again, but now for different reasons. She nudges one of her feet into the floor in a somewhat shy manner as well.

“Well, I…I suppose that is alright. I would not mind too much, as long as it’s not constant and you are not on the other side of the world. That would…take a long time for me to reach, just to abate your loneliness.”

Rax chuckles gently.

“I agree, and I shall use it sparingly. Or endeavor to try, at least.”

She lifts it up with one hand, using the other to gather up her long curly hair.

“Could you help me put it on?”

It appears that Nadel had not expected this to happen so soon, and she widens her eyes.

“W-wait, now?”

“Yes, naturally. I wish to test its potency, if you do not mind.”

Nadel hesitates and hastily tries to generate counterarguments, but it’s difficult to track anything of use.

“But, it’s…” She looks at Rax, who almost seems expectant, possibly even psyched, and it prods a tender facet of Nadel’s heart, who deems it too precious to ignore. She sighs instead.

“Very well, but you’ll have to sit down. You’re too tall.”

Giving it back to the drake, Rax soon slips down into a chair, so that Nadel can get access to her neck. The drake waits a moment or two before she connects the clasp from behind, as she knows there will be a surge of energy and she has to psychologically strap herself in for the impact. This seems to have been a wise choice, because as soon as it does, she detects a tingling sensation, not just in her stomach or chest, but her very core. Not necessarily unpleasant, but stronger than she had anticipated. It is brief, however, and swiftly dissipates. Soon after, it has settled down and they find a more comfortable, almost cozy mood around them.

Rax gradually stands up, keeping a hand at her side where the injury is, and her gaze is rather distant for a few seconds.

“Hmm, this is indeed interesting. I had not predicted for it to be so…intimate. It is like I can feel you touching a part of me.”

The way she phrases it makes Nadel’s chest flutter for an instant.

“Yes, it’s…it’s because we’re so close right now. It is not quite as constant from afar, especially if there’s miles apart.”

Rax remains satisfied with that conclusion and faces her companion again.

“Sensible. I am eager to observe what it will do for us elsewhere. I might try to remove it at night, though, for your sake.”

“Well, I believe I will be able to notice the difference either way.”

Nadel lowers her eyes and digests the entire appearance before her.

“It, erm…looks good on you.”

An unexpected compliment, which is why Rax’s lips curl into a smirk instead.

“I imagine it does.”

Suddenly, Nadel realizes that she may have underestimated the nature and efficacy of this link. She can perceive every inch of that self-assurance, the radiance of Rax’s soul and how thoroughly they
have grown interconnected. It eats at her, fills her with a yearning she didn’t know existed prior to this moment. A reflexive resistance is erected, but she soon acknowledges that she won’t let this get between them. She has sealed her own fate.

Closing her eyes, she exhales in a taxing fashion.
“I’m going to regret this, I know it.”

Before a response can be issued, Nadel advances. Her hands latch onto Rax’s shoulders, her feet utilizes the toes to elevate her position and her eyes draw shut. Without needing to elaborate on her desire, Rax gets the gist of it as a pair of lips lock onto her own, vehemently and cravingly. The action somehow manages to be a perfect coalescence of a demand and a plea, that the draenei will reciprocate and justify pouring her heart out. Luckily, Rax does nothing to combat the display.

Nadel is soon imbued with amplified elation and ease as two hands grab onto her hips and pull her in, consolidating the passionate embrace. Instinctively, Nadel’s fingers ascend, run through the black hair and caress the curly strands, following an inexplicable whim that begs her to touch everything she has disregarded so far, to stop ignoring her innermost sentiments. This is where she knows that she belongs.

Neither of them can discern how long this entanglement lingers, how intricately they remain hitched, and perhaps it doesn’t really matter. Once they finally unfasten themselves however and the residual hunger is unveiled, Nadel regrets her impulsiveness just a tiny bit. She can both feel and directly behold Rax’s reaction. It incites a minimal scowl from Nadel.
“Don’t be so smug.”

Rax snickers involuntarily.
“I did not say anything.”

“I can see it on your face, you fool!”

“You can spy yourself on my lips? That was a vigorous kiss indeed.”

“…shut up!”
Behesting currents

In spite of imagined torrents and emboldened retributions, the tower of Amber Ledge lies still, even days after the intrusion upon forbidden grounds by audacious mortals and scattered numbers of red dragon allies. No call had been issued, no promises of a score was being pivoted as a clash to settle. It’s tricky to determine what awaits them, whether the blues are simply prowling in anticipation or Malygos and his ilk have other affairs to decipher, but nevertheless, the Kirin Tor is appreciative of the intermission. This assessment is echoed by a particular outsider too, even if her mind is tied up with a variety of other contentions.

Shuffling herself through the tight and regimented corridors, Kassari makes for a specific door, situated just outside her own rented room. Her posture is marginally hunched, compared to most days and as soon as she sets a few first steps inside, she exhales and slants into the nearest wall, giving off cues of a drained state, though the cause is unknown. Luckily, she does not have to linger on her tribulations in solitude. A certain someone has been expecting her arrival and as she seizes a seat, Khroga joins her. The orc carries two cups of steaming hot goldthorn tea, which she slides onto the table with delicate stability. Shortly thereafter, she grabs her own chair and from this position, leans towards Kass, nuzzling into her black smooth hair, an act the elf greatly appreciates. It’s the sort of affection she has been starved for in the last several hours of tumultuous discussions and strategizing.

“You okay, zak’tro?”

The orcish turn of phrase usually intended to be spoken only between lovers or other affectionate individuals conjures a light, but highly pleased smile onto the mage’s lips. “Better now, that’s for sure. Dealing with the Kirin Tor can be…overbearing at times, at least as far as the Archmage is concerned. There’s a persistent flavor of mistrust in the air. Could nearly taste it.”

Not being remotely impressed by the named individual, Khroga huffs faintly. “What does he know anyway?” She brushes a few tender fingers over the tip of Kass’ right ear, which twitches delightfully. “Want me to be there next time? Bring a bit of orcish flair to it all and make sure you’re treated right?”

Had her intent been to make her girlfriend chuckle, she does prevail. “You’re charming to offer, but it won’t serve to improve my relationship with them, sadly.”

“Meh. Their problem.”

“Don’t worry, dear, I can handle it.” Giving them both a measure of leeway, Kass plants her lips on Khroga’s cheek, ahead of returning to her chair. Obtaining a sip of the tea – allowing the sweet, hot and soothing liquid to spiral through her mouth and down her throat – her eyes soon drift to lock with brown of her partner. “Did you inform the others?”

Khroga partakes of her own creation as well, naturally, though in larger samples. “Hmm?”

“My sister and her friends. I told you to have a word.”

“Oh, right, yeah. Went to ‘em just after you left for that meeting. They had to get something fixed
before—"
Her train of thought and description is cut short by a knock on the door.
“Well well, speak of the demons.”

Getting on her feet once more, Khroga strides to the door and past it, she discovers none other than Raxeen waiting, clothed in a casual attire that she’s been wearing since their prison break. The draenei bows her head in a gracious greeting.
“Good afternoon. We came, as requested. I hope it is not an inappropriate time.”

Khroga stands aside.
“Not at all. We’re just winding down, that’s all. Come inside.”

Without rising, Kass curls her lips and displays a brief smile.
“Hey there, Raxeen. Feeling better?”

The mage deftly notes the lack of a limp in Rax’s step, which she bases her evaluation on.
“Yes, I have been healing quite nicely, or so the menders have reported. My condition does feel more manageable, at the very least.”

“Glad to hear it. Your actions back in the prison were tremendously heroic and it would have been a mighty shame for you to be punished for it by cruel fate.”

“Heh, indeed. I suppose tragedy has badgered me enough already as it is, thank the Light.”

Not noting a particular individual, Kass furrows her long brows bemusedly, but only until she gets eyes on her sister out in the corridor, having walked several meters behind her companion. Rivaryn has, unquestionably, her beloved girlfriend in tow. This, in and of itself, does not give reason to fret, and yet Kass frowns regardless. The source is conspicuous – she can see just where Thariss’ enthused eyes are aimed.

It’s silly and perhaps a tad unwarranted, really, how extensively Kass’ annoyance for Thariss can at times mount up. After getting her sister back, the Arcanist suddenly feels...protective inclinations that go off like a buzzing alarm whenever the night elf gets too frisky in her vicinity. Now seems to be one of those days. The hunter, unaware as she is, treads through the halls in a very informal outfit, which clearly sits comfortably on her body, though the pants are quite snug and therefore conveniently outline the lower sections. This is not altogether accidental.

Being still meters away from the doorstep, Thariss maneuvers her hand fairly abruptly, aims and spans her beloved’s butt cheeks, who gasps in shock and swiftly swivels around. There’s no rage or indignation involved, but Riv does chuckle and playfully slaps Thariss’ tenacious stomach and abs.
“Thariss!”

The warrior smirks wryly right back at her.
“What?”

“You know what!”

“Was just appreciating ya, that’s all.”

The expression isn’t fully imitated, but there is a faint elevation of the sin’dorei’s lips. She wraps her fingers around one of her girlfriend’s brawny arms and inclines into her torso.
“Not in public, you...naughty fool.”
Thariss meets this rather meager defense head on with a flash of her teeth and fangs, bending her body downwards. One of her hands slowly and enticingly runs along the other woman’s side. “Maybe you shouldn’t flaunt that ass then, huh?”, she teases.

“…excuse me?! I was doing none of that! It’s called ‘walking’, you dunce.”

“Uh-huh. And the swaying was just a fluke?”

Unimpressed, Riv rolls her eyes. “More like your imagination. You’re seeing things.”

“Mhm. Sexy things.”

Descending, her fingers soon reach and clench around the previously tapped rear. As the blood elf’s weight is next to irrelevant for Thariss, she can handily lift and haul the hunter up in the air. Despite a certain wish to protest, Riv permits the act, even encircling her legs across her lover’s waist. This is locked in place by her arms being planted behind Thariss’ neck.

As Riv’s back gingerly hits the wall, her eyes shut in sync with the craving lips thrusting into hers. She can’t possibly disregard the shiver of excitement she obtains, practically every single time that these large, headstrong and yearning hands fondle her. The subsequent kiss is intense, as the warrior’s tongue drills into her, abiding no contest. An irrefutable urge fills her, and her mind submerges into the pleasure, shutting out all other background elements, to the level where she could almost-

“Can you please wrest your tongue out of my sister’s mouth and be civil for once, Dusksong?”

The sensual and sultry motions are ceased on the double, followed by a brisk twitch and jump from the hunter. Thariss, however, merely steers her grin from one Silvershroud to the other. “I would, but your sis can’t get enough of me. Should see whenever I start licking-”

Whatever she had hoped to detail, it never leaves her head, as her mouth is closed shut by the hand from an aghast Riv. “No! We are not discussing this in front of her.”

“…and I absolutely don’t wish to know!”, adds a mortified Kass. Thariss chortles as she kindly drops Riv to the ground.

As the couple wanders into the boundaries of these lodgings, Riv kicks their visit off by slipping into a hug with Khroga, which the orc gladly reciprocates. “Still unscathed after wrestling with the Kirin Tor all this time, I hope?”

“Tsk”, Khroga emits without distress. “No question. These humans pale in comparison to what a summit of shamans back in Orgrimmar can be like. This is almost a vacation.”

The hunter giggles, content with Khroga’s undaunted attitude and the retention of her humor. In her peripheral vision, she notes the cups waiting on the table. “I’m glad and relieved you’re here. Means a lot to me that you’re so good to Kass.”

The shaman’s disposition recedes from a flippant edge to a relaxed stance. Her gaze shimmer with a pervasive fondness as she sets it on the good mage. “I’m glad and relieved you’re here. Means a lot to me that you’re so good to Kass.”

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The shaman’s disposition recedes from a flippant edge to a relaxed stance. Her gaze shimmer with a pervasive fondness as she sets it on the good mage. “What can I say? Gotta take care of those you love. Mother hammered the importance of family into my head.”

“Heh. Sounds like a sagely woman to me, one we can surely use among the tattered remnants of our House.”
After granting Khroga a pat on her shoulder, Thariss directs herself at the younger sister. Of course, despite Kass being a mite miffed, this does not prohibit the warrior from striding up and embracing her. The prickly exterior from the sin’dorei lingers only for a limited time, prior to yielding, at least physically.

“Someday, you’re going to end up in real trouble when you run afoul of a more esteemed individual.”

Unsurprisingly, Thariss is rather cavalier about the whole affair.

“Bah. Been there, done that.”

With the greetings dealt with, the whole trio is invited to take a seat each. As they get cozy, Kass slowly imbibes her tea and mentally adjusts her ideas.

“I’m grateful you could spare the time, for I wish to update you regarding our current state of affairs. Well, I assume you have some measure of interest in this progress.”

Thariss, who’s idly brushing her fingers across Riv’s back, merely shrugs.

“Not exactly stoked, but if you wanna share.”

Kass resists the impulse to frown and pushes on.

“On our latest briefing, the Kirin Tor confirmed that they have now established a base of operations – albeit temporarily – within the defensive perimeters of Coldarra. A multitude of issues are yet to be solved, where erecting a stable teleportation system is perhaps the chief concern from my own point of view, but they’re getting there. From the interior, it seems likely that they will have the ability to attune the very core constructions of the blues’ ley line network within a reasonable timeframe and tear it asunder, should nothing go awry.”

She skids one finger over the top of the cup, a pensive look suffusing her gaze.

“Personally, I intend to stick around and make sure they succeed; with Khroga at my side, of course.” She alters trajectory, levelling her eyes on the other women.

“I would love for all of you to join us. The work we’ve already put in has induced some substantial changes so far. Imagine what continued dents will result in.”

Sadly, her own light enthusiasm is not met in kind. Rax is distant, Thariss scratches the back of her head, while Riv’s ear flits back and forth, once or twice.

“Well, we don’t necessarily disagree…” Riv starts. “But fighting the blues isn’t our foremost concern.”

Kass likely didn’t rush into elation to begin with as she may have foreseen an absence of it in her sister. That does not preclude disappointment as an outcome.

“Isn’t it? You told us it’s precisely why you teleported all this way.”

“True, but…we never aspired to actually delve into the complexities of a war.”

“Yeah, at least not this one”, Thariss concurs. “Were on board with getting Nadelgosa’s brother outta prison, but that’s where it ended.”

Kass scratches the right side of her jaw and crumples her brow a smidgen, while her ears inadvertently twitch.

“I see your perspective, though I feel as if you shouldn’t allow it to govern your hearts. Remember that—”

Once more, a noise interjects in their conversation, as a few thumps are distinguished from the door.

“More guests?” Kass rises and strolls in a quicker pace to it. Outside, she discovers another set of elves, though only outwardly so.

“Oh, Lady Nadelgosa, Lady Stellagosa. I hadn’t anticipated your arrival.”
In a courteous showing akin to Rax, Nadel dips her head. “No, I speculated as much, miss Kassari. We don’t wish to be nuisances, though we do request your leave to enter. We’ve come to understand your sister and her friends are within, and hope to speak with all three.”

“Hmm. Very well, you may proceed.”

Upon spotting the nature of their company, Rax appears unusually happy and though the drake makes eyes at her, neither choose to prompt any overly intimate actions. Stella has detected this link during previous days, as well as the necklace which Rax still proudly showcases, but she has no disputes. For now. “My friends, I presume you’re debating important subjects, but a matter of import has emerged. Our brother has seen some recent developments.”

“Oh?”, says Rax. “Nothing worrying, I hope.”

“That…hinges on what you categorize ‘worrying’ as. After a thorough investigation of his state, it now seems unavoidable that we can no longer keep him here, should we want to pursue substantial breakthroughs. We’ll have to transport him.”

An apprehensive mood had seeped into the room prior, but this now corrodes into far worse depths. “It’s that bad?”, Riv asks cautiously.

With her ears bent backwards, Nadel shuts her eyes. “Unfortunately, it is, even if his physical condition mends well. He sustained a tremendous amount of internal spiritual fractures upon some of the complex webs and frameworks which encapsulates our bodies. We fear he…might not make it.”

Her assessment might dip into too drastic and debatable results, visible via her sister’s rising skepticism. Stella steps up to her side and squeezes the older drake’s shoulders. “Let’s not jump to all too severe conclusions. From what we’ve gathered, it probably won’t end with such tragedy, but permanent damage could be likely. To reduce the risks of anything irreversible, we need to act fast and soon.”

Following a brush with panic, the merc trio manages to dig into a bout of resolve. “Where’d you need to go?”, Thariss inquires.

“Wyrmrest Temple, a central assembling summit for all five dragonflights, would be the primary favorable location. The red dragons there possess some of the most skilled healers across all of Azeroth.”

“It wouldn’t be just the six of us plus your mounts, however”, Nadel continues. “A few of the more fit blue drakes that we helped rescue will align with us for the road. But, we would most obliged if you elected to escort us.”

Their words indicate that a priority must be made, at least where the mercenaries are involved. Ever the brash one, Thariss snorts. “What’s that now? A big bunch of mighty drakes couldn’t possibly require the subpar assistance of a few puny mortals, could they? Nah nah, I musta misheard.”

With eyes still closed, Nadel rubs her creased forehead, hoping to suppress any potential anger. She doesn’t want to quarrel with the night elf, not this time around. “Thariss, please…”
“Just saying. Last time, you girls did kinda screw us over.”

“Not an…unfair judgment to make”, Stella concedes, “but your team has more than proven your capacity for strength, honor and guile. Your aid could be vital. And, in general, we feel safer in your proximity.”

Riv fixes the position of her hair tie, as she mulls their circumstances over.

“Well, from my angle, I think it sounds like a terrific idea. It’d give us an opportunity to actually explore other regions of this continent, which was our intention anyhow.”

“I stand with you”, Rax reveals. “And not solely due to the dire situation at hand. We accepted and started this mission together. Pursuing it to the finish would be the righteous thing to do. We liberated Deradgos from his cell – why give up now, when his need is greater?”

With the previous snark having dispersed, Thariss is locked in a transitory and contemplative realm. She shrugs, kowtowing to the sentiments around her.

“Definitely ain’t in a mood to go toe to toe here. Just thought it was kinda funny how the winds have flipped, but I’m not gonna scuffle ‘bout it. You wanna go, we’ll go.”

Both of her comrades are satisfied and Riv rewards her with a smile and a quick kiss on the back of the hand.

“Thanks, dear. Glad you understand.”

“Meh. If you hadn’t been here…”

She scratches her nose and discards the rest of the idea, resuming her focus on the drakes.

“So, another teleport, I guess?”

Nadel shakes her head to dispel the notion.

“Not in this occasion. The preparations and spellcraft it necessitates would be too slow. The ley line grid is still unstable, which would force us to begin from scratch. We shall fly you there instead.”

“It should go without saying, but this includes your animal partners too”, Stella assures them. “One fully grown dragon will accompany us on this journey, who has adequate strength to be up for the task.”

Should’ve seen it coming, but this information excites the night elf yet again, who trains a smirk expressly at the older drake.

“Ooh! Finally time for all of us to get a ride from grumpy blue, huh?”

As sharply as a whetted dagger, Nadel glares.

“…don’t get your hopes up.”

“Uh, technically, you already rode with me once”, Stella reminds them.

“Fair point”, Thariss assents. “A lil’ bumpy, but it was fun.”

Riv thoughtfully grazes her own chin, measures their scenario and tracks the most worthwhile deductions.

“We should keep it scattered. I can ride with Stellagosa, since we get along.”

Thariss instantly raises her hand.

“Dibs on Nadel!”

The room grows a tad silent, as a facsimile of a growl leaves Nadel’s lips, but only to the point of
procuring the attention. “Out of the question”, she insists. “No one but Raxeen may sit on me.”

Not an unreasonable, nor unforeseen verdict. Thariss doesn’t even appear annoyed as she shrugs. “Tsk, knew it. Guess I can’t blame ya, since you sit on her all day long.”

The jab is evidently meant to aggravate her, but ostensibly goes way over her head, due to the befuddled look Nadel proffers. “…what’s that supposed to mean?”

The warrior is now quite exhilarated that she’ll receive a golden chance to tease the drake openly, but she’s impeded by someone squeezing her hand. Thariss glances sideways, encountering the disapproving emeralds of her future wife. “Thariss, no details.”

“What?”, she chuckles. “Won’t need any. Give her a sec, she’ll get it.”

Her prophecy does indeed end up being fulfilled, no more than seconds later, as Nadel groks the allusion, demonstrated by her widened eyes, suddenly glowing blush and concealing of her face with both hands. Stella giggles.

In a show of compassion, Rax rises and walks over, caressing the closest arm with a tender grip. “I would say there is nothing to be embarrassed for, but…” She marginally slants her frame, planting her mouth closer to Nadel’s ear, to prevent anyone else from eavesdropping. “You are adorable this way.”

Too abashed to look the other woman straight in the eye, Nadel merely swats her shoulder, too lightly to make an impact. “You’re not making it any easier.”

Having been diverted from the conversation for a short while, Kass decides to intervene once again, sighing to cement her feelings. “Well, I won’t deny my disappointment, but I will acknowledge the more urgent emergency.” Riv becomes the focal point of her sight. “I’ll do my best to stay in contact regardless. If you get the chance, I suggest you head to Dalaran. This would enable me to dispatch a bird in that heading, with any updates.”

With their discussion coming to an early stop, Riv seizes her one window now to embrace her little sister. “We’ll make for the city at the first free moment we get. Be careful out there, okay?”

The warning prompts Kass to tilt her head, observe her sister doubtfully and then mildly bump her nose. “I need no lessons in caution from you, miss ‘get herself captured by kaldorei after she scurried off to Kalimdor all alone’.”

Riv is momentarily stumped, blinks bewilderingly and rummages through her mind for plausible comebacks. “What? But…No, you can’t just…but I was…dammit.”

At least she receives a supportive pat on the back from the tallest elf in the room, though conjoined with a smug grin. “Damn, that was just right on point, huh? Makes you think.”
“Wipe that smirk off your face or you’ll sleep on the grass for a week.”
Buzzing bugs. The crowing of roosters. Bypassing children excitedly chatting a little too loudly early in the morning. Traders hawking their wares on the streets. A lot of noises that Melia had never expected to long for when they were contemporary, no more than ambience back then. Some days, she reveled in their rhythm; in others they were trifles she kinda wished she’d be rid of, or that they’d leave her alone. Not until the Plaguelands and up here, in the cold, oppressive northern glaciers, did it hit her how indispensable they really were. A sense of normalcy that she might never have again.

With the arrival of morning, Melia is thankfully not condemned to complete silence. As she steps out of her tent, the surroundings are teeming with commotion from the various soldiers. She heads into the center of her team’s camp and gets a piece of snack that has been cooked by the late-night shift crew, but upon turning to sate her hunger, she’s exposed to a stark element. She hadn’t pondered the implications last night, but it’s unmistakable right here and now – they have passed into the fabled icy wastes that she’s heard so much about.

In some tales they are dreaded, in others spoken of with awe, while most at the very least embellish the length. Not that it’s necessary, for she honestly has to hand it to whatever deity fashioned this landscape. The fjord which they burrowed through only days ago retained residues of greenery, of trees, grass and salient dirt. Not here, though. Dragonblight is the dawn of a winter land persisting in potential perpetuity.

Quickly skipping back into her tent, she fetches the fur cloak she nearly forgot and drapes it over her shoulders, prior to giving the camp a looksee. While sipping from a bowl of soup and a bottle of water, she combs the span of this gathering for a specific figure. In amidst a diverse crowd, she discovers the right one.

Ashindra had been allocated to this final period of the night and is thus already wide awake, apparently tied up in a few soldier-based activities, though not sparring.

Instead, she can be spotted speaking with a few of the younger – or at least newer – crusaders and tries to take a mentor role. She corrects the angle of a tauren’s sword, who’s more used to hammers, informs a goblin that explosives are too risky on the front unless lobbed and fastens a dwarf’s pad narrower onto her shoulder.

The last is an undead woman, timid and somewhat indecisive.

“S-Sergeant, I…I need some a-advice”, she stammers.

Ash steers a sincere, though not harsh, gaze at her.

“Go on.”

Her grey and slightly decrepit skin has several stitches over it, including her face, and when she grimaces, there’s a noticeable stretch. She lifts her hand, attaching it to the other arm.

“Lately, I’ve felt i-increasingly awkward around my shoulder. Can’t really feel p-pain like I used to, but…every time I block with the shield, I-I fear it might be…dislodged.”

Ash tilts her head as she scrutinizes the right body part.

“Hmm. That’s tricky. I can’t exactly set myself in the position of having your condition, but I can give you a few pointers which I often benefit from.”

“T-that’d be…helpful.”
“Grab your shield.”
Carefully, Ash rests a hand on the arm after her student has equipped herself and attempts to give tangible recommendations.

“First of all, when there’s an incoming attack, try to slant the shield in order to reflect, rather than take the brunt of the blow head on. You have to follow movements step by step, make some educated guesses, but within acceptable limits. Don’t jeopardize other areas of your body.”
She withdraws and presents the motions in tandem with the description.

“Secondly, I gravitate towards angling my arm near my body in a sideways stance during heavier phases, as to not put all the burden on the limbs. Here, let me show you”, she says, before clutching the forsaken’s forearm once more.

Melia observes the entire encounter, which fills her heart with both energy and a burst of pride. Ash is acclimatizing remarkably quick into the second-in-command rank that she needs, and sports some of that charisma which has been stated but not previously displayed.
As soon as Ash’s green eyes discover the Lieutenant, however, she disentangles herself from the cluster and almost dutifully treads over to the human.

“Good morning, Lieutenant.”

Melia flashes a mildly playful smile.

“And good morning to you too, Sergeant”, she returns the pleasantries. “I hope the last few hours have passed unremarkably?”

Ash nods crisply.

“No adverse developments yet. Spotted some…unconventional creatures in the sky shortly after I took the reins, but that’s about it.”

This report sets Melia visibly at ease.

“Excellent. Sounds like we’ll have a wide open road ahead of us. I do wonder how long that can endure, though. Northrend has been consistently troublesome.”

Turning to the west, in the distance, they can both note the large construction towering up above the white-dusted ground – Wyrmrest Temple. Measuring the remaining course, Melia ventures a guess that they’ll get there within a day.

Leaving the other soldiers to their joint exercises, the two women drift away and seclude themselves. With the privacy, Ash’s features soften as her curiosity ramps up.

“Did you…sleep well?”

Melia tries to suppress the urge to smile even brighter. Inwardly, she can’t ignore how Ash has inquired pretty much every day since…well, the kiss. Makes her wonder if the paladin is hankering for more.

“Not worse than most days up here. Although, gotta say, I long for the day when we get to sleep in real beds again. Feels like a lifetime away.”

The elf chuckles.

“Now you’re being hyperbolic.”

A light smirk springs up on Melia’s lips as she jokingly pokes Ash’s side.

“Yeah, thanks for taking the hint!”

“Tsk. But I concur. I may have served as a paladin for a decent few years now, but some luxuries wouldn’t be half bad. Maybe the Highlord will shed light on a more permanent arrangement, wherever his covert operation is taking him.”
“Heh, we can only hope. Actually, I—”
Before they can examine the topic in any detail, a small team of people approaches from the outside.
“Oh, is that one of our patrols?”

“From the other squads, yes.”

The inbound contingent is led by a male night elf, tall and pretty slim. Judging from the bow on his back, he must be a ranger. In his wake comes four more people of differing skillsets. All of them salute.
“Lieutenant Haven, we have news regarding the Scourge.”

Melia shares a very brief glance with Ash and then nods at the scout.
“You’ve been scouring the area?”

“Yes, Lieutenant. We were dispatched by Sergeant Revenor here under orders to get the lay of the land and investigate the adjacent terrain for additional hazards. Well, we did and stumbled into a few…unforeseen individuals – members of the Ebon Blade. They were en route to the Temple as well.”

To her side, the priestess notes how Ash’s ears perk inquisitively at the name.
“Ebon Blade? Are you familiar with them?”, she asks Melia.

“Yeah, we’ve ‘met’, so to speak”, Melia divulges. “They’re a group of death knights that were freed from the Scourge’s control. Remember the army that struck the Chapel and botched it? Same crew. They now battle their old faction. I hesitate whether to say ‘with us’ or not, though.”

With an opening, the scout proceeds.
“The small detachment we spoke with were astride on…skeletal horses or something similar, led by a human called Wilthorn.”

Melia nearly freezes, her eyes widened.
“Wilthorn…”, she repeats, voice pervaded with shock.

“Correct.”

Getting exceedingly intrigued by the reaction, Ash’s eyes scans Melia’s face.
“Anyone you know?”

The priestess dismisses the question with a handwave.
“Continue, Corporal.”

He chooses not to comment on their interaction and obeys.
“The Ebon Knights are allegedly vying with the Scourge over at Zul’drak, a zone to the northeast, where the Lich King’s forces have besieged a regional troll Empire. They witnessed how a big chunk of hostile undead broke off and headed in the general direction of Wyrmrest. According to their own words, they grabbed their steeds and tried to get here first. The Temple is apparently about to have it even tougher.”

“Alright. Thank you, Corporal. Go get yourself some breakfast”, she commands, albeit in a partially absent manner. “And tell the troops to get prepped. We need to set out as soon as possible.”

The night elf salutes once more and executes her will.
In the meantime, Ash is drawn towards Melia, her mind buzzing with questions.
“That sounded…serious.”

Melia fidgets to begin with, oscillating whether to lay the truth bare. Not like she’s required to. As
the superior officer, she acts on her terms.
“It’s…nothing. Not important.”

But it won’t be so easy to discard. Doubt has already festered, and Ash furrows her eyebrow, as she
navigates the slippery and winding mental path ahead.
“Maybe, maybe not. Either way, it has hit home somehow, and I’d like to know why; providing
that it isn’t too private.”

Unsurprisingly, Melia is…conflicted. To appease her, they relocate to the outskirts of the camp, a
private range. Meanwhile, she looks out over the sea, the glistening blue entity to the south, though
she seems more focused on what lies beyond.
“Wilthorn. That’s a name I haven’t heard in…a few years.”

“You know him?”

“I…can’t say. I knew a Wilthorn, that’s for sure.” She creases her brow and wraps arms around her
own waist.
“There was a young officer in the Stratholme Guard who grew up visiting the Temple of Light
pretty regularly. He and I were of a similar age and became fast friends until…”

She clears her throat in a mildly abashed sense. Ash quickly groks the implication.
“There was something…affectionate.”

“Uh, yeah. We were sweet on each other for a while”, the human attests. “Funny part is, mom
never liked him. Thought he was too mischievous and flippant, didn’t pay enough attention to the
services. Can’t say I ever fully agreed. He was like any other kid when homework is concerned –
they’d rather be out playing.”
Melia smiles faintly and tucks some hair behind her ear.
“All the same, the two of us did fool around for a couple of months. Got into all kinds of trouble.”

Even though Melia is unveiling her own secrets, Ash grows a tad awkward.
“Oh uh…well, think I can fill in the blanks for where this is going.”

The priestess lets out a minor snicker.
“Point taken. But you’re right. He was…my first. Not the last, but it’s why he made an impact. Our
relationship wasn’t lengthy.
The last vestiges of a good memory I have of him is during a supply escort to the temple, days
prior to the…incident. Or was it weeks?” She exhales through her nose. “I can’t keep track of the
timing anymore. All sort of blurs together.”

“It’s a reasonable reaction. You two weren’t bonded at this stage, I take it?”

“No, this was years after our breakup, but we were still good friends. He informed my mother and
me of the plague, but was lacking in details.”

They’re walking over a thin and erratic line here, one Ash doesn’t wish to burst, but she presses on
due to swelling captivation. She has to hear more.
“Did he fall before or after the erm, tragedy?”

It doesn’t escape the paladin how Melia slowly inhales.
“In the middle. I’m sure of it, since he was on guard duty that day. No clue as to the correlation
between my Wilthorn and this fella, however. He wasn’t an extraordinary man – just another
soldier.”
Shutting her eyes, she lays a hand onto her forehead.
“It’s sort of weird. I maintain memories and occasional images from the time preceding it, but
nothing crucial. Just little snippets, excerpts of peace. It was fairly calm and quiet before it all
broke apart. This wasn’t for a lack of conflicts, but despite of them. I recall how news of the orcs’
breakout had reached the streets. Some feared a new war, others didn’t wanna relieve themselves
of a prized serenity.”

Ash’s left ear twitches in thought as she rests a hand on the hilt of her blade, a reflexive motion.
“Oh yeah, the internment camps. Had almost slipped my mind. We merely picked up hearsay of
that operation.”

“Quel’Thallas was quite thoroughly sealed, so I get why.
For me, the most memorable was probably the fact that it was the last instance where mom and I
sat down to discuss the oncoming autumn schedule. Had certain festivals and holidays that the
church organized. Most years, I’d only been part of the planning procedure, but that late summer,
mom wanted me to be in charge of one tied to Hallow’s End.”

“Sounds like a fairly substantial responsibility.”

“Oh yeah, it was. Not like I wasn’t nervous, but also teeming with anticipation.” Her head shakes
tentatively. “That day never came.”

Ash restricts a desire to reach out, predominantly as she can’t predict what it will make her feel.
“Final regrets – I’m familiar with the concept.”

A wistful smile is displayed for but a moment.
“T艺.
The spread of the plague was discouraging, sure, but none of us had envisioned that it’d be taken
all the way to Stratholme, nor that there’d be an outbreak. Felt like…a distant threat, nothing we’d
ever witness up close.”
Melia abruptly veers away, stopping dead where she is, and Ash follows suit. The elf perceives
how her superior’s shoulders marginally slump and she brushes her fingers over the mace at her
belt. It takes a few seconds for her to recover and by that point, her volume has decreased.
“I beg your pardon. Didn’t mean to…vanish.”

Sensing the parallels to her own past from the bubbling across Melia, Ash figures it’s best to drop
the reluctance. She shrinks the space between them, perching herself by the human’s side and
levels a hand onto the closest shoulder.
“It’s alright. Like I implied, I know what you’re going through. It’s okay to let it hurt, even now.”

Melia’s sigh is almost steeped in frustration.
“I know, but it’s so…grating, to revisit that day. I can still conjure all those mental images, of
hearing the Prince waltzing in, issuing his horrific orders, how the entire city was burning,
everything we’ve ever known…
Nothing we could offer that sonuvabitch placated him. I can’t believe I ever-“ Her next intake of
breath is shaky, bristling. She has shifted from sorrow to fury.
“I can remember how mom came running back as I was holding a lesson for some of the kids. She
was all but cut in half, before some of the defiant city guards protected her, granting her enough
time to escape. The two of us rounded up as many as we could and led ‘em to the tail end of the
temple, but not to hole up – there was an escape tunnel. Guided everyone out personally.”

The paladin squeezes her shoulder.
“A valiant decision, to be sure.”

Pinching her own arm somewhat, Melia tries to cool her temper before she dares look at her companion again.
“I’m sorry, Ash. Didn’t mean to give you the whole monologue out of nowhere.”

A knowing smile materializes in return.
“I don’t mind at all. It’s good to get it out, for the heart and the soul.”

Melia exhales heavily.
“Guess it does have a therapeutic value, yeah.” She shakes her head, letting go of her own arm.
“But now isn’t the time to get bogged down in heartbreaks. We have to deal with these undead that the Ebon Blade warned us about.” She slowly angles back to the dragon temple and gains a harder, determined gaze.
“The first time, I ran when Menethil’s troops came for us – I won’t be doing that ever again.”
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The skies are grey and unruly, burdensome to predict, as this day reaches its middle heights. No sun is present to offer what little hope might have existed to the denizens below. Clamor and clatter of metal, squeaking and splintering of bones, squelching of rotten and decaying flesh all whirl with the cadence of an unrelenting tide against the gargantuan tower, unsettling every nerve and straining every muscle.

The Scourge has come to Wyrmrest and they’ve brought along every tactic, minion and device meant for war that they can muster. The full army is not participating, but their numbers are enough to cause serious trouble and distress. Up until this moment, they have struck against at least two separate flanks, which was arduous enough for the Temple’s defenders, but that’s not the sole snag in the mix. Not only are the forces of the dragon stronghold fairly limited already – as all dragonflights haven’t had the opportunity or resources to spare – but additionally, they are beset by blue dragons that have withdrawn from the alliance and then launched a treacherous assault. Not to mention the fact that the black dragons have avoided this struggle altogether, depriving them of essential soldiers.

The fear in their hearts picks up by several degrees as the guardians are suddenly set upon by a fresh influx of Scourge reinforcements, without much forewarning. The dragonkin are vigorous and mighty fighters, but through sheer numbers, the Scourge can overcome such obstacles and flip the odds in their favor. As time elapses swiftly, this is the route which the battle is chasing and there are few avenues of a comeback to scour for. The outlook of the battle for the longest time is grim and internally, plenty of the draconic warriors prepare either for the inevitable or to execute contingency plans which their leaders have prepped, to preserve what can be saved. Either way, lives will be lost.

Fortunately, fate does not seek to embody such cruelty this day. From left field – literally – comes a second force to join the fray. This one does not merely consist of undead, but many more living, of all origins and sizes. They charge in on foot, with a wide assortment of capabilities at hand – from paladins, warlocks and mages, to priests, warriors and archers, as well as members from every race represented in the Horde and Alliance. At the forefront sprints none other than Ashindra, with her shield strapped to an arm and the other deftly grabbing her sword, Vem’tavir, hoisting it into the air, calling everyone to action.

“For Azeroth! For the Light!” she shouts and the rest echo her fervor.

The crusaders nearly crash into the hostile host like the head of a hammer onto brittle wood, though they radiate a fierce sheen of blazing light, which sears and melts the flesh of their foes. Some scatter, fleeing in instinctual fear, while others give way to reclaim their bearings. Ash helms the frontal subgroup, administering specific adjustments or shifts in movement. In the meantime, Melia commands the overarching battle from a more pervasive view in the back row, while providing support. Her allies maintain a rejuvenated and fortified status, as enemies see holy fire rain down upon the unjust.

The surprise attack is a triumph and they make a lot of headway for a time, but such success has a cap. They start to take the depraved side of the undead a bit too lightly, underestimating their formidability and cunning. This division of the northern armada contains more than mindless
pawns alone.
Unbeknownst to them at the outset, one small section of the Scourge battalion uncouples itself from the cannon fodder and slithers in behind the crusaders, disappearing into the shadows.

They don’t pick up on this fact until soldiers along the rims and furthest lines begin to fall, one by one, to nigh unseen sources, fading into perceivable nonexistence shortly thereafter.
Ash, with her decent situational awareness, is one of the first to take note. She steers her attention towards her commander, after having devastated a trio of ghouls.
“Lieutenant! I believe we have unwelcome company.”

The human looks at her second-in-command and construes the cues Ash lends her, by performing a couple of hand signals they’ve practiced.
“Got it!” A split second later, Melia is priming a spell.

Meanwhile, Ash swaps direction, finding one of the orcs among them.
“Braktog, redeploy to the right flank, on the double! Forsaken troops, regroup on Private Braktog! Move!”

With their undead allies out of harm’s way, before long, a stream of Light energy gushes out of the priestess, simulating a pulse of unyielding brilliance. It disperses the shrouds around the immediate vicinity. The damage is minimal, but the effect on those who prowl is dramatic. A few agents of mayhem in their midst are suddenly unveiled, as well as brought into temporary disorientation, courtesy of the almost poison-like effect which the Light has on their anatomy.

Some of these entities see no other recourse than to flee, procure some distance between themselves and this excruciating beacon, but the idea isn’t universal. Some linger where they were compromised, and Ash snatches the opportunity. She storms into relative proximity, shield first. Attempting to bash one, she sprints without uttering a noise, even holding her breath. Somehow, this is not adequate enough to mask her approach. Out of thin air, the humanoid creature she’s assaulting summons a black blade with a red ominous aura, which it angles and blocks Ash’s shield with, and actually fares pretty well. It manages to stand firm, without losing the foothold.

With a stern scowl over her features, Ash glowers past the shield, square at her foe. She catches the dull grey or borderline light green skin – bruised and faded – claws on the fingers, wearing stark blood-red clothes and armor with golden highlights. She doesn’t know what abhorrent lowlifes would emulate her people’s iconography and motif, but she’s not about to let it-

And her thoughts expire, like hit by a brick to the head, when she stumbles over the face. The long pointed ears with just the right curve, the elongated eyebrows, the flowing – albeit tarnished and corroded – red hair, the nature of the blue eyes. She’s not simply staring at any kind of undead, but an elf, debatably a sin’ or quel’dorei. And a reasonably well-preserved case of one too, it’s fair to say. Not a ghoul or a flesh pile. And yet…

“What…kind of abomination are you?”

His mouth goes ajar, flashing the sharp fangs as canines. Reminds her of the kaldorei, but somehow larger.
“The kind which will spell your doom, mortal”, he states, voice fluctuating somewhat.

A mere instant later, he’s gone, evaporating as smoke. He does not vanish, though, as Ash can still sense his undead presence via the Light. She whirls around in all haste and absorb the imminent attack with her spiked shield, shortly before retaliating with her blade. This atypical elf has honed alacrity however and effortlessly sidesteps
her blow. This exchange continues for multiple rounds.

What she has on her hand appears to be a rogue or a mage, potentially a cross between the two and thus, she acknowledges the deficiency of a purely melee-centric combat style. Time to broaden her options.

“Light, bless me with your dedication and clarity. Let me cleanse this realm in your name”, she beseeches quietly, calling for aid.

Unlike her battles at large, she does not instill her weapons with might, but the armor with sanctifying energies. Raising her foot, she stomps it into the ground, creating a field of consecrating illumination. No matter where the undead elf stands, it cannot dodge this spell, as the Light burns it from below. It emits what can roughly be deemed as a hiss, making it careen out in two seconds flat, in an endeavor to regain some leeway.

Ash isn’t about to permit even a wink of recovery and coats her shield in a layer of light. Unhooking it from her arm, she grabs it by the edge and hurls it like a frisbee made of reinforced steel. It bashes its target spot on, square in the abdomen of the man, contorting his body and hurbling him achingly fast onto the frozen grime below, while the shield ricochets to the ground a few meters away.

In lieu of taking the defensive action to retrieve her shield, Ash goes on the gutsier – and arguably more reckless – offensive, pursuing her explosive and righteous impulse to hunt him down. Alas, it misses the mark and her foe backflips out of reach.

He does not disengage outright, however, but instead penetrates her defenses with a spell, striking her exposed leg. As she staggers, he locks her down with a hex, hampering her bodily control, making her lurch and grow sluggish. Her motoric skills slacken, and strength weakens.

As she falters, dropping to a knee, he confidently struts into her radius. Opening his mouth, he utters words in thalassian.

“Mm, such rich and delectable flavor. Forgive me for the boldness, but your handiwork has worn me out. My stamina must be replenished, and I believe this blood shall do. Fear not, your essence will be put to good use. Perhaps past the feeble haze of life, you shall serve as we do.”

At first, it’s a mystery to Ash what’s really transpiring here. She has fought all manner of Scourge minions – necromancers, ghouls, skeletons, shades and so on – but this is new. One thing is incontrovertible – her power and fortitude, possibly her very life force, is being directly drained out of her form. In her current position, it’s unthinkable, nigh insurmountable.

But no matter its actual true source or nature, this substance is coalesced with the putrid magic of the Scourge, necromantic fuel and undead taint. This is something she can confront.

Ash commences another internal invocation, in nothing but a mutter, amassing all she can muster. “Please, merciful Light, hear my plea. Encircle me in your empowering embrace and break these bonds.”

Once again, the prayer is received and yielded. On cue, a shield of dazzling radiance insulates and sustains the blood elf, splintering his connection to her.

The bloodsucker is stunned at first, reversing by a step or two, but his vitality has now returned to the stage where he can sufficiently fight her without hindrance.

“Hmph. A clever solution, light-drinker, but no more than a half measure. Once that bubble pops, the succulent blood of yours is mine. And oh, it will be a sublime experience to consume it, ounce by ounce.”

As she rises, Ash is now breathing heavier than previously. She knows there is a spell or two in her repertoire that can function as makeshift restoration, but this could be too costly to use when hell
might descend on her in a moment’s notice.
“You are vile”, she nearly spits. “Whatever you were in days gone by, I can see and hear you’re nothing but a monster.”

“Hah.” His laughter is meager and dry. “As blind as all of your kind. I was once like you, filled with audacity and pride, fierce to attain retribution for our lost brethren. But that is now a thing of forlorn memory. The hour of Quel’Thalas has passed, child of blood. The Scourge invasion was not a tragedy, but an omen.”

“Omen? So you’re not simply a disgusting creature, but delusional to boot? Fitting for a mass murderer’s pawn, I suppose.”

He alters direction, slowly circling her static position, while swinging his blade around nonchalantly.
“You growl, but we are not so dissimilar. In time, we will be one – the san’layn is the fate of all elves.”

Ash unintentionally bristles at this implication, virtually taking it as an accusation, perhaps a little too feverishly.
“Not in a million years, you sunless cur! I’m nothing like you, nor will our people ever be so repugnant!”

Melia, who’s deep in her own duel with some Scourge henchmen, suddenly catches wind of Ash’s outburst and pivots towards it. She’s shocked to see her comrade in the current condition.
“Ash!”

In the sequential moment of the protective spell’s burst, the san’layn lunges at Ash and with the shield being out of bounds, Ash has no other comeback than to parry with her sword. She has trained a tremendous amount for battles of all styles and as such, she should possess enough versatility to safeguard herself, but not for any prolonged session; at least not with an opponent this tricky.

She does gain a lucky break, as Melia comes to extricate her. A fresh bubble – albeit more brittle – envelops her in its caring fortification, preventing the san’layn from whaling at her outright.
“Step away, you bastard!”, cries Melia. “Not gonna let you have her!”

Not having noticed the swooping of the priestess, he turns to scoff underwhelmingly and switches to the Common tongue.
“A human mongrel? How tiresome. Your blood is not close to as appetizing. Won’t quench my thirst in the slightest.”

“Oh yeah? Well, if you want someone to sate your hunger for a quick death, I’m your woman!”

“Paltry sense of humor at that. How typical.”

Ash, with briskly dwindled stamina, glances at her commanding officer.
“Melia…don’t get involved. Can’t let him hurt you too. I can do this.”

“What? You can–“ Melia groans frustratedly. “Don’t be a hero now when you’re almost dead, you dolt! You can’t do this alone.”

“You don’t–“

The battle between the elves never resumes, for in the crusaders’ dire hour, they hear commotion to the west, out across the icy fields. The peculiarities that figure in are twofold – it is not shouting
but roars and they originate from the sky, as opposed to groundside. The gazes of all three combatants are drawn to the heavens, to witness a glorious and unprecedented view.

“Blue dragons?”, Ash asks out loud, anxiety grafted onto her voice. “When did they get here?!”

An entire dozen of the scaled interlopers fly in a vector which will cap off right above the battle—though, evidently, most are drakes, with ostensibly only one full dragon. This of course incites alarm in the majority of the crusaders and Wyrmrest protectors who witness the sight, setting themselves up for a showdown they never wanted. But they’re mistaken.

The blue contingent dive closer to the surface and when they’ve all but arrived, riders can be spied on the backs of a few. Still in the air, one of them leaps right off with shield and sword in hand. She stomps and causes a minor quake, which sends half a dozen Scourge lackeys flying.

From the ground, she straightens her back, as the cold wind kisses her pale blue skin and rustles her short white hair. She flashes a wide excited grin.

“What’s up, rot bags?! Didn’t think you’d get a Dusksong in town, did ya? Well, she’s here and your shit is about to get wrecked!”

Ash is startled.

“Thariss? But then…”

This assumption produces distress in Ash’s chest, which distracts her. The san’layn jumps at this window, hogging it as rapidly as he can, to strike before either can reign it in.

What he doesn’t anticipate is a guardian angel from above. A singularly accurate rifle shot is fired from the back of a drake, soars through the air and hits him just slightly off the heart region, making him tumble backwards.

The undead elf has to retreat into a safer environment once more, among its allies, granting Ash a breather which she didn’t know she required. Her eyes are lifted to the skies, converging with the familiar emerald green pair of another, who holds a smoking gun in her hands.

“…Riv.”

Melia is inbound in a jiffy, hooking an affectionate arm around the paladin.

“Ash, look at you! Can barely stand. Hold on, I got you.” She invokes the Light’s restoring blessings, to get Ash back in the fight.

“There. Should keep you steady for a while longer.”

Ash feels the pressure sloughing off her and inhales comfortably as her legs stop shaking.

“Thanks. I owe you…again.”

“C’mon, we’re even by now. Besides, reckon it’s not me you oughta thank.”

The human’s eyes follow the mesmerized ones of her partner, towards the riflewoman. She scans the other elf, as Riv gets dropped off closer to the ground by one of the drakes, meeting up with a red-scaled raptor who she caresses. Together, they fan out and hit the Scourge hard.

From another location, Ash beholds how Raxeen lands with a separate drake and bolsters the Light-imbued forces with some of her own.

“Pheta, sar vacha! Faramos ril’parn man’elar raki!”, she lets out, as her body shapes into a beacon of Light. Simultaneously, Nadelgosa shifts into her elven nature, to have a more precise control of the arcane and summons water elementals to stem the tide.

There’s a desperation in Ash’s wish to write off the nervousness she detects upon Riv’s pending approach, but it’s a real maze to unravel. Scourge troops stand in their route and after collecting her weapons, she slashes any targets she can reach, while Riv blasts some from her end, until they’re
side by side, instinctively going back to back.
“Riv, when...when did you get all the way up here?”

“Long story.” Over her shoulder, Ash both feels and hears her old friend firing another shot. “How about we discuss it over drinks after we’ve dismantled these vermin?”

Fixing the straps on her shield to fasten it properly, Ash’s expression is hesitant. “If you’re sure that you want to...trust me.”

It’s Riv’s turn to glance above her own shoulder, emeralds permeated with cursory curiosity over such confliction. Instead of quizzing, she attempts to motivate. “Well, if you’re too rusty to keep up, I can find a different partner.”

Ash rotates a quarter and lets the two women look straight at one another, surveying their circumstances. So many years has passed since a chance like this existed, when all hope did not seem to have been suffocated. Maybe Ashindra Revenor has not been abandoned. She puffs from her nose and shakes her head. “Don’t you worry, I can hold my own more than most. Think you can match me, Farstrider?”

Riv’s subsequent smile sends a vibrant shiver through her body. “You know it.”
Once more, they thrust themselves into combat.

Chapter End Notes

*Rough translations that I had in mind for Raxeen's lines:*
“*Pheta, sar vacha*” = Light, bestow me with courage
"*Faramos ril'parn man'elar raki*” = These unnatural spirits will not be granted another tile
Once friends, once hearts

Serenity once more, upon the snow-dusted steps along the Path of the Titans. The battle of Wyrmrest Temple has ended – or at least been brought to a temporary pause – and as it reached its twilight, the living stood as undaunted victors. This was by no means as a result of the Argent Crusade’s involvement alone, but the blue dragon squad coming from the west was a major point in their favor, at the end of the day.

Nevertheless, the outcome was not a complete net positive – casualties and fatalities were suffered by the winning side, detriments they couldn’t skirt around. After saying their farewells and quick prayers for these fallen hapless souls, there was no other recourse than to burn them, to prevent future reanimations. As for the casualties, they were all escorted into the temple, where defenses were shored up and stretchers were brought out of storage for them to rest on.

Melia has taken it upon herself to organize the healers and menders, in order to patch up dragonkin and crusaders alike, while simultaneously, another Crusade-Lieutenant handle defense revisions, should the undead emerge unrehearsed.

On Haven’s orders, Ashindra began to file a report detailing her fight against the mysterious san’layn figure. As the human has a few words with a draenei priest, Ash makes her return.

“Lieutenant, my report is completed. I’ve already compiled a copy too, so we may dispatch it to the other higherups in separate regions.”

Following a dismissal of the second priest, Melia skims the text, nodding slowly meanwhile.

“Alright. I’ll get into the specifics later, but I trust you know what you’re doing. It’ll be pivotal for Highlord Fordring and all of the top officer staff to get a read on these, before we get into any more scraps.”

“I can do nothing but agree with your assessment.” She folds her arms, creases her brow tentatively and draws her gaze to the ground. “Fighting them back there was…distressing. Never before have I wrestled with a creature of this breed. They were not only smarter, but stronger than the bulk of Scourge monstrosities. If we can’t find a way to neutralize such a threat, it could spell future disasters.”

“No doubt. Definitely on the same page in that regard.”

Just one single night has went by since the showdown, which is why the memories are still fresh for Ash, as is the sore condition. The repulsive notion of what the Scourge are doing to her people’s dead is a flavor that won’t leave her mouth, like an immutable sting. She has to bite her tongue to facilitate her own desire for a topic swap.

“Any news from the other fronts?”

Sliding the document in beneath her robes, Melia’s eyes drift to a differing avenue in this slice of the Temple.

“Yup. Heard from Horde and Alliance representatives that are stationed in the vicinity, if you wanna be filled in.”

“Please.”

“Well, apparently, both factions are gathering tremendous numbers for a critical strike, according to the troops I chatted with.”
Nowhere in sight at the moment, but Ash is aware of the two referenced individuals. Didn’t catch their names, but she saw a kaldorei woman and a male orc – both which had discharged glares against one another.
“Anything concrete?”

A sigh and a shrug from the priestess.
“Had a few stiff words, but you know what they’re like. Not very forthcoming as per usual. Wanna keep the granularities under wraps.”

“Even from their allies?”

“Does it surprise you?”

Ash lifts her hand, ready to detract, but as no worthwhile words swirl around, she submits.
“Maybe not. This does raise the question of what the Crusade has in mind, though. Should we not engage with them?”

“Sorry, Ash, but there honestly isn’t anything in particular we can undertake in this case. If the two factions don’t wanna have a rapport, there is nothing to cotton onto. We’ll have to hold this position and wait for orders. A Crusade-Commander of some stripe is supposed to arrive from the north at one point or another. Until then, our squads stay put.”

“Hmm. Fair enough. Their loss, I guess.”

With this subject ostensibly wrapped up, though not wholly resolved, Ash turns her attention elsewhere.
Wyrnrest Temple is a strange form of construction, from her point of view, by nature of its design. By the dragons’ account, there are upper levels, but no stairs which aligns to them. In the crusaders’ current location, there is one big central chamber, with lots of people, but no avenue of elevation. Then again, this is presumably an element they can pin on the fact that the constructors possess flying capabilities and therefore does not stipulate linked roads between the tiers. Prioritizing the needs of mortals was probably never a factor.

In this central complex, across the room, they can observe how Rivaryn, Thariss and their mounts are all standing side by side on the floor, lingering near a wall, mostly relaxing. Earlier on this same day, Ash detected how the blue dragons they flew upon – alongside Raxeen – departed the scene after having assisted with the task of carrying the wounded fighters by serving as makeshift transport vessels. They scaled the height of the tower, with the motive of contacting the reds. Riv had clued them in, delineating the matter of an exceedingly scratched up dragon that they were sustaining, which his jailors had done quite a number on. They hoped to solicit the reds to nurse him back to health.

But in the here and now, Ash’s concentration is latched onto the hunter rather willfully, though she would never confess that she’s captivated to see Riv again. It’s practically surreal how much of a transformation the paladin’s life has borne since their previous…bout. Unbeknownst to her, Melia’s vision is funneled into her during this sequence. Eventually, the priestess’ curiosity is getting the better of her too, in light of Ash staring at this woman so keenly. Rivaryn or whatever her name was, certainly is…enticing. Perhaps to a drastic degree.

To snag some momentum, Melia audibly clears her throat.
“Who is she?”

Ash flinches slightly, before finally returning the spotlight to her superior. She anxiously tucks some of her hair away, recognizing that she was blatantly gawking.
“…p-pardon?”

“The lady you tore apart a bunch of Scourge with yesterday. Seems like you’re well-acquainted.”

“Uh…yeah. Rivaryn Silvershroud.”

She remembers both names? In Melia’s book, that can only insinuate how this woman has made a significant dent in Ash’s memory banks.

“Someone close, I take it?”

“In a sense. We were…friends.”

Melia’s brow arches in a highly disbelieving manner at the insecure tone in the application of that term.

“Friends, huh? A lot of fuss for one lil’ buddy, if you ask me.”

The concern multiples as Ash scratches her neck and averts her eyes.

“M…maybe more than that. Some years have elapsed since we were able to, erm…”

Her words go adrift, lost in suspense, a result which does not placate Melia.

“The two of you were irresistibly drawn together earlier, like a kobold to candles. Some kinda magnetic force on the battlefield, unlike anything I’ve ever witnessed.”

“Mm, true enough. Riv and I are longtime friends, all the way back to our intertwined formative years. Even so, our last encounter was…combative. When I saw her touch down, I couldn’t tell whether she was all set to hug or slap me.”

Melia blinks, nonplussed by the allusion.

“Whoa. Doesn’t exactly sound like an action a friend would take.”

Great, now she framed Riv in a temperamental style – not at all what Ash had in mind.

“You don’t…it’s a convoluted scenario, with ample risk for failure.”

“Huh. If you wanna spill the story, just know that I’m here.”

“At a later date, perhaps.”

Cutting this one loose, Melia studies the hunter’s company.

“Who’s the night elf?”

She overhears Ash exhaling from her nose.

“Additional complications. Thariss Dusksong – Rivaryn’s girlfriend for the last year or two, allegedly.”

“…oh. Well, that ain’t ideal.”

“Tell me about it.”

Watching Ash, it’s difficult to determine whether she’s thrilled or terrified at the prospect of conversing with the other sin’dorei. Someone else might have to give her a mental nudge.

“You were still on track to have drinks with her, though, correct?”

The paladin hesitates, her long ears angling backwards.

“That…was the arrangement, but I no longer know what to do. I mean, what would I even tell her after all this time? I feel like a dumb teenager for wavering like this, but I have to set things right.
between us. Our dynamic got so bent, on the heels of past tragedies, but I want to rekindle what sliver of association we can come by. I…value her too much to dismiss our whole lives together.”

To claim that Melia herself isn’t dubious as to what getting embroiled in this ordeal will entail, would be disingenuous, but she acknowledges that her desires are pretty inconsequential in this instance.
“What if I come with you, as support?”

She definitely caught Ash off-guard here, judging by the astounded expression.
“Wait…you would?”

“Why not? We’ve stuck as team throughout this venture so far. Besides, Silvershroud is gonna have her lady as a tagalong, right? Simply fair that you get to bring a d—um, ally.”

“A valid point, but…” Ash looks to be pondering her selection, whether this is a favorable outcome or if she’s merely trudging deeper into the bog of embarrassment. The answer soon falls into place for her and she grows comfortable with image her mind is formulating for her.
“Okay, I guess it wouldn’t hurt. As long as we’re both delicate in our methods. So uh, whenever you’re ready.”

Melia smiles, finding no cause to prolong the affair. She drapes her hand onto Ash’s arm and steps close, their sides touching.
“Lead the way.”

As they diminish the space between themselves and the elven duo, Riv and Thariss have already tracked the approach, though neither employ any preemptive decisions. The latter is etching some type of shape from a piece of wood with a knife, while the hunter is petting her raptor. Ash remembers seeing him back at the Black Temple, but she never conducted any introductions. There’s a second or two of tangible discomfort, until Ash clears her throat.
“Hello.”

“Hey”, Riv responds softly.

“Sup?”, is provided from Thariss.

Ash has to go further and swallows. It’s bizarre how swiftly her throat dried up.
“You ah, mentioned drinks yesterday. Was that a turn of phrase or a genuine invitation?”

White eyes meet with emerald for an instant, gauging their individual states.
“It was serious”, Riv testifies. “Are you up for it?”

“If it’s not too much of an issue…”

Thariss stashes the gear she was playing around with and rises to her feet.
“Gimme a minute and I’ll fetch us a drink.” She nods at the human. “You in on this too?”

“That’s the plan”, Melia replies. “Unless you’re opposed to a puny human putting her nose in your business.”

Thankfully, Thariss chuckles at the jest.
“Never. The more the merrier, I say. I’ll pop off and find a bottle for four.”

In the meantime, the blood elves are faced in intersectional lanes, searching the opposite display for the essence of their outputs.
“A pleasure to see you again, Ash”, remarks Riv. "In spite of dismal context, that is."

“Yeah, likewise”, Ash concurs. “You…arrived in the nick of time. Thank you.”

“It wasn’t intentional, but I don’t regret the quality of our timing. Did all your troops make it?”

“Not everyone, sadly, but your disruption saved a great deal of lives, I speculate.”

Riv smiles, but in a polite manner more than heartwarming.

“If need be, we’d do it again.”

With this basic small talk out of the way, the air cultivates an incredibly stale and tense value once more, as if they are unwilling to be the first to progress the discussion towards the next stage.

Makes even Melia feel awkward.

It’s a relief once Thariss glides back in, holding a glass bottle in her hand, containing a blue glittering beverage.

“Only permitted me to purchase this one. Had nothing else to spare, or so they claim.”

She holds it up to her eyes and furrows her brows in concentration.

“Some sorta weird draconic liquor. Got it off this green dragon lady. ‘Voluminous dream nectar’, she called it.”

“…what does that mean?”, asks Riv.

“Beats me.”

Melia snorts humorously.

“It’ll do, I bet.”

With everyone on their feet, they relocate and find a suitable spot to sit elsewhere. On the floor, obviously, due to a shortage of chairs; another aspect which the dragonflights show deficient comprehension for. Thariss produces one mug each for the women in her company and distributes a portion of the drink. Getting a whiff, it carries an enigmatic scent – they identify traits of blooming lilies and the aroma of freshly fallen rain on dirt, but this is inexplicably replaced seconds later, to conjure up images of the ocean and traces of their favorite dessert. Grabbing a sip incites similar fluctuating concepts.

“You know”, starts Thariss, “getting an inkling of why they put that name on the label now.”

“Yeah, they got the ‘dreamy’ part down pat, for sure”, Melia assents.

These comments are meant as tasters for the main thrust of this meeting, but they don’t achieve their goal – Ash and Riv are being redundantly demure. Ash rubs her arm, currently not wearing her full regalia, as she watches the floor and the hunter is fixated on grooming Razz.

In the heat of battle, it was a breeze to interact and collaborate, as adrenaline was rife and by extension, the survival instinct was thriving – no emotions to get in the way, purely intuition. But now, everything is back to a default and subdued status, with the ambivalence in tow. They don’t truly know how to communicate, regardless of the degree of their now defunct friendship.

Trying to illuminate a conceivable path, Melia extends pleasantries to the night elf.

“Thariss, right?”

Unlike her beloved, the warrior is a tad more composed, lounging into the wall with her legs crossed, brushing her lips over the booze. Her eyes flutter at name being uttered.
“She told ya, huh? Got it on the gold, yeah. Thariss Dusksong, professional demonpounder.”

She proffers a hand to the giggling priestess, who engages it midway.
“Lieutenant Melia Haven of the Argent Crusade. It’s a distinct pleasure.”

“Oh yeah, caught a word or two about you guys. Somethin’ with the Light, or whatever?”

“Heh. A real condensed outlining, but it does sum up our fundamental ideology. The Light is at its heart.”

“Watched your deeds out there on the field, by the way. Props to ya, cuz I saw a lotta skill on display. Had the whole situation on lockdown, from where I was standing. Really gave those rotten scumbags a thrashing.”

A chuckle is evoked from Melia.
“Thanks for taking note, but it is what we do. On our charter, after all, and I’m compelled to adhere to every detail of it. Of course, I won’t deny that I have personal stakes bearing on this campaign too.
But your entrance was absolutely breathtaking as well. That flashy jump and a trembling stomp as the landing? Awfully risky, one might add, but a thrill to witness.”

If she sought to inspire a grin from Thariss, there’s traction, as the warrior performs this proudly.
“Happy to please! Kinda my MO, all things considered. Like, undead aren’t too far off from demons. Squishier, but the same premise. Fighting against dipshits that wholeheartedly deserve their clobbering are too few and far between, for my taste, so you gotta savor it. Have to fess up that I’ve missed it.” Her enthusiasm briefly subsides, as she coughs.
“Uh, for the record – the rot bag thing? Tell your Forsaken pals I didn’t mean anything by it. Going out on a limb to assume that they’re cool people, if they’re with you.”

“Very well, I’ll convey your apologies to them, even if it’s unlikely they overheard.”

“Do it anyway, just to be on the safe side.”

With the ice skillfully cut open and extracted pieces out of, Melia steers her focus to the elven companion, in hopes of progress. Unfortunately, her dissatisfaction festers, for both of the blood elves retain a reluctance to occupy any inch of social ground. Melia squeezes her own hand and homes her irritation in on Riv, who’s still predominantly making Razz her epicenter.
“I don’t wish to dictate how you to do your thing, miss gunner-hotshot, but actually facing us is bound to help this whole mess along, I predict.”

Riv’s ears wince slightly and Thariss widens her eyes. Like almost instant feedback, the warrior quaffs her drink to stay out of this rocket’s course. Simultaneously, Ash is torn by the snappy spirit of the outburst.
“Melia, please…”

“What? The point of this event was for you to have a dialogue, right? Sulking won’t get there any quicker.”

“Yes, but…”

She hears Riv exhaling and gradually sliding closer.
“No, Ash, she’s right. Sorry, I wasn’t aiming to…be rude.”

“Welp”, utters Melia, “then you damn well didn’t-“
“It’s okay”, Ash intercepts. “No one got hurt.”
The old friends expend another few moments at staring, but it now dawns on Ash what can alleviate some pressure and reap an ounce of privacy in the process.
“We could go with thalassian, if you’re so inclined”, she vocalizes in said tongue. Melia marginally scrunches up her nose, presumably due to being omitted from the interaction, but keeps her lips sealed.

Riv strokes her own chin in contemplation, glances between the opposite duo and nods.
“I’d be glad to.” The next act is the hunter’s and she beckons the paladin with a hand.
“You didn’t get a chance to greet Razz formerly, did you? Come over, I’ll introduce you.”

Despite the gracious offer, Ash lingers at her seat, while her eyes float to the big reptilian-esque creature.
“Will he…consent to it?”

The terse breathy laughter that leaves Riv’s lips gives Ash exhilarated goosebumps. Her memory betrays her as to when she last picked up a true representation of it caused by her. Far too long.
“Don’t be silly. Razz is a good and friendly boy.” She gingerly caresses the scales underneath the raptor’s chin, and his eyes half-closes. Ash is positive she just heard a sound resembling a purr.
“He’d never bite without incentives or my explicit command.”
Revolting against her impulses, Ash abides and walks up to them. Razz glares at her in a cautious, starch capacity to begin with, which holds the paladin at bay.
“Keep steady, Ash. Present him your hand.”

Inhaling slowly and expectantly, Ash does as she is bid. The large raptor head, boasting two stout columns of razor-sharp fangs, gets intimate, smelling the appendage industriously and thoroughly. Unearthing nothing to instill fright, he soon folds back and allows her proximity.
“Was that...all?”

“Mhm. You got his go-ahead. Feel free to touch him.”

The paladin smiles in a conjoint nervous and delighted way, as her fingers mindfully grazes his scales.
“Wow, he’s so…sleek.”

“Heh, yes. Not all of it is natural – I try to maintain his health and appearance as methodically as is viable. Plenty of surgical brushing and bathing, mixed with a sensible diet.”
Ash beholds how lovingly and freely her old friend embraces what is essentially viewed as a killing machine by a large margin of their people. In return, Razz looks content and serene, permitting every sweet nudge.
“Made sure to carry out a bunch of research first, obviously, by asking local trolls and tauren in the Barrens for recommendations, so I’d be fully in the know of how to tend to him.”

Ash shakes her head, but her lips remain curled.
“You always had a flair for understanding animals. Can’t recall if I’ve ever had this type of opportunity in the past, however. The Darkspears I fought beside for the Horde kept their mounts secluded from ours.”

“Mm, I’m not unfamiliar with the conceit. Razz here can be somewhat guarded and prickly with new folks, but he takes to those he senses nothing untrustworthy from. As he’s settled down, seems like you’re now on that list.”

“Heh, yeah. Quite a relief.”
While Ash administers her care on the raptor, Riv seizes the chance to examine her.
“Someone told me you were at the Sunwell in concert with our visit.”

The paladin swallows, a faint stream of stress enveloping her.
“I…I was. Stood by the entrance, in fact. ”

“Why didn’t you come say hello, then?”

Ash nervously rubs her nose, ears pressing against her hair.
“I…preferred not to infringe on your peaceful induction to it. You looked like you were in need of space.”

“What? Ash, you know I’d never view you as a nuisance. Aren’t we friends?”

“You say that, but…”

Riv is nigh blindsided by Ash’s meek demeanor. This is a far cry from her simmering fury at the Black Temple or the charismatic woman she knew way back when - the one who could charm her without strenuous effort. Who has she grown into?
After trailing off, Ash holds for Riv to respond. Anything is acceptable right here and now.
“So, the Argent Crusade, huh?”

The red-haired elf allots herself a glimpse of the tabard decorating her chest. She corrects some of the roughened posture it’s crumpled into.
“Yeah, I…needed a breath of fresh air, as you might've realized. To reestablish and ground myself, I suppose.”

“A wise decision, in your circumstances. Does this suggest that you’ve lifted the chain from Quel’Thalas too?”

Here is where she shakes her head.
“Not through and through. I haven’t officially resigned from the Blood Knights, just…taken a temporary leave of absence and transfer, on an indefinite duration. Lady Liadrin sanctioned it.”

“Sounds reasonable. The attire is a good fit for you too, I think.”

Ash is moderately and surprisingly psyched by the tone of it, pining for a compliment.
“You…you do?”

“Without a doubt. Gold was always more of your color.”

A smile sprouts on Ash’s lips, but she covers it up with a cough.
“Well, there’s erm, a grey majority on this one, but-“

“Tsk.” Riv playfully bumps her arm. “Don’t ruin my compliments with technicalities, dummy.”

“…sorry.”

In due time, someone has blatantly reached the juncture where she feels they’re overdue and coughs interruptingly, to draw their gazes. They note a mildly vexed Melia.
“Hey. I recognize I’m butting in, but…not that I have any issues with listening to thalassian – it’s a gorgeous language, really – but I don’t speak a single iota of it.”

Ash explores her friends’ expression, wondering what prompted this choice. Was it worry? Everything was going well, so that can’t be it. She couldn’t have been…
“Yeah, I’m on board with that”, states Thariss abruptly. “Don’t know squat ‘bout it either.”

“Glad to not be alone in this. I imagine it’s not quite as bad for you, though, is it?”

“Mm, not unfair to say, but there’s a lotta differences to darnassae. In the end, it comes off as garbled babbling. Pretty, I’ll give ‘em that, but babble all the same.”

Riv reflectively taps her fingertips at her cheeks.

“Oh. When you put it like that, yeah, guess it is a little excluding. We can rectify this, however.”

“Apologies, Melia”, Ash directs to the priestess. “We only wanted a moment.”

“No harm done”, she replies. “I get the caution and all that, but I assumed you’d kick it off in this respect and then ease back. My mistake.”

With a fresh situation on their hands and friendlier relations cemented with Ash, Riv's interest for Melia flourishes.

“What did you say your surname was?”

The human amends a few strands of hair and stretches her back out.

“Haven.”

“Hmm. Getting the vibe that I’ve heard it before, but can’t identify the specifics. You’re not from Stormwind, are you?”

“Oh, yeah, I suspect you have. I’m from the north like you, but Reliena Haven, Bishop of the Temple of Light in Stratholme, was my mom.”

A shimmer of awareness traverses Riv’s eyes, as her ears tilt glumly.

“…oh dear. My condolences. Your home, I…”

Melia hoists a hand, quelling what’s likely to emerge.

“It’s fine.” Ash knows it’s not, but they all share the same psychological burden. “Thanks for sentiment.”

For a couple of seconds, Riv is shaping up to go astray, but a consoling hand from her beloved onto her shoulder reverts her to reality. The crusader duo bear witness to the hunter gratefully squeezing Thariss’ fingers, prior to prepping herself for a reboot.

“So, eh, just basing it off what I’ve discerned from your mannerism, but I take it you’re Ash’s girlfriend?”

Ash is holding her drink at this exact second, barely having a sip, but virtually chokes on it instead. In contrast, Melia is so startled that she lets out a tiny giggle.

“…wait, what?”

“Aren’t you?”

The Lieutenant has no choice but to aid Ash with a few taps on the back, as the paladin coughs violently. A number of moments later, she blurts out a bashful retort.

“N-no! By the Sunwell, where did you—…we’re not—…why would you even—“

Whereas the paladin fumbles, Melia laughs, both joyfully and slightly embarrassed. Riv partially mirrors this impulse, as her cheeks redden.

“Well, crap. Sorry, I’m sorry! You were so close on the battlefield and your chemistry made me infer that…y’know.”
“That doesn’t…”

The preceding strips of hostility Riv had parsed from Melia swings away, to be substituted with elation, possibly relief.
“Come on, it’s alright and a realistic conclusion. But I happen to be her superior, actually.”

“Ooh, of course, I see it now. That makes sense. Should’ve been implicit to me. But in my defense, that hasn’t stopped her before.”

Ash is now appalled.
“Riv! What in Anasterian’s name!”

“Hmm? It’s accurate, isn’t it? You haven’t forgotten senior priestess Lenore-“

Rather hurriedly and in all fluster, the paladin swats Riv’s leg.
“Shh! Shush! Don’t! Just…don’t.”

Luckily, Melia is really cracking up at their interplay, as does Thariss.
“Watch out LT”, warns the night elf jokingly. “Word goes the little unassuming paladin over here can be quite a flirt.”

Melia smirks and glances at the aforementioned woman.
“Don’t worry, I’m already conscious of her antics.”

Acknowledging how she’s losing this fight, Ash downs her whole drink.
“…this is going to be a long visit, isn’t it?”
Rays divided

Dragonblight has gone through transformations into quite a different region in the past few weeks, which would be evident should one contrast it with reviews of historical development for the last several centuries.

Preceding the Lich King’s stronghold getting set in stone, this land was renowned and revered all on its own by the dragons which it draws its name from, but this resulted in sparse activity and tranquility - as though it slumbered. Embodying nothing but the role of a wide-ranging graveyard, it could never have been styled as a fertile land – hence ‘blight’ – but recent calamities have somehow, against all odds, doubled down on the wind of misery. With the arrival of mortal armies, adventurers and aides, the encumbered state has not loosened, quite the contrary. More than ever, the frostbitten soil shudders and the breeze carries tales of annihilation.

But there is a brighter side to all this dreary and ominously doomed chatter, for at least their efforts might bring an end to the tyranny of the undead monarch once and for all, if events proceed fittingly. The ploy which the Alliance and Horde had been collaborating on for an extended episode now, stayed classified for the few days which the mercs spent in the Temple’s confines, omitting theirs and any other faction’s participation. But the truth was to be unavoidably exposed, as they put their cards on the table.

As the sun coasts over the chilly sky and steadily strews its brilliance across the ice, a fresh battle punctures the solidified aura, but not by the dragons’ doorstep. Some miles to the northwest sits a colossal and robust gate, which is surprisingly freshly assembled. The draconic inhabitants of the Temple recounted to the mortals of the Scourge’s elected name for it – Angrathar the Wrathgate. The compound is allegedly shaped of a material known as saronite, a substance which the locals have cautioned against, for it evokes the corruption of the Old Gods.

The aggregation of Scourge troops has been trickling out from this entrance, which merits the joint forces from the south to stem the surge by extinguishing it for good. Or so they hope. Either way, it’s under siege. For the mercenaries and the Argent Crusade, it stays as a distant, ambiguous operation, for neither have been allowed involvement. Their assistance was not enlisted, but given the scope and level of peril, it could be a fortunate outcome.

At this hour, Melia is standing at the outskirts of the humongous Wyrmrest Temple alone, viewing the siege of Angrathar from afar, though it’s merely visible with binoculars from this extreme range. The wall, for manifesting as such a lofty edifice at the foot of the towering and singularly imposing Citadel, is at least easy to scope out, which is why she has a target to lock onto. The eyes are solemn, miles away. Her solitude is of a fleeting quality, however, for she soon inadvertently receives a modicum of attention and company.

“Has it started?”

Melia is startled to the point of nearly loading a spell, but whirling to the source, she comes face to face with none other than Rivaryn. In a hurry, she tries to bottle all the surprise up. “Lightly, but the essentials and heavier strikes are yet to come. It’s what the red dragons communicated anyway.”
Like Melia, Riv has garbed herself in lighter clothes for the moment, as no battle lingers up ahead – a green tunic, white scarf, leather jacket and some black pants.

“Any breakthroughs, you reckon?”

The priestess turns to the remote struggle, spotting nothing but the faintest of outlines.

“Hard to say while we’re so far removed from it. They have plenty of hurdles to overcome, though. The Scourge are no pushovers, even when hard-pressed.”

“Yeah, I know it well.”

“What of your team? What’s the status of your dragon ally? There was one in need of healing, right?”

Riv nods briefly.

“Mm, Deradgos”, she relays. “Thariss and I haven’t been up there ourselves, but Raxeen informed us he’s now revived, albeit will require a great amount of rest, in light of all the torment he endured. Those are the red dragons’ words, not hers.”

“Ah. He did seem to be in pretty rough shape. Hope they manage to fix him up and get him on his feet. Or claws.”

“So do I.”

A cold and unconcerned wind passes them by, as a hush festers between them; in a way exemplifying their current personal terms in a symbolic fashion, with more poignant accuracy than any words have the capacity for. Riv clears her throat in hopes of still having a ghost of a chance.

“Well, erm, you deserve praise for your heading out there, in all the mayhem during battle. Everything seemed to be coming through as a result of your tactics and the soldiers were all ears the whole way. Laudable traits of a commander.”

Still a tad snappy, Melia scrutinizes the elf disbelievingly.

“Had you anticipated differently?”

“W…what? Oh, no no! That’s not what I-…

I’m sorry. This isn’t what I meant to imply. I was referring to your…duty, I guess. Haven’t seen a lot of priests calling the shots on a battlefield. It’s not what I’m accustomed to, but you clearly subvert stereotypes and viewpoints taken for granted. I’m…I’m glad to have met and fought beside you.”

“Hm. Well…thanks.”

Another cold lick of winter flaps over them, making their hairs stand on end. In the corner of her eye, Riv notes how Melia’s face is somewhat strained and she still elects to stare at the landscape as opposed to the hunter. Riv had been wishful that their first meet and greet capped off positively, but this currently comes off as no more than a fantasy. At this stage, Riv can only imagine one way to douse the blaze, or at least diminish its intensity. Their single real common thread.

“So, you work with Ash. For how long now?”

The human’s expression does indeed soften by a fraction.

“Must’ve been a few months, at this rate. No one had much demands for education or drilling from her, as she’s already a mighty proficient fighter, with keen battle knowhow. They slapped a rank on her chest, per my request, and then assigned her to my squad.”
A faint smile crops up on Riv’s lips at the visions her mind procures. “That really adds up. Ash has, as ever, been one to immerse herself with much vigor and high tempo into new roles and lifestyles. She’s not afraid to test her boundaries and beliefs. Or, uh…she used to be.”

The last remark prompts Melia to swirl towards her, picking over Riv’s image. “Yeah, apropos your relations…mind if I prod you a lil’?”

Riv corrects her hair and takes in a fresh waft of air, as preparational measures, prior to folding her arms and averting fully to the priestess. “Not at all, go ahead.”

“Well, the spirit of your relationship before the atrocities you suffered has had me…curious for a while.”

“She didn’t tell you?”

Melia grimaces in an unsatisfied fashion. “Meh, she made it open-ended and vague. ‘More than friends’ was the best she could deliver.”

“Hmm. That is…unusual. But I’m not going to put on an act or camouflage it – we were lovers, girlfriends and…well, extremely intimate for many years. Decades even.”

Previous antagonism exuded notwithstanding, Melia is gradually getting drawn into it and gaining an appreciation for the personal maze comprising this case. “Wow, for so long? Did you guys ever…?”

“Consider marriage?” Riv tilts her head downwards a few inches, the wistful smile on her lips now taking precedence. “It wasn’t on our own agendas, no, but lots of our friends and loved ones presumed that would eventually be the payoff. They recommended it in droves.”

“If everyone else was so keen on it, what stopped you?”

Riv breathes in deep, appearing as troubled by it as she feels. “Truth be told, I don’t know where we might’ve sailed off to. Chances are that we would have let the idea play out and see it through to the end. But the Scourge invasion tore any aspirations to pieces. Ash was what others call my…”

A few seconds passes, though the word doesn’t come to her out of hand. She wrinkles her brow, trying to comb her memory for a decent term, but ends up short. “There’s nothing immediately matching our concept of it. Let me lean on Thalassian instead – in our home, Ash would be titled ‘Nor’alah thoridas’.”

Melia’s gaze is directed at her, but the priestess has a look of complete obliviousness on it. “…I did say I’ve never taken lessons in that language, right?”

The hunter chuckles. “Yes, my bad. It means ‘As rays indivisible’ – the rays alluding to a facet of the sun, if that wasn’t clear.”

“Whoa. That’s so…uh, poetic.”

“Hah, it may well be for non-speakers. The closest parallel in Common I can think of is ‘soulmates’, but it’s not at the same profound degree.”
With such an affectionate thread, Melia bites her lower lip, oscillating in the crossroads of options. She isn’t certain whether grilling Riv with a wagonload of juicy questions is the right path or to straight up ignore her, for she’s still a little…miffed. But why would she apply the latter? What would it accomplish in the long haul? It’s not like Riv owes her or crosses her trail. And what road is that anyway? Does she yet realize what she craves, when Ash is the topic at hand?

She’s ticking herself off too intensely and goes for the fork to probe Riv. “Hate to put you on the spot, but why didn’t it work out if you were truly ‘indivisible’? I mean, that phrase sounds like a done deal to me.”

“A reasonable angle, which is…more complex than I’m able to convey, but… Well, for starters, it’s predominantly a figure of speech. Thalassian can be…flowery and frivolously theatrical. If I’m to be brutally honest, then nothing is eternal; not even love.” Her shoulders slump and her expression alters, taking on sincerity. “But I have to admit the chances were decent that it could’ve prolonged for many additional decades, or centuries, had the Scourge invasion not been jammed into our lives and ravaged all we’ve ever known.

Don’t think anyone can ignore the fact that we were irrevocably changed as a result – myself as a vivid example. I can no longer circle back to the old person I was, the Rivaryn of the Farstriders, and in all fairness, I wouldn’t desire to. This identity I’ve built now and the reality I perceive, it’s my life. I’ll cling to it, as tightly as possible.”

Melia inclines her head slowly and knowingly. “There’s some resemblance with Ash in this regard too.”

“Yeah, so I’ve gathered. Ash is not who she was in my mind’s eye. She has progressed to a point where I can no longer keep track. Is there a single trace left of the woman I once loved?” She shrugs. “It’s lost on me.”

The deeper this chat runs, the more Melia detects how she opens internal doors for the hunter, as if Riv works her way through to the human’s heart. “Listen, I…I know this’ll be foolish to even put to words, but I gotta have an answer – do you still want her?”

Riv transitions to Melia, looking directly into the green eyes and scouring their territory. She exhales out her nose. “Straightforward and earnest – I respect that. But the answer is, as you probably suspect, no.”

“Not even a tiny bit?”

“I…I do house some lingering affection for her, yes. Love, but a platonic emotion. I seriously doubt we’ll ever bond in a comparative way again. Besides, you’ve spoken with Thariss a couple of times by now, right?”

“Your girlfriend? I have. A very funny and good-looking woman.”

The lips of the blood elf curl somewhat, her mind drifting. “Mm. She’s a blessing and wonderful, in every sense of the word. She’s no longer my girlfriend, though – we’re betrothed.”

Melia’s eyes expand in shock. “Oh. Ooh! Wow, that’s terrific. Congratulations!”
“Thank you. Now here comes the…dicey part, as you might say - what are your feelings on Ash?”

It would always come to this, a line of inquiry they couldn’t skirt around forever. Melia does deviate regardless, turning her gaze elsewhere and runs a hand at the back of her neck. “I erm, don’t suppose that I…heh, can give this one a pass?”

“No one’s going to press you and you’re definitely not obligated to answer anything I ask, but I do think it’s only fair.”

Despite this sentiment and the rationale behind, Melia can’t disregard her innermost hesitation and gets convinced that she has to brush it off. “Not gonna lie and say you haven’t earned anything, but I get the sense that it’s misguided. She’s my subordinate and…that’s all there is.”

Riv tilts her head in a leery manner. “Is it now? So the way your eyes twinkle in her presence is just a hallucination?”

“T-twinkle? I…I dunno what you’re on about.”

Once more, a smile surfaces on Riv as she playfully nudges her fingers at Melia’s side. “You do. And to put it mildly, you were overdefensive when we had those drinks.”

Guilt marginally overcomes her and Melia bundles arms around her own frame. In a self-conscious vein, she pipes down, in spite of no outstanding company. “Okay, to be honest, deep down, I do recognize a…connection; a string which ties our hearts into one. We have philosophies in common and shared experiences. Ash is…funny and pleasant to speak with.” She sheepishly scratches her nose. “…and quite a looker.”

Riv laughs softly. “Too true.” She plants a hand on Melia’s shoulder. “I know what it’s like and this isn’t a reaction to scoff at. Hold on to it.”

The Lieutenant shuts her eyes and shakes her head lightly. “I wish to, but…it’s hard. Ash is so odd to read most days. Can never completely pinpoint her. Now and then, there’s a plain signal like she’s on board, if a little shy - which is cute - and then the next…she resets to all business.”

“I can’t nail down the exact cause of this, but my counsel is to stay on the course. Be stubborn, but not overwhelmingly bullheaded. Give her some room to breathe, but let her know where you’re at. If you do try to pursue this avenue, you have my support.”

Now, for the very first time since they linked up, Melia grants her a warm smile. “Thanks. Really. It’s comforting to hear you say it.”

Almost immediately following the admission, she grows regretful. “But now I feel guilty for my previous behavior. I shouldn’t have treated you that way.”

Riv shrugs it off. “It’s fine. Water under the bridge.”

“You say that, but I owe you an apology regardless – I’m sorry.” Melia ponderously folds her arms. “To add onto what you stated earlier, my opinion of your performance tracks in a similar manner. You were excellent and I’m skeptical we would’ve survived without the assistance. If there’s an
appetite for more, I’d like your team to accompany us after we depart. You’re mercs, correct? The Crusade is in possession of enough gold to pay your salaries.”

Riv is slightly taken aback, but not stunned.
“A…generous offer, Lieutenant. It’s on the table for sure, but I’d have to chat with Thariss and Rax.”

“Naturally. We’re not out of here anytime soon, so you’re free to sleep on it.”

Soon, the duo is not left so isolated anymore, as two more people are inbound. Melia notes them right away, but Riv doesn’t parse it until Thariss herself friskily grabs the hunter’s waist and raises her up. Her initial response is to gasp, but only until she comprehends who she’s dealing with, where she switches to a giggle; particularly due to the night elf’s tickling.
“That was terrible alertness, babe. Gotta be faster.”

Riv snickers and grabs Thariss’ nose.
“Pff, shut up. I’m not exactly in any danger, am I?”

In return, Thariss playfully snaps her teeth.
“With a hungry predator like me comin’ after ya? I should think so.”

A handful of seconds later, as they embrace one another in a tender kiss, with Riv digging her fingers through her lover’s hair, Ash clears her throat.
“Lieutenant, we have company. Crusade-Commander Tailbirch has set foot on temple grounds.”

With an elated expression, Melia sets her arm on Ash’s and gestures for them both to bail.
“Let’s not keep her waiting then, shall we?”
As the battle of the Wrathgate still waged and the gusts from the collision reached Wyrmrest Temple, many emotions and reactions arose as a byproduct. Precognition deemed it laborious to determine the result of the clash between the two sides, but in many ways, this could be seen as a positive element – if the outcome was not wholly decisive, it would imply that a chance for the living yet existed, which was more than many had ever hoped. The Scourge’s pure brute force was seen as insurmountable, but perhaps this single showdown would prove otherwise.

Late in the process of the confrontation, Rivaryn’s team was finally approached by one of the Alliance delegates stationed at the floor of the Temple grounds, a kaldorei woman. “Ishnu-alah. My name is Captain Seabreeze, the head guard assigned to Alliance Ambassador Trueblade. I had some inquiries for you, if it isn’t too much trouble.”

The trio had searched among each other, but glimpsed no opposition. “Not one bit”, Thariss told her. “We in your way, Captain?”

“On the contrary, you might be stars in the sky for us. Had some questions about your status. I heard from a few of the denizens that you were blades-for-hire and in particular, your capacity intrigued me”, she revealed and nudged her head in Riv’s direction. “What’s your name?”

“Oh, Rivaryn. Rivaryn Silvershroud.”

“Miss Silvershroud, word goes that you’re well-versed in the skillset of a hunter?”

“If it does, then it’s an accurate word, whoever spoke it.”

Seabreeze nodded with a pleased glint in her eyes, folding her arms. “We could use a good tracker, you see, if you’re interested.”

“Well, granted that you don’t have any disputes with procuring aid from a sin’dorei.”

“No, absolutely not. You’re a freelancer, right? Don’t worry, I can grasp the difference.”

The hint of a smile beckoned on Riv’s lips. “Excellent. Then what can we do for you, Captain?”

“Let me preface this by telling you that I can’t provide elaborate details, no fine print. But in essence, we’re on the hunt for an Alliance squad which went missing in the Grizzly Hills, a region to the east of here.”

“Missing?”, asked Thariss. “How long ago we talkin’ here?”

“Contact was lost about a week ago from today, according to local reports of those situated in the Hills. Again, I cannot disclose the full and unquestionable nature of the mission they were on, but suffice it to say, it was of high priority.”

The mercenaries hesitated for a spell, scouring for the emotions which they apparently all shared. “Uh, I see”, said Riv. “But if this task was so instrumental, shouldn’t the Alliance be searching for these absent troops itself?”

“Well, that’s the hitch – it was key, but not indispensable. Those aren’t my words, for the record, but from higher in the command chain.
Myself and others fear that the team we’re on the lookout for was compromised by Drakkari trolls."

“Drakkari?”

“This continent’s sole troll tribe. They’ve been around since the dawn of the species and preside over an empire to the northeast, called Zul’Drak. Or maybe I should switch it out for ‘presided’ – from all available intel, they’re losing the bulk of their land to the Scourge. And that’s actually a consequence we fear more than the trolls, that the Scourge corralled our soldiers. If they’re all dead, this would be a substantial blow to our prospects of a smooth victory.”

“So what’s the delay? Just send a battalion and rescue those people”, urged Thariss.

“Like I already mentioned, it’s not on the table. With the Nexus War in the west, the siege of the Wrathgate and our myriad of operations in the Howling Fjord, the Alliance expedition is worn thin. What we aren’t, however, is pressed for gold – hence, hiring mercs would be a viable and advantageous investment.
In one way or another, I need someone to at least find traces of our people, determine their conditions. Can you make this happen?”

For the third and final time, the three ascertained the spirit circling their midst, though it was undue. With little else on their plates, and as Nadelgosa notified them that she wasn’t going anywhere, they could safely dictate their next route.
“You’ve got yourself some primo trackers on the payroll, Captain.”

And with that, the team had retreated from the tiles of the Temple, out onto the chilly landscape beyond. The Captain offered them an approximate destination for where to concentrate their sweep, and it took them a week or two in order to journey all the way past the hurdles of the land. The Alliance had no flying mounts to spare in beneficial proximity, nor had the dragons, and so the team had to wind through a lot of precarious terrain. This entailed Scourge pits, Scarlet Crusade expeditions and ghostly figures of a bleak yore they had no wish to explore to any greater details.

For the three, this is a little bit of a reprieve from their previous arduous history with the northern reaches, as it contains the first tangible manifestations of forest that they’ve encountered. Specifically in the northern districts, the trees grow with sparse intervals and the snow finds it tricky to flush past the tall pine tree crowns, though not impassable.

From Riv’s point of view, this terrain is reminiscent of the excursions she took into distinct zones of dwarven lands back on the Eastern Kingdoms, though with a prevalence of the nominative hills. The last known location of the wayward soldiers was somewhere in the western portion of the province. Reportedly, they made a transient stop in Amberpine Lodge, one of the Alliance-controlled towns and then veered to the west.

As for the settlement, the mercenaries had no incentive to make a visit, even briefly, but instead parked their feet a few clicks to the west of it. This decision was picked on Riv’s recommendation, as she was confident she could scrounge up the tracks on her own.

It is from this locale they set out on their own pursuit, scouring the undergrowth and soil for clues as to what could’ve possibly occurred to the poor souls. After all, no one simply goes poof out of nowhere.

With the unsympathetic winds flailing in their vicinity, Thariss draws her coat and scarf closer, her body shuddering a bit at the latest.
“Fuck me. Figured some greenery would make this place more bearable, but every venue here is like an ice cube.
Babe, you really got a bead on a trail or is it just as cold as my ears right ‘bout now?”

Riv, who’s kneeling on the ground to dust some snow off her object of interest, smiles to herself.
“I did caution you to bring extra padding.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re always smarter and more resourceful. Don’t have to brag.”

On the other side of their row, Rax tilts her head somewhat, to wipe away some more of the white substance which had nestled on her horn.
“It is curious how your people praise and thrive through the night, yet you despise the cold, Thariss.”

Thariss glances over her shoulder with a displeased look.
“Think you got that a lil’ mixed up, Rax. ‘Night’ doesn’t necessarily equate ‘cold’, ‘least not on Kalimdor. And Northrend isn’t cold, it’s like freezing in the fucking grave. Even the Night Warrior wouldn’t take to this mess.”

“The Night…Warrior?”

“Long story.”
While Rax is dutifully affixed to the road which Riv isolates for them, Thariss is steeped with doubt.
“Babe, you a 100% this is worth the bother? To me, this passage we’re on just presents like a sheet of white cream and tons of prickly…uh, I dunno, pricks. Hearkens back to Winterspring, come to think of it. And I have mentioned how royally that shithole sucks, right?”

The hunter exhales at the mildly abrasive whining, though she doesn’t forfeit her position.
“A couple of times, yes. Or more.”

“Good. You don’t genuinely trust we’ll actually solve this puzzle, do you? Cuz I get the vibe it’s a doomed cause and we should head back. We’ll get paid whether we chase ’em down or not. So why go to the trouble, when we can get easy gold?”

Next to her, Rax gains an anxious expression, fiddling with her hammer which hangs behind.
“This is an accurate statement’, she accedes, “but the Captain will presumably demand proof of our presence as a prerequisite.”

“Big deal. So I’ll grab a snowball and lob it in her face. Bam, job done, money snagged.”

“…now and again, your antics are a paradox to me. I cannot distinguish if this is a serious proposal or not.”
With Thariss blatantly not being in an especially solemn or grounded mood, Rax instead directs the question which pulses in her mind at Riv.
“But she raises a valid topic. Do you truly believe there is a potential for finding these Alliance fighters?”

Riv has her nose practically buried in the ground, mirroring Razz to an ostensible degree, as she corroborates.
“Positive. All I require is time to scout and seal off the right prints. I know they’re here, Raxeen – trust me.”

“Very well, I shall put my faith in your qualified hands.”
One who is not as lenient is Thariss, rolling her eyes in a worn fashion.
“Riv, gorgeous, I admire your persistence and all that, but personally, I’m also running outta energy here, not to mention freezing my ass off. It’s so frosty that I’m dead sure my body is turning into ice on the inside.”

With an unconvinced arched eyebrow, Riv shifts barely to peer at her wife-to-be.
“That’s not biologically possible, dear. You’d have keeled over by now.”

“What, are you suddenly a grade-A scholar now too?”

“No, but my sister is a decent one.”

“…bah, whatever.”

Eventually, following a lengthy round of foraging, to her girlfriend’s surprise, Riv calls out her success.
“Hah, there we go! That’s our lead.”

“You located a trace?”, asks Rax.

Riv is dusting at the ground, in an area where no snow has been dumped in a bigger span than in the previous stretches they traversed.
“Yeah, got some prints of boots and what appears like…hooves? Definitely not a horse, based on the size, so chances are a draenei made the latter.”

“What makes you so certain it isn’t any old wanderer, though?”, Thariss probes dubiously.

“Due to the scant amount of activity in these parts. Unlike a city for example, there are very few elements that would’ve disrupted this type of residue. And you seldom spot crowds of this size in the wilderness, outside of military patrols. And hunters, I guess, but the Captain back at Wyrmrest already attested that they almost never permit civilians to wander about without supervision.”

The wavering doesn’t entirely dissipate on Thariss’ features, but with Riv and Rax both being invested, she begrudgingly settles in.
“Hmm. I don’t love this, but guess we push on.”

Together, Riv and Razz continue to work meticulously, sussing out more facts and contents related to the case. Conjointly, they excavate a second piece of proof. The blood elf notes how her raptor companion has approached a collection of bushes, so she rises and zips across.
“What’ve you found, boy? Another lead?”

Grazing her fingers over his scales as she passes, the gleaming of an object planted into the earth draws her attention, right where Razz is sniffing. She kneels down and picks it up, inducing a smile. She showcases it for her friends.
“A torn Alliance symbol. Still think we’re on a wild strider chase, dear?”

Thariss holds up her hands in defeat, united with a sigh.
“Alright, no need to shove it in my face. You win.”

With the paladin popping over, Riv places it in her hand and Rax turns it around, to view the lion logo from multiple angles.
“An authentic Alliance emblem, indeed.”

“Mhm”, Riv agrees. “I theorize it was ripped off to leave clues for any faction members that could’ve followed behind, like dropping breadcrumbs. It’s what I would do if I was captured.”
Thariss shakes her head as she joins them, playfully rubbing her lover’s chin.
“Well I’ll be damned. Forgot how gifted you are at snooping, hot stuff.”

“Heh. I merely have sharp eyes. And, you know, decades of training and expertise as a ranger.”

A smirk festers on Thariss’ lips, as she slides her hands down to Riv’s sides to tickle her instead.
“Blah blah, don’t get cocky now. I’ll wrestle ya and you’ll recall how that always ends.”

Riv laughs softly and backs off reflexively.
“Maybe you should sing my praises more often and I won’t.”

The warrior grabs her, spins her around and lands a light spank on her behind, which sends her forward.
“Get back to huntin’ our prey, ranger girl. I’ll reward you later.”

After another day or so of rummaging across the narrow path, Riv guides her team via some bushes, past an array of trees and over a hill, but then stops flat. She drops to one knee and lifts an arm as a signal. The duo follows suit, hurriedly enters her position and sits down.
“Did you notice anything?”, whispers Rax.

“Yeah, heard a bunch of physical struggle ahead. We shouldn’t be too far off. Fall in behind me and keep it quiet.”

Banding together, they proceed in a more languid pace, though one that at least makes them tricky to differentiate from the rest of their environment.
A couple of hundred meters ahead, behind a collection of marginally thinner trees, they see a tumultuous fight going down, where shouts and grunts are periodically emitted, both from toiling and agony. Glancing slightly to her left, off-road, Riv discerns what she presumes has to be ruins in visual range, potentially of Drakkari origin. Then again, she has little knowledge of the type of cultures which have constructed civilizations in this territory.

Giving it a couple of seconds to examine the full scene, Rax is the first to remark on the individuals embroiled.
“There can be no doubt”, she says, maintaining the low volume. “They are Alliance.”

“Yeah, can’t be much else”, Thariss assents. “Draenei, gnome and human. Could be some kinda freelancers or…bandits, I suppose.”

“My people rarely entangle themselves in illicit activity of such nature.”

“I know, just giving us options. Hey, who’re the ones they’re fighting?”

Observing the events, it would seem they’re up against a pack of trolls with chiefly frosty blue hues.
“Drakkari, I speculate”, says Riv. “Don’t see what else it can be. Those are not Darkspears.”
Riv pulls out her rifle and raises it, to peer through the scope.
“The weapons that both sides are wielding suggest a similar origin, though distinctly non-Alliance make. I can see feathers and a jagged wooden design of the hilts. I’d categorize them as akin to Amani craftsmanship. Confiscated, perhaps?”

“Or just pilfered.” Thariss squints, hoping to get a better view. “To me, it doesn’t seem like the Alliance folks are in armors.”
“They’re not”, Riv confirms. “Simpler gear, not prepped for combat.”

“Okay, why is that?”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t be sitting here trying to measure them from afar, love.”

By now, the night elf has unsheathed her shield and blade. 
“Fine, but I’m getting antsy here. What’s our next action?”

“There are no alternatives”, says Rax. “These people need help and we are honor-bound – as well as contract-bound – to rescue them. The Alliance are allies, and there is a draenei among them, one of my people. I shall stride down there and aid them, no matter the ramifications.”

With this assertion, it’s not as if Riv and Thariss have much choice. The former nods curtly and once more aims her weapon.
“Okay, go. I’ll back you up from here. Razz, follow Thariss.”

The night elf grins in a somewhat vicious manner, her fangs virtually gleaming in the reflection of the sunlight.
“Showtime.”

With the word given, the three melee-oriented combatants rush ahead, as Riv waits behind next to the nightsabers, who have both prowled down. Calmly and methodically, she lines up shots against her foes. At the opportune moment, she fires away, blasting at least one of the trolls that was zeroing in on the gnome, another ranger who is unfortunately forced to utilize a bow. The human is explicitly a spellcaster judging by all the magic he flings left and right, but the draenei is more conflicting to pinpoint, as the axes she employ should signify her role as a warrior, yet there is something disparate about her.

Thariss and Rax propel themselves into the clash, with the warrior taking a prominent and frontal role, being both heavier and sturdier than her comrades. As two Drakkari warriors near the human, they’re impeded by a charging Thariss, who bashes her shield into the nose of the first and then spins around to kick the other away. Rax, as should’ve been foreseen, uses her connection to the Light in order to launch a judgment spell and liberate the draenei.

At a closer look, they can both distinguish that she is no warrior, for at the second draenei’s command, her attacks expand far above what is physically plausible. Her slashes become doubled or tripled, tearing over her enemies by way of ripping and carving relentless winds. Rax might not be intimately accustomed to the practice, but she knows a shaman when she sees one. They are still not an abundantly numerous one among her kind, though they’ve swiftly propagated their count.

The fight itself isn’t too extensive. With now relatively equal numbers and Riv’s long-range support, the result comes down to a match of skill, strength and shrewdness – in the end, the trolls cannot rival what they’re opposed with, nor do they surrender. Blood is the only way to resolve the dissension.
After their assailants are all eliminated, the mercs turn and face the winded survivors. To Thariss and Rax, these units strike the two as runaways, prisoners perhaps.

They ascertain an even greater unprecedented trait from the shaman, which renders Rax confused and her eyes widened.
“Aruunel?”

The light blue-skinned draenei gazes up from her spot, bending over and still panting. Her face is bloodied and bruised.
“Rax? By the elements, you—what in Velen’s name is going on?”
Out of all the people they could’ve possibly bumped into, Aruunel was not high on the list. At best, Raxeen had presumed that her old flame would limit herself to the two center continents, chiefly to protect Exodar or if pushed, unleash herself in avenging fury on the Horde. This would of course fuel the rivalry and bloodshed, expand the cycle of reprisals, but at large, damage would be minimal, personal. Yet instead, she finds the shaman in the thick of a fatal mission for the Alliance, hunted by Drakkari trolls? What could’ve driven her to such precarious boldness?

After double checking the area for potential additional Drakkari pursuers, Rivaryn guided the team and their new Alliance tagalongs into a small clearing, with pine trees as shielding to intercept line of sight.

Out of an intersection of compassion and necessity, the mercenaries share waterskins with the runaways, as well as some dried meat, with promises of a warmer supper later down the line, as it gets cooked. With Razz, Ilca and Rax’s ride guarding the periphery, the rest of the group settles down, first and foremost to have a chat and gauge the status of the former prisoners.

The human among them especially stuffs his face, utterly decompressed and set at ease for having better food to munch on.

“Ahh, this is amazing”, he utters, still with a piece of jerky lodged in his mouth. “Never thought I’d miss dried beef, but that troll food was Lights-damned awful.”

“Picked it up in an Alliance inn back in Dragonblight, but we’ve got some fresh venison that Riv here hunted for us too”, Thariss tell them.

In the meantime, Aruu and the gnome proceed with more…discretion.

The merc trio has done their best to apply bandages and wrap warm extra clothes plus blankets around their rescues, but it evidently doesn’t satisfy every need.

Rax tends to get a little too worried, even now, using a moist handkerchief to attempt and wipe some splattered blood from Aruu’s cheek. Unfortunately, it is not a pervasive affair, for the shaman soon flinches.

“Stop it, Rax. I can do it myself.”

“But-“

“Please, break it off. Give me some space.”

Rax parts her lips, grows tense and then woefully acquiesces.

“Very well.”

While Aruu concentrates on fixing the rest of the spill, dirt and flecks, the elves wise up, knowing they have to act and allay the awkward tone.

“So uh, this wasn’t at all what we believed we were in for, but we’re obviously relieved to have come at the last minute”, says Riv.

“As are we!”, the gnome effusively agrees. “Most immaculate timing of you.”

“We try our best”, remarks Thariss.

“My name is Rivaryn. This is Thariss and Raxeen. We’re acquainted with Aruunel here, but never met either of you two. At least, I think not…”
She glances at Rax for verification and the paladin inclines her head. “Indeed, they are strangers to me as well.”

The gnome is a noticeably sprightlier figure than the other two, her voice tone possessing a touch higher pitch. Her skin is a medium brown, while she has green hair in a ponytail. “The name’s Bekkit! Bekkit Rizzlemeld. And if I might be honest, your rescue operation was stupendously executed! Multitudinous thanks to you.”

“It’s no problem whatsoever”, Riv assures. “If we can aid people in a pinch, we’re glad.”

“The pay helps, though”, reveals Thariss.

Bekkit’s gaze is soon enthused as she scours Riv’s position. “Your weapon of choice and composition, it is tremendously intriguing. May I take a closer look?”

The blood elf currently has her rifle resting against her side, and she blinks with a measure of puzzlement, prior to unsheathing it. “Oh, uh, sure. Just be careful.”

“Hah, no need for trepidation, for I have plenty of history dabbling with these types of weaponry. Let’s give it a looksee…”, she says, as she gets underway with her examination. “Hmm. Is this a multi-bypass injection cog? How unorthodox…but quite ingenious, all things considered.”

With the gnome muttering away, the pale-skinned human with black shoulder-length hair clears his throat. “Well, see no reason not to carry on with introductions. I’m Samuels, a member of Stormwind’s mage order. And I echo my companion’s sentiments. It was absolutely dreadful in that camp. I…I was utterly convinced they’d eat me alive.”

Aruu rolls her eyes at his superstition. “You’re an idiot, Samuels.”

The look on his face turns devastated. “What?! You didn’t see the eyes they sent me! They were practically salivating more for every day!”

“They do not eat other sentient beings.”

“Oh, you say that now, but we have no idea where the rest of the prisoners were sent! I tell you, it was dinner, sacrifice or…worse.”

The shaman covers her face with a hand, more than a little disgruntled by his mewling. Once the Alliance trio enters a more susceptible state of mind, with food in their bellies and their throats quenched, Thariss rededicates on the matter. “Right, now that this is outta the way, we’d be mighty appreciative if you gave us some answers.”

“Of course”, speaks Aruu, grateful but remaining suspicious, which her voice clues out. “We’re two on this.”

Riv is better accommodating and offers a shade of the truth. “I understand you’re reasonably wary on account of what you’ve underwent at the hands of your captors, but you need not fear us – we were hired by Alliance representatives at Wyrmrest, a Captain Seabreeze. She told us there wasn’t enough manpower close to hand for them to send a bunch of extra scouts, without the requisite trail.
The objective we were compensated for was to locate a missing squad – yours, I take it – and then bring you back into the arms of the Alliance, essentially.”

With the story having run its course, Aruu still wears signatures of displeasure. “This is unacceptable.”

The opposite trio is bewildered by the dismissal. “…pardon?”, asks Thariss.

Samuels rapidly intercepts and coughs too loudly to be real. “What the good Lieutenant means is uh…we extend our gratitude without hesitation! Without your intervention on our behalf, we would likely have been recaptured – or slaughtered – and spent the rest of our diminutive lives in those cages and I’d prefer to dissolve such horrendous thoughts.”

The shaman does not appear to revel in the fact that she was so brazenly interrupted, judging by the searing glare she sets on the human. “But it is not enough”, she accentuates slowly and sharply. “Lieutenant…”

“Silence, Specialist”, she spits. The rest of the camp grows eerily quiet after this outburst, as no one dares challenge her wrath. For now, she bottles this up and circles back to the merc team. “We are thankful for what you did, hands down, but we were fulfilling a critical assignment for the Alliance war effort against the Scourge. The integrity of it was endangered as we were taken into Drakkari custody. It has to be carried out.”

“How did you get free?”, wonders Riv.

Aruu fidgets a bit with the piece of cloth granted to her, eyes steered downwards. “It was a joint venture, really. We sat in there for days, definitely more than a week. A few others had met the same fate, and some were taken away by the trolls; in all likelihood interrogated and killed. There were, at the very least, four other survivors from our squad, once Samuels and I managed to collapse the magic suppression bonds that the Drakkari had fashioned.”

“You shattered them? How?”

She zones out for a few seconds, gaze unfocused and drifting. Then, she shrugs halfheartedly. “I beseeched the elements, told them to assist us. They obliged. As Samuels teleported us out and past the threshold, we hastily developed a new plan, to split in order to be harder to track.”

With a malleable gap, Samuels vocalizes his own opinion. “From where I’m sitting, we only have one alternative now – we should withdraw to a safer foothold, try to recover the rest of the squad and report back to Alliance Command.”

As the two float towards contrasting ends of the spectrum, Bekkit coughs awkwardly. “Well…I’m sort of in the same boat as Samuels, Lieutenant; though, I concur it’s unfortunate we never extracted anything constructive from this leg of our operations. But there’s always next time!”

Aruu’s next exhale is somewhat exasperated. “No. Do neither of you get it? Leaving now would be misconceived, as we’re so close to our goal.”

“Misconceived?”, Samuels repeats with a level of disbelief. “Aruunel, Captain Delron is dead and our gear was impounded by the trolls. How the hell do you reckon we go from here?”
In this one street, the shaman has to relent and reassess her values. With few other items on the menu, she turns to the mercs.

"Is there any way we can solicit you for assistance?"

Thariss spreads her arms with marked skepticism.

"Well, maybe, but we don’t even know what it is you guys are after. No one’s told us jack shit."

This proves to be a claim which places all three of the soldiers in a state of ambivalence.

"Lieutenant", emits Bekkit. "Would it truly be wise to incorporate outside elements into this complication? Could just make everything ten times worse."

"I don’t see how we have any choice", admits Aruu.

"We could follow my plan…", mutters the human. "You know, would save us a lot of grief from our superiors."

"Are you that blind, Samuels? The General is exactly the type of person who would press us to obtain our objectives at all costs – even if that implies moderately bending the rules."

He retreats and lifts his arms in surrender.

"Alright, suit yourself! I’m not taking the fall for this one. It’s all on you."

She shakes her head in contempt.

"With the Captain no longer among us, the burden was already on my shoulders, fool."

While the faction-aligned bicker, the neutral party is in a pondering lockdown.

"This may or may not be a fact", alleges Rax, "but for us, the contention in question is instead what more precisely is unfolding here. We are out of our elements in this matter, I would surmise. What part of the Alliance do you report to and what is this objective?"

On the heels of some dilly-dallying, Samuels and Bekkit motions at Aruu, to demonstrate that they’ll stay out of her way.

"Normally, we are loath to speak this out loud, but we can grant you fragments of insight, to part the haze, as it were.

When last we met, I wasn’t perfectly truthful with you. By that point, I had already entered into the morass of the Alliance’s…more secretive activities, which is more than being a simple soldier or ground pounder. For the last year or so, I’ve been a member of a special forces subdivision of the Ninth Legion, designated ‘Section Three’. We are less…conspicuous than our comrades in the Seventh Legion."

All three of the other women are bemused by the title, but the soldiers give off no prompts of a joke.

"Section Three? There’s a one and two?", Thariss inquiries.

"I can’t descend any deeper into its formation, for it’s of a sensitive nature. Just know that what we do helps safeguard the cohesion of the Alliance." She halts momentarily, to inhale and ready herself. "In truth, divulging any single portion of the intel we possess is probably a criminal offense to some degree, due to the clearance one must earn and the clandestine dimensions of our organization, but right now, that’s quite moot. Our mission is borderline unsalvageable, with much of our squad dead, including our leader. We escaped by the skin of our teeth and triumph from here is inconceivable. We need support."

"I’m not disputing you, Lieutenant", starts Samuels. "But in my mind, this is plainly why heading back to HQ and updating them on our progress is the right call, not putting more nails in the
“If we cut bait, nothing will come of this. You may do as you wish, Specialist, but I’ll track down what we came for.”

“And uh, what was this target of yours?”, Thariss prods.

“Our original purpose in this region was to trace and acquire an ancient artifact from an era long gone, when the downed World Tree here was first erected.”

The night elf contemplates it for a second or two.

“You mean Vordrassil?”

“Oh, yes, that was the name. You know it?”

“Yeah, my mother told us the tale in my younger years, in between cursing Staghelm. Never was a big fan of the guy.”

Aruu sighs and scratches her nose.

“The full explanation is exhaustive and frankly, kind of dull, so I’ll make this short.”

They hear Samuels huffing.

“Agree to disagree.”

It would seem these two are constantly at odds. One might cogitate on why they were implemented in the same circle to begin with. All the same, Thariss smirks.

“Hey, Aruunel’s got a point and we’re commenting on my people here.”

The mage is unimpressed with her conclusion.

“It would merely indicate you have an insipid appreciation for historical details.”

“Whatever. Nerd.”

Riv lays a hand on her beloved’s arm, clutching it softly.

“Thariss…”

“Basically”, Aruu continues, “Fandral Staghelm – one of the Archdruids of the kaldorei – planted branches over some saronite in this specific province millennia ago, in order to nurture a brand-new World Tree. The idea was auspicious, but the output left much to be desired. It failed as a result of being corrupted by Yogg-Saron’s cage, one of the Old Gods imprisoned here, as the saronite energy seeped into the roots. The kaldorei saw no other recourse than to cut it down, but the area was never conclusively cleansed.

However, the original hollow, the hole where the branches were buried and the source of the construction, should still have contained the item deployed which allowed the tree to fertilize and mature – the druids called it a ‘Splinter of Malorne’. Though it has since been rendered warped by Old Gods influence and magic, a druid reached out to Alliance High Command and swore that she and some of her brethren could purge the tainted essence. It would be a formidable weapon against the Scourge. All they required was someone to extract the Splinter.”

Now with the warrior having divorced her glibness, her fingers are interlocked with those of Riv, mesmerizingly watching Aruu and digesting the narrative in her mind.

“That’s…a lot more comprehensive than mother communicated. So, enter Section Three?”

“Yes, our squad was selected for the job, a group of fourteen troops. We originally embarked on a voyage to the World Tree, falsely assuming it would hold what we were chasing, but made a
shocking discovery upon arrival – it was gone.”

“Gone? Destroyed?”

“Incorrect”, replies Bekkit. “Another faction had beat us to it.”

Aruu nods briefly.

“Indeed. We rummaged through the furbolg camps in the area, but came up empty. Afterwards, we naturally suspected the Scourge, for who else would be so keen on thwarting our success? Sadly, our consequent calculations were wrong, and it wasn’t until numerous days later that we uncovered evidence which steered us towards the west instead, near a subset of troll ruins.”

As this rings in her ears, Riv’s twitches light and mental images spawn.

“Hmm. Believe I spotted some of those where we picked you up. Or in the same sector, anyway.”

“True, those clusters are close to our destination. Regrettably, we faced two issues – 1) Having departed furbolg territory, we were continuously followed by…some manner of beast that we couldn’t identify, but were able to sense in the air. Or them, as it was resoundingly more than one. 2) A contingent of Drakkari had already set up camp in the whereabouts and as we showed up, they ambushed us immediately. Were in the middle of performing surveys at the time. Most survived and were taken prisoner. Now there’s only half of us left.”

“Said your Captain died?”, probes Thariss. “How’d you know?”

The question, while simple, spurs a scowl on Aruu, Samuels to swallow in dismay and Bekkit to scratch her cheek.

“Because…we saw his body”, reveals the latter. “After the...interrogations.”

“They dumped him among the rest of the uh…fallen captives”, says Samuels.

“Rhavjaka”, curses Aruu at the memory, but neither she nor Rax reveals the translation. “Anyhow, I’m no healer, but it was visible enough that he had been tortured. But regardless of our current state of affairs, it would be a critical boon for the Alliance to gain the Splinter. Join us, once we’ve revitalized a bit.”

Her plea is genuine and respectable, but on the whole, it creates worry in Rax.

“Aruu, this may not be wise. If what you say is accurate, you have been captives for days, starved and dehydrated. The best to do now would be to escort you to the nearest town and-”

“Your pity or concern is irrelevant”, Aruu interrupts strictly. She switches to stare at her old companion. “I can handle myself, Rax. I’ve got no shortage of experience.”

The paladin can sustain a connection between them for only a fleeting period, until she averts her eyes. Aruu then looks at the elves.

“We managed to salvage some gear from the trolls we slayed. Should be adequate physical protection.”

“Oh, please. End this swaggering act, Lieutenant”, complains Samuels. “It’s nuts! We didn’t pull it off with a dozen troops, but you expect to do the trick at half strength?”

“Believe what you will, but it’s not impossible. In the next phase, we’re now clued in on the troll’s positions and tactics, as well as what we’re chasing. We can prevail, if we tread carefully. In fact, a smaller team would be less likely to get detected.”

Samuels, still trapped in a mire of doubt and self-preservation, distraughtly shakes his head.

“Seriously, do you know the odds of this? It’s an extremely long shot.”
“I’m well aware.” That’s when she rewinds to Rax and her companions. “We can’t do this without your support. Please, stand with us. I will guarantee you’re paid double what the Captain promised, by the Ninth Legion.”

Rax is in a severe torrent of trepidation, not knowing which way to swing and Riv scours her friends for reactions. Thariss is the sole person ready to respond, her ears twitching in fascination. “Double, huh? That’ll make for a nice pile o’ gold…”

Preceding their decision, Samuels says his piece. “Alright, I’m done. You wanna pursue this irrational gamble?” He discards it with a wave. “Be my guest. But I’m getting out and heading straight for Amberpine. Someone has to report back to the Alliance to fill them in on your failure and I’ll be happy to play the part. I’d teleport out, but at this distance, the decay surrounding the leylines would be too hazardous.”

Aruu doesn’t seem particularly discouraged by his disentanglement. “Fine, whatever you say. We shall survive without you.”

“I have sincere qualms about the veracity of such lofty claims…”

The two may have reached a compromise, but Bekkit is much less convinced. “This is unwise, both of you. We should stick together.”

“Quite the contrary, this might prove to be a sensible division” posits Aruu. “It behooves us to enact some kind of fail-safe, in case the second endeavor falls by the wayside.”

“Well, would you look at that”, states Samuels in a mildly derisive tune. “We’re in line on something. All that’s left is for me to wish you luck, I suppose, for when you commence. At least make an attempt to survive, however poor the prospect is.”

“We’ll do better than that, by prevailing. However, the fate of this mission hangs in the balance, for we rely on the three of you to accept”, she tells the mercs. “I will not disguise it either – once we’ve cemented our arrangement, there’s no forfeiting. Consider everything with prudence.”

“I’m up for the challenge, all the way”, Thariss divulges. “Not cuz I wanna wave the blue flag or anything, but tilting the scales on the Scourge sounds pretty sweet.”

Riv is at a more cautious stage, rubbing her chin thoughtfully. “I want more details. What exactly does this entail? Where would we go and who are we fighting?”

At this time, Aruu has begun using the cloth she received to wipe her axes clean. “By the intel we’ve accessed, I can’t be completely sure, but it’s leaning towards the Twilight Hammer.”

Thariss grimaces. “Oh, great. Always wanted to have a second round with those tentacle-loving fucks.”

Riv arches her brow questioningly. “You know of them?”

“Yeah. Before our time, babe. They’re Old Gods worshippers.”

“The site we’re bound for”, Aruu resumes, “is in the subterranean levels of the ruins to the west, where they’re cooped up. The entrance has been blocked, but I have solutions to breach it. I can’t furnish you with a systematic strategy for how we shall deal with them yet. We’ll cross that bridge
With the situation delineated and the mission on the table, the mercs have to choose whether to accept or reject. By now, they have all pieces of the puzzle as they’re likely to attain. “It does sound exceedingly risky”, Riv admits, “and a little skewed for an official Alliance operation…”

“But we’ll take the bargain”, Thariss affirms. “We’re in.”

Bekkit and Aruu both seem relieved, and Riv retrieves her weapon once more, securing it over her shoulder. “We’ll help you surmount the cultists, but I consult you to take it slow and warily. Let’s not rush into anything.”
It’s the little things she misses the most, the unnoticed, the unremarked essentials. Stuff that would be a blur in everyday duties, but that now have grown into hollows in her soul, compartments she never knew were empty. The flavor of Southsun marmalade, the clanging of the blacksmith’s hammer, flirting with the shy fruit vendor in the morning, the scent of a particular hunter’s aroma following a long and sensual night…
Ashindra still remember them, but merely in fits and starts. They are somewhat overshadowed, by greyer skies of reality and of a shameful truth.

Once Rivaryn and Ash unfastened at Wyrmrest Temple, they were bound to go their separate ways, given their differing allegiances and priorities, which neither felt was wrong or inauspicious. They’ll see each other again someday.
As it were, they were not destined to schism as distantly as one could’ve visualized, for while Riv voyaged into the Grizzly Hills, Ash ended up only just past the border to the north, in Zul’Drak.

The Argent Crusade squads that had been stationed at the Temple were relocated to this province and their goal is twofold – 1) investigate Scourge activity and evaluate their formidability, risk assessment, spread and if any countermeasures can be distributed. If so, hit them where it hurts. 2) Decipher the circulating rumors and indications that the Ebon Knights are conducting missions in the zone. If at all possible, establish contact and grill them for their ambitions and commitments in Zul’Drak. If help can be lent for key strikes, they have the all-clear to take the initiative.

As the sun rises on the stiff horizon of the glacier-like continent, thawing the dozed off living only to a minimum, Ash is cognizant of that Melia stirs and rises. Couple of minutes later, she rounds up her squad.
After Commander Tailbirch debriefed them back in the Temple, they were allocated two more squads, as well as a new leader – Captain Briggton. A human born in Elwynn, he’s dour, introspective and firm, though not the bellowing type.

As per the bulk of days spent here in the last several weeks, Ash has been active during the final sentry shift of the darkened hours, the late morning streak, which puts her as responsible for arranging the breakfast setting, or at least those with the aptitude.
Once the Sergeant gets her immediate superior a refreshing meal and a cup of tea, the two go for a stroll, partially to heat the remainder of Melia’s body. It’s awfully cold to awaken here and a little exercise is a welcoming conduit for it, especially given the company.

“So, Briggton been an obstacle in any way to you?”, the Lieutenant inquiries.

Ash, already having energized herself, sticks a hand to the hilt of her sword and floats her gaze out over the scenery, as monotonous and dreary as it is.
“Not so far. Although, I have to note that he’s an uncharacteristic choice as a commanding officer, at least by the common Crusade archetype.”

Melia surveys her second inquisitively.
“How do you figure?”

“He’s diligent, I’ll hand him that, but he’s not of the charismatic ilk, nor does he carry an overdose of zeal.”
“Heh, well, I could argue that’s not a criteria.”

Ash briefly holds up her hand. “I know this, but it’s a plus and by all demonstrations, sort of a Crusade staple. He’s an outlier.”

“Hmm. Well, he is our ranking officer, so for the time being, we’ll have to contend with him and his mannerisms, whatever shows up.”

“And I’m prepared to, Lieutenant. Merely wished to pass along my opinion, to maintain honesty with you.”

A lucky break, for Ash is soon audience to a dazzling smile from Melia, as the Lieutenant perches a hand on her shoulder. “And I appreciate your candor, as always.”

A freezing breeze flaps around them, sending them into shuddering fits and by sheer subconscious reaction, the scope between them dwindles. They continue their promenade, gaining an increased gap to the encampment. In this stroke of seclusion, Ash’s heart supersedes her better judgment. “Don’t want to get bogged down in fault-finding and grousing this morning, so if you don’t mind, I’d like to…confide.”

Melia’s eyes flip with zest, though she preserves a veil of cool. “Yeah, sure. I’m here for you, Ash.”

Ash catches a hefty breath, a reflexive act, to precipitate her subsequent baring of facts. “Still haven’t fully processed our encounter with Rivaryn”, she outs, practically no louder than the wind.

The human’s look is kind, compassionate. Too good of a soul for Ash. “You have any regrets in relation to it?”

“No, not…regrets. Instead, I can’t help but dwell on whether I generated the impact on Riv that I pined for.” She stalls for a few seconds, rubbing her hand delicately above her neck as she mulls her next step over. “There’s an angle you should be made aware of about me - I’m never quick to…fess up to my mistakes. It’s erm…” She coughs politely. “…a character flaw. But the last confrontation with Rivaryn rattled me to a profound degree, made me acknowledge the lane I was conforming to had been a huge personal fallacy. I…hope my headway on this shortcoming was the impression Riv accrued. She has earned that much…and more.”

Hadn’t been the intended consequence, but a crack of unrest settles in Melia, as she grips Ash’s forearm. “Hey, don’t let it hang over you. If you do, no doubt it’ll molder until you begin to rot. Better to off-load it now, save yourself the trouble and move on. I chatted with your old friend, you know. She nursed no grudge.”

Ash reflects on it, letting the lens twist and squirm via her interior. Maybe there is something she can do to deflate its effect. “Lieu—Melia, may I pose a personal question for you? It might seem a little offhand, possibly breaching some boundaries, but…”

Melia aligns at her expectantly, more engrossed now than previously. “I’ve shared more with you than almost anyone in the Crusade, so ask ahead.”
“It’s regarding your father.”

The Lieutenant noticeably hardens, her lips pursing, brows sinking. She swallows, but abides.
“Well uh…yeah, okay.”

“If the opportunity ever arose, at any point, would you take it in order to find and meet your father? A chance to turn over a new leaf, a reset in your lives.”

Ironically, while Melia counseled Ash to forego her burdens, she’s apparently not at the stage to subscribe to her own words, for she displays blatant signals of indecision.
“Ultimately…no, I probably wouldn’t.”

“You…wouldn’t prefer to forgive him? Not even if he wants to make reparations?”

The human’s focus goes astray, despite not detaching herself.
"He made his values crystal clear, and those were him over me and mom. He left, so whatever his concerns are now, they don’t matter. I’m past him and any trite apologies. Which won’t come, by the way. Wager he reckons we died in the culling.”

Stark and strident, but not necessarily unjustified. Ash’s parents didn’t forsake her and even in the Vestarial dilemma, it was a good deal more levelled. But it doesn’t prevent the guilt from commencing its gnashing in the back of her head, and from her to start fidgeting, as she teeters on how to advance away from this tricky spot.

With nothing springing from Ash’s lips, Melia feels it warrants a shove.
“Why’re you highlighting this anyway? Does my father’s absence…bother you?”

Ash lifts her hand, scratching behind her neck with an anxious crease on her eyebrows.
“In a sense, but not the plain one.
Do you recall when we spoke of…atonement?”

“Oh, yeah, think I do. Was a lil’ outta the blue.”

“Well, I broached it because I’ve been party to and at fault for certain…ethical violations.”

Melia perplexedly raises a brow.
“Violations?”

“As a…Blood Knight.”

“I don’t quite follow. You committed crimes?”

By this moment, they’ve cut their stride short and reside on a specific slot, at a range from the camp. Ash is in a fluxed shape, swinging whether to proceed or not. She did sound off on A, why hold back on B?
“Not…me as an individual, but the Order itself.”

“Hold on. You’re saying the blood elven paladins are responsible for something big? Of what variety?”

Ash breathes out through her nose, clenching her sword a bit fiercer.
“The type which makes you debate if you’re yet entitled to the Light’s grace.” The draft in the air is getting more incessant and Ash has to brush her hair out of her face.
“How much have you heard of the Blood Knights?”
“Uh…well, probably fair to claim that my expertise in that field is finite. I’m aware their your people’s paladin guild, which rolled in after the Sunwell was vandalized and your capital city sacked. That about wraps it up.”

“But you had no idea of its framework?”

“I would have no way of knowing. Haven’t received the option to visit since years prior to the… decimation and I got a hunch they wouldn’t drop me an invite nowadays.”

Ash affords a delayed inclination of her head.

“Slim chances of that, yes. Even if it’s true that my former associates now tap the Light and arcane fused energies of the Sunwell to execute their powers – as do I – it wasn’t always so. Our dawn was…less virtuous. In the wake of the Scourge’s incursion, and such a ravaging devastation, the quel’dorei – now sin’dorei – were not just demoralized. We were resentful.”

“Of…humans?”

For a spell, Ash suspends her mental speed and funnels a nonplussed perception of her superior, before recovering shortly thereafter.

“What? No, that was not—okay, that did come to pass, but not right away. We had a more… metaphysical scapegoat. Not only had many of us been believers in the Holy Light, but most stayed true to its ideology and principles, right up till the juncture where everything crashed and burned. The reality of our tragedy could not be misinterpreted – the Light had failed to protect us, left us dispossessed and destitute, with an excruciating hunger for magic that could hardly be sated. As the trend to feed from arcane sources in living entities and siphoned crystals mounted, the budding paladin Order proposed that we copy and repurpose this method.”

Suddenly, it strikes Melia in a by far more intense fashion.

“Wait, you’re telling me they…drained the Light from people?”

“Not from all people, but organisms that embody the Light itself.”

The Lieutenant widens her eyes, genuinely staggered. It would appear she never had the foggiest.

“…the naaru.”

“Indeed.”

Ash averts her gaze in shame.

“Servants of Prince Kael’thas abducted one designated ‘M’uru’ at the assault on Tempest Keep, and later transferred the entity to Silvermoon to sap power from. In lieu of it, an innovative Magister premised that we manipulate the Light potency for our own gain – paladins without compliance to faith.”

It’s no wonder that Melia can’t hide the truth of how appalled she is by the notion.

“Were you…culpable of the same act?”

“I was – and rather cheerful to boot. My disillusionment was equally aggressive as a by-product of the fall. I…lost my parents, a fair share of friends and loved ones, fellow priests.” She chugs down a lump in her throat, the simmering emotions beneath the surface. Her tone is a bit shaky. “During our flight, I witnessed some of the…atrocities and was unable to prevent any of it. Children, innocents, elderly…all of them torn asunder as if their lives were nothing more than fodder for the undead. Too numerous to count. The whole ordeal was so bleak, so harrowing, as if the end of the world had been ushered. I just…
broke.”

All of these horrors notwithstanding, Melia doesn’t verbalize her thoughts, but she can’t deny that idea sends chills up her spine. It’s ghastly to imagine someone leeching the Light’s energy straight from the body of another living being. It is inimical to the very teachings of the Light, what code Melia was raised upon.

As opposed to laying into a traumatized woman, however, she elaborates on the uncontested.

“You’re obviously different now, Ash. What made you pivot on your standpoint? The Sunwell?”

The paladin looks downwards now, kicking at a couple of rocks on the solidified ground, still a flush of ill conscience roaming her.

“It’s part of it, yeah”, she confesses. “But I’m also indebted to Rivaryn. She unshut my eyes. We ran into each other at the Black Temple on Outland and she went head to head with me on…an unrelated matter. The essence of it, in the long run, is that she was correct and elicited a wake-up call in me.”

Revealing this, at such a phase, not just Ash’s shoulders, but her ears slump in defeat.

“It hit me how despicable, how inextricably dishonorable – in the most literal sense of the word – our perpetrations were. It was…anathema to what I’d been taught at the church. Worse, it was pure, undiluted cowardice. What I and the remainder of the Order perpetrated was no better than the injustices of the Scarlet Crusade.”

This has affected the paladin in a far more powerful capacity than Melia could’ve foreseen. She attempts to grip Ash’s hand, soothe her.

“Ash, you shouldn’t beat yourself up like that.”

But such consolation is substandard in these waters. Instead, Ash frowns, digs in deeper.

“I’m serious. Who else in this world is so adamant to warp their moral compass? I can’t take the high ground in this case, for it was…beyond the pale.”

“Your people were desperate. You were at the brink of extinction.”

“And that excuses scrapping every shred of our ideals? What is even the point of surviving, if we end up as monsters regardless?”

She plants a hand on her forehead, pressing into it in an endeavor to calm down, images of remote events blistering through her mind. In the meantime, Melia affectionately and abatingly kneads her arm.

“I…I’m sorry. I’ve…kept this pent up for a time now, that it kind of just…swelled. Those were not some of my finest years.”

“I hear you and I understand it, more than you might assume. But in the grand scheme of things, Ash, this doesn’t seal off redemption. Everyone deserves a second chance; you and your people more than most.”

Offsetting the guilt in earnest now, Ash’s whole frame droops, slackens. Her green shift and regroups with Melia’s greys.

“Even your father?”

“Heh. Let’s…deal with one person’s baggage at a time, shall we?”

“Perhaps you’re right.”

Consequently, she detects Melia’s fingers around hers and innately, their eyes convene, searching the soul of their companion. Ash is on the doorstep of exposing her other shame – the indefinitely more monumental one – but veers at the last second. She clears her throat.
“Thanks. Erm, for the vote of confidence and encouragement.”

Melia smiles and rests her cheek on Ash’s arm.
“Anytime.”

Chapter End Notes

No Vestarial debate yet. Saving it for last
Nary a soul is standing witness as the Section Three duo and their mercenary trio appendix prowl out from the relative comfort of their glade shelter, now with one count lower, as Samuels has departed their company and drawn himself back into the awaiting arms of Alliance dominion. To tip the scales marginally in their favor, the team opted to aim for a night time assault, seeming like the most opportune segment of the day for this form of operation.

For the majority of the party, it is a challenge of stepping stones and managing one’s speed, as to stay as muted as is feasible. Three of them try their best to watch and reproduce Rivaryn’s slick slides. As a skilled and experienced ranger, for Riv it is not so much a steep measure as it is to mentally rewire herself into her old rut back as a Farstrider. Once she does, the rest comes naturally. Another who excels primarily without assistance is Thariss. Below the night’s darkened belly, her race’s natural abilities are close at hand and if she sticks to a patient speed, she can practically disappear into the shadows.

Weather conditions are not uncomplicated to predict up here, what with discordant magical influences flipping the answer on an irregular reliability, but as luck would have it, the sky is cloudy this night. It is in instances like these that Aruuel wishes the Grizzly Hills were more densely populated by trees, though. However quantitative and tall they are, the atmosphere is still rife with bare stretches.

Fortunately, the ruins they’re surveilling for entry are not the primary epicenter for Drakkari supervision. In the dim veil of the late hours, the trolls have no more than a few patrols on sentry duty, as the burrowing and excavating is put on hold. Even so, their guard schedule is not ironclad, which opens up for mishaps and bungling. Devious stealth-savvy souls can more than likely tiptoe their way past the system.

The merc trio previously possessed a sketchy knowledge of their destination, besides its discernible ties to ice troll history. The decorated patterns on the stone, the ornaments, the jagged symmetry of the braziers – much of it jogs Riv’s memory, of Amani motif and handiwork, yet with its own spin. “So, this is Drakkari craftsmanship.”

“Indeed”, responds Aruu. “Our regional intel categorized these ruins as Drak’Zin. The application for them, what assets they bestow or the capacity they serve nowadays for the Drakkari is thus far unidentified, but neither does it carry much bearing on our task.”

“Don’t suppose you’ve got maps on the interior?”, asks Thariss.

Regrettably, the shaman shakes her head. “Our squad would have been the first Alliance presence in there, possibly the first non-Drakkari in many a decade. The trolls could cover such ground, but as you know, we weren’t in a position to salvage anything from them.”

To break inside, they have to enact care, a slithering pace and patience. The Drakkari might not cram the area with troops, but it’s not fecklessly maintained. No one in the team can boast being an expert at furtive methods, but keeping one’s distance and taking it slow can do wonders for worming one’s way into illicit breaches; expressly so with a
thick layer of darkness and faded illumination.

Despite the nature of their espoused mission and the sorely pressed deadline, Raxeen discreetly treads over to Aruu’s side while they standby for the guard to do his round, swapping to their mother tongue.

“I cannot predict what will transpire here, or how long you elect to stay with us, so I should pose the question now before it runs its course – how did you get tangled in this…web of secrecy? In our days together, you were far more…overt.”

Aruu muzzles her groan as she stares daggers at the paladin from her peripheral vision.

“You seriously want to push this now?”

“After this cooperative effort is cast off, you will drop out of sight, no? Now is my only chance.”

Straining her face, Aruu nudges her less-than-joyous expression near her ex.

“And why would you assume I’d tell you a single word of it?”

The hostility is nearly combusting, but Rax, to her credit, does not rise to it. She doesn’t shy away, nor duplicate the heat. Her gaze merely drifts from eye to eye.

“I don’t. This is why I’m asking, appealing to your kinder and more amenable sensibilities. I realize you won’t forgive me for…our past, but you won’t have to. I simply care to hear that an old friend of mine is genuinely safe and not held at an emotional swordpoint.”

And here, Aruu snorts and pull her face away.

“Friend? Really?”

“Aruu, please…you have already disclosed more than we’re legally approved for.”

“Then perhaps I should keep my mouth firmly shut and not dig the grave deeper.”

“I’ve partnered with intelligence organizations before, draenei ones. I know what’s at stake, what they’re capable of.”

The way which she phrases it makes Aruu briskly and lividly maneuver to regard Rax once more.

“Excuse me? That’s what you reckon is happening? Blackmail or bribing?”

At this charge, Rax is a tad more hesitant, dropping her focus to the ground.

“Well…I’m honestly somewhat out of touch here.”

“And out of your elements, I suspect. You were a Vindicator, Rax, not a spy or rangari.”

The paladin breathes out through her nose, forfeiting just about, but not in full.

“Then prove it. Illustrate to me that my apprehension is paranoia and not legitimate skepticism.”

Aruu glares at Rax with the energy of a bursting sun, clenching and burying her fist into the earth in a manifestation of her faltering temper. Rax is quite cognizant that the odds are still 50/50 whether Aruu will recount the tale or eviscerate the paladin’s face with an axe. Or just her nails. Gradually, she swivels away, homing in on the ruin and the objective, in order to regulate her degenerating mood. Might push her over the edge otherwise.

“Not that it’s any of your business…but if you’re so persistent, I’ll indulge you.” And in all likelihood, partially out of spite. It could underwrite once and for all that Aruu is a resourceful, skilled woman, who can do without the coddling.

“After a dreary period of languishing, I grew taxed with the ordinary life of the Exodar and consequently sought challenge, battle. Of course, I set my sights on the Horde. I set out and began
my quest in Kalimdor. Had some success for a few weeks too. But prior to fulfilling my deepest hostile whims, I was contacted and intercepted by an unsourced and undefined…association.”

In the process of story, Rax had centered her aim over the fields, to be on the lookout for unforeseen snags, but doubles back right away.
“Association?”

“They confessed to have trailed me for a prolonged time and told me that my talents could come into much better service for the Alliance. If I was ‘done clobbering like an infant’, they had a proposition.”

“…they actually said that?”

Aruu hurls a face at Rax which tells her not to drive this inquiry in.
“With little else to feed on, I begrudgingly accepted the offer and was henceforth transferred to a remote and off-the-grid destination, somewhere in Stormwind territory. Don’t ask for the nitty-gritty, for I scarcely recall it myself.
There, I met with a short stocky human woman, who introduced herself as General Rita Hammond, head of the Ninth Legion, one of the top-ranked officers in the Alliance military. She invited me in and once we’d shared a drink, clued me in on that she’d been illuminated of my past performance and deftness in the draenei army. She pinpointed specifically our ‘war’ versus the orcs on Draenor, the transition I had undergone by the spirits. Said she ‘wasn’t an authority on the elements and ancestors’ and so forth, but she gleaned that I could very well be.
The reports they’d compiled on me had impressed her and other renowned representatives of the Ninth Legion. Claimed that she was confident I had plenty to contribute in the special forces. She conceded that the accounts outlined my exceptional proficiency in topics of brutal productivity and strewing rampage, but also sloppy, uncontrolled, aimless and a waste of a fine blade.” She snorts wistfully. “Almost as if master Nobundo himself wrote it. General Hammond insisted that, with a handler’s touch, I could tame some forbearance and direction. Section Three was her proposal as the instrument of control.”

“And you…took the deal?”

“Not posthaste. She allotted me a number of weeks to knock it around. Naturally, I was…torn”, she voices, shortly prior to giving Rax a meaningful glance, “in light of my former career.”
Rax’s features send signals of a rueful reaction to this comment, even if she keeps thoughts to herself.
“But when it all comes down to it, this is who I am. A fighter, a soldier, a…doer. It may not be pretty, won’t afford me medals, parades and public commendations, but it is labor that must be done, for the Alliance.” To articulate it, she stares poignantly into the paladin’s eyes. “And I’d be grateful if you stayed out of it.”

In time, they have to let up and decrease their volumes, as the entranceway to the ruin is coming into view and grows deserted. The team has traced a path along the outer reaches of the open widths of the vicinity, bolting from tree to tree.
The pocket where the gateway lies is overarchingly stripped of vegetation, save grass, to make room for the structures and installations that the age old troll denizens produced. Thariss bestows the exterior level a rather unimpressed once-over.
“Whew. These really are some ramshackle hives, huh? No one’s renovated this place since my mom was in school, I bet.”

“Don’t let the face value deceive you”, asserts Bekkit. “Though the ground-level scenery is delipidated and inadequately conserved in this late era of its lifespan, our squad accomplished
cursory scouting, hours ahead of our capture. The entryway you see over there constitute subterranean tunnels that were dug out and sculpted underneath.”

“No shit? What’s down there?”

“Purportedly some high-profile deceased of ages past were laid to rest in the burrow, but it was prevalingly adopted for use as an ancient research station.”

Riv’s ears twitches with fascination.
“Research of what?”

The gnome lifts her hand to display an absence of answers.
“Who knows? No details of the experiments housed here have materialized for us. Should we unearth preserved journals of any sort, it would be most compelling to deconstruct the specifics. Even then, there is the quandary of hunting down a willing translator with education in the ancient Drakkari dialect of Zandali…”

“Which isn’t our priority”, Aruu punctuates. “Stick to the objective, Bekkit.”

“Ah, yes, naturally, Lieutenant.”

Breaching the ruins is infinitely more intuitive on this occasion, on account of no spies or lurking shadows fastening onto their every step, to betray their mobility. The squadron lies in wait for a secondary patrol to go their route and then promptly advances as delicately as they’re permitted, towards the unobstructed maw, which curiously is left ostensibly uncharted. The inner hallways are truly in a degraded state, forlorn and neglected. There’s no honest to goodness doorway, for the ingress is verging on a hole in the ground rather than a grand avenue.

It does digress beyond a simple pit, however. Stone stairs descend into pitch blackness, flanked by intricate antiquated symbols and artistic depictions of animals – one is presumably a polar bear, another a snake. Renditions of the Drakkari loa, perchance? The tunnels down here are extensive and dim, devoid of a meaningful light source. The group plunges into this pool of shades, but puts off devising one of their own until the stars are no longer visible. Then, Thariss fetches a torch from her bag and lets her girlfriend ignite it.

Thariss and Riv alike have to squash fits of coughing. Their throats are provoked by the dust that litters the floor, outcroppings and antique paraphernalia, which nest discarded from a diminished generation. As none of them can brag about archaeological training, nor any knack for anthropology, the general value of the place is quite lackluster, for it contains hardly anything of note. This isn’t a treasure hunt, but there are also no imperative components for the task at hand which jut out and snatch their interest. No maps, no markers, empirical items that would string them along.

It’s hard to declare that these halls are a maze, for they’re not quite so comprehensive and a few tunnels are caved in. A small count of them even comprise old triggered traps.
Aruu treads into the front, the clomping of her hoofs scattering just lightly over the walls. With a somber and resolute expression, she hastily studies the roads which branch out.
“Combing each and every one of these tunnels will take too long”, she alleges. “We don’t have all night, but we’re counting on that the Splinter is concealed in a slot here somewhere.”

Having uncoupled herself for a minute or so, Riv now comes rounding a corner into the same corridor.
“Razz and I swept the adjacent paths over here. Not much to report, really. They appear to go on and on. That said, there is definitely something…elusive about this habitat, a little odd.”
“Odd?”, Thariss repeats. “You smellin’ something, babe?”

Reflexively, the blood elf grazes a few fingers over her own nose. “I didn’t discover any arcane traces, but yes, there is a cleansing scent. It hangs faintly in the air, but subtle.”

Aruu pitches an eyebrow up. “It does? That’s suspicious. There can’t be a smell without a source, right?”

“I concur. Either we’re dealing with an illusion or another type of magical guise is at work here.”

Even if she’s aware at it won’t be welcomed with open arms, Rax reckons she has to put her suggestion forward. “I can enact some perception prayers, Aruu, try to find a trail. If this lair’s veins are steeped in corruption, the Light will guide me to it.”

Surprisingly, Aruu shrugs. “Go ahead. It’s worth a shot.”

A fleeting smile decorates Rax’s lips, before she clears her throat and tries to concentrate. She shuts her eyes, lays a hand onto her own chest and mumbles in the draenei tongue, a plea to the Light and a yearning for its wisdom. Aruu seems to bear a minimal reliance on it and doesn’t lend it scores of credence.

For Rax’s elven cohorts, it’s a noteworthy opportunity to observe Aruu’s impersonal affinity for it. Her disenchantment for the Light registers as altogether earnest.

Seconds later, Rax’s eyes flip open and she instinctively banks to a particular corridor. “This way. I detect a malicious entity down this passage, or several, rather. Like…dots of contamination, flecks of death. A Scourge spark.”

The blood elf’s frame freezes slightly, which urges Thariss to grab and clutch her hand for comfort. In the meantime, Aruu puts one of her fists in the palm of the other. “Ah, I knew it. Had my fingers on it, but no evidence. They have to be the culprit.”

“Let us not be so heedless”, proclaims Rax. “I do not think it is as straightforward as you presuppose, Aruu. This power font that I can sense, it is…bent somehow, marred.”

The shaman is unperturbed by her paltry warning. “It’s the undead, Rax. What were you expecting?”

“That is not what I implied. I am saying that this is not the Scourge, but most assuredly…reminiscent. If I were to guess, I would surmise it is a deviating entity which exploits a necromancer’s likeness.”

Aruu isn’t fully satisfied with this description, but she lets it off the hook. “Can you guide us to the accurate whereabouts?”

“Without hesitation, yes.”

The shaman flags the road with her hand. “By all means. For the rest of you, I also counsel unsheathing of weaponry. Let us remain alert and set for battle.”

Strangely, what Rax navigates to is nothing more than a closed and apparently stable rock wall, with no transparency, as solid as solid can be.
“Hmm. This should be the correct route. The stained aura oozes from this venue.”

“Well, whomever is in there, they could’ve activated some defunct defenses. It’s the only logical outcome, why Rivaryn senses aroma but no visual evidence and why your tracks end here.”

Thariss picks up the sword in her hand and taps it onto the wall. There’s a palpable resistance, meaning it is not a hugely clever trick.

“So, the hitch in this case is, how do we get inside?”

“There is little doubt in my mind they powered the ingrained mechanism by fueling it with spiritual essence. I can hear the faint anguished cries of cursed souls upon the breeze. Lost troll ones, I wager.”

“Can you fix it, then? You got your uh…” The night elf pauses and rolls her fingers in the air, hoping to find the right term. “…spiritual whatsit. Drop in the bucket, right?”

Aruu turns to frown at her ignorance.

“No, I can’t. There are miles apart between the schools of shamanism and necromancy. We commune, they enslave.
I can confer with ancestors, yes, but my foremost bridge is to the-“

Her elaboration is suddenly cut short by Riv shushing her.

 “…pardon? You can’t-“

But the hunter raises a finger, to show that she should hold her tongue.

“I hear footsteps.”

Dread grips and soaks them all in an immediate gating of sound.

“Where?”, whispers Thariss.

Riv gives it another chunk of seconds, until she gestures at the wall, the same obstruction to Rax’s search. A moment or two elapses, but the rest catches the same pitter-patter imminently.

“Hurry”, Aruu warns them in a low pitch, “get into cover!”

They can’t afford to be uncovered too soon, preceding acquisition of sufficient data on this whole affair. In keeping with Aruu’s assessment, they all pile away and find an empty corridor to slink into. The torch they lit earlier is extinguished and impulsively, Riv places a hand over Razz’s maw, as a precaution, however unnecessary.

Just as they conjectured, the racket of a door opening bounces across the walls, as some manner of secret sliding entrance is pulled ajar. The pocket is no more than a meter at most, but one figure comes forth from it. Per the contours, they gather that it’s a human. However, the audience is shocked as they bear witness to how its anatomy begins to shift into another build, more beastly. Claws spring out of the hands, a thick light brown fur overtakes practically every particle of skin, the head elongates and develops a predator’s fangs and its eyes blaze in a decisive yellow.

The team can’t stand and gawk for long, as the beast seems to be in a real hurry, inspecting its surroundings for but a second or two, before it enters a hasty pace and rushes off. Confoundingly, it sprints in the opposite direction of the located doorway, delving further into the ruin. A back exit?

Nearly everybody who spotted the stunt are stunned into muteness, ineffective at producing a remark on what they beheld. There is one stark exception – Thariss.

“Huh. Now that was a real twist, wasn’t it?”
Her tone matches their baffled states, but predominantly for the characteristics of the creature, not the transformation.

“Uh, dear”, exits Riv’s lips, “do you…know what that was?”

“All in all, the group is uninformed on the name and Rax gets to embody their obliviousness. “Worgen?”,” she asks. “That word has not been amid the vocabulary which I was taught of your world.”

“Yeah, that tracks. They’re not a common afternoon tea discussion topic, so lemme catch ya up to speed – the worgen are…a kaldorei creation, or some such. My brother, Carvall – the druid - talked about ‘em once. Told me that peeps from his Order brought those things into existence.”

Riv tilts her head incredulously.

“They made worgen? How?”

“Well, story goes that, millennia ago, as my people were vying with the satyrs, we were in a sorta tough bind and sought new strengths, outlets of power. The druids pulled off the development of a technique they dubbed the ‘pack form’. Had the hide of a wolf. Sadly, despite all the might and fortitude of the spell, the mental downside was that it tapped into an unstable rage and ferocity in the brain, rendering them incapable of fully taming it. Those who tried, and failed, to master it were lost. Supposedly, they were banished to the emerald dream, but this was…y’know, eons ago.”

Bekkit clears her throat.

“As a matter of fact, I happen to have browsed some documented cases of these…worgen, in the northern strips of the Eastern Kingdoms. Reportedly, they can still be found in that region, but I’ve seen no mention of them in Northrend.”

Aruu ponders the intel she’s yielded, her tail swinging from side to side.

“Are they sentient?”

Both Thariss and Bekkit wavers.

“Uh…kinda iffy on that, now that you ask”, admits the night elf.

“It shouldn’t be…unthinkable”, posits Bekkit. “This specimen carried the simulacrum of a human prior to switching, right?”

“Yes, should be a furless guy ‘neath all that, somewhere.”

A plot is hatched in the recesses of Aruu’s head and she swirls to Riv.

“You are a hunter, correct?”

Riv blinks bemusedly.

“Erm…yes?”

“Could you rig up a trap?”

“Oh, yeah, without a bother. A basic one shouldn’t take more than a minute or two. With my engineering kit, I could craft something more advanced; this might extend the time frame, though.”

“Okay, then please get on it at once. I’ll leave the design up to you. We’re going to capture that worgen, see what it knows. We will need insight on this bunker, a map, layout and loads of other facets. This is our best bet.”
There are costs integrated in attempting such a bold measure, physical expenses, but regardless of risks, they decide to go ahead with the gambit anyway. If they are to hog the prize pouch on this one, going above and beyond is paramount.

An hour or so passes until the worgen returns. In its razor-sharp grasp, it drags a body of an animal or prey. Deer, by the curve of the horns and the dimensions of the torso. Nothing that fazes them.

The snaring of the entity is quick, but not out-and-out seamless. Having been tasked to engineer not just a constructive device, but a silent one, Riv went with the most baseline – a set of provisional bolas, grafted to a pressurized wire. As the worgen stumbles onto it, the bolas are instantly launched from a low horizontal vector, which sling around its ankles. It trips over with a tiny stupefied gasp, which converts into an aching grunt as it hits the floor.

Subsequently, Thariss storms in and whacks the worgen with her shield, sending it into unconsciousness. Takes two swings, but it does the trick. Then, they tie a harder knot with ropes over its arms and drags it into an auxiliary chamber.
In here, they bide until it regains its wits. Upon wakening, it vigorously rattles its head with bewilderment and agitation, before it registers that it is ensnared and watched by an array of judging gazes. A low growl leaves its maw, but the way that the ears slump also exposes its fear.

“Can you comprehend my words?” Aruu asks demandingly. It doesn’t answer, but there’s an unmistakable intelligence, a clarity.
“I have questions that need answers. Who are you?”
Not unexpectedly, it growls again, this one with a heftier undertone. As it exhibits a glaring disinclination to talk, Aruu furrows her brow with a hint of cunning, as it hits her how she has to organize this interrogation.
“Don’t feel like being cooperative? Very well. I have fixes for this.”

Rax takes a gander towards her.
“Aruu?”

“Shh.” She bends her knees, tipping her head closer to the worgens. It’s invariably smart enough to parse that, should it try to bite her, Thariss with her sword in hand would make it pay.
“Have you ever encountered a shaman in your life? We control the elements, the focal cornerstones of existence, the fundamentals for the natural world. The earth below your feet rumbles to my touch, the heat from the flame chatters in my ear, the air that encircle us dances over my skin…and the water which compose your body is like the current of a river.
It is a rudimentary matter for one of my kind who wants, to distort the very makeup of elemental forces. If I call…”
Her voice temporarily vanishes, and she plants her palm onto the ground. With a dash of focus, she accumulates the willpower and decisiveness to coral the ground into obeying her wishes. A moment later, they all see a crack in the grime just inches from her fingers. Then another behind her palm. A third spawns by her thumb and then it progresses exponentially after this. They grow larger and thicker, as if the very floor is crumbling under the gargantuan pressure of a giant’s appendage. Aruu stops when she has wreaked a miniature crater in the floor, at which point she locks her eyes with the worgen’s again.
“…it disintegrates beneath my touch.” She now elevates this hand and slowly drives it towards him. “Shall we test if your water will boil in the same fashion?”

And now, the worgen breaks, being scared into submission. It flinches and the hiss it exudes sounds as if it quivers.
“Stop!” it shouts in fluent Common, though a little warped by the gravelly frequency. “I’ll tell what you want to know!”

With a pleased nod, Aruu gets up on her hooves again. In the corner of her vision, she discerns a distressed tremor on Rax’s face, but she ignores it.

“Who are you? Who do you work for?”

“My…my name is Davot. I-I’m with the Bloodmoon pack.”

“Bloodmoon? Who are they? Another Scourge lackey?”

The vein in which he snarls is almost indignant.

“We are minions of no one! We carve our own way and the Grizzly Hills is our domain.”

Thariss sniggles with a dash of mockery.

“That so? Ain’t doing much of anything down here in your underground rathole, now are ya?”

Davot bares his fangs at the elf, but it’s nothing more than a measly gesture. He snaps back to the draenei when Aruu kicks her hoof into the indentation she smashed out earlier.

“Who are the Bloodmoon? You have a chief, don’t you?”

For a wink or two, he grows conflicted, indecisive if he should be revolting or not. In the end, he proves too squeamish to flirt with death.

“We serve…Arugal.”

“Who?”, poses Riv. “I don’t know that name.”

“Arugal? Of Shadowfang Keep?”, probes Bekkit. “That individual was eliminated years ago by the Horde.”

“He was”, admits Davot, “but the Scourge…reanimated him, on orders from the Lich King himself. He was sent to orchestrate the reformation and revamp of what the undead call ‘the Wolfcult’. He gave us the title of Bloodmoon thereafter.”

“Hmm. Is there any correlation between you and the Shadowfang pack?”

Davot is outwardly a tad perplexed by the name and shakes his head.

“Not that I know, but the name is unfamiliar to me. All we know is lord Arugal, our guide. He showed us the way, made us who we are.”

Growing quite jumbled herself, Thariss lifts her hand to redirect attention to her.

“Wait a sec. If you serve Arugal and Arugal was repopped by the Scourge…aren’t you Scourge followers?”

“No”, he retorts sharply. “…and yes.”

“…you lil’ shit. You’re deliberately confusing me, aren’t ya?”

“Enough”, Aruu interrupts. “You, Davot, I demand to know what your plot was, the marrow of all this work down here.”

“We are performing experiments, on lord Arugal’s behest.”

“For the Scourge’s benefit.”

Davot huffs.
“No! For ours. The undead plague will never gain what we concoct here.”

“This Arugal was reconstructed by them. As far as I’ve perceived, nothing can fully escape their reign.”

“Then you have been misinformed. He may have rose from the dead, but our liege retained a sense of self, of his will and he is not content to languish as a puppet of another master. He craves freedom and the same for his pack.

These ruins were chosen for two reasons. On the one hand, they keep away the scrutinizing fixation of the Lich King’s shades; on the other, they harbor untapped energies brimming from the ground. Or so our alpha insists. What we achieve down here will ultimately help in liberating us from the Scourge’s rotten paws.”

Aruu kneels once again, but here, she wields less leniency. She clutches one of her axes by the hilt and holds its blade up to Davot’s throat. This is unshakably a coercive approach and she can easily ascertain how he swallows nervously.

“Are you at fault for the Drakkari getting the drop on my team a few weeks ago?”

The tip hovers mere breaths astray from his skin, and the edge virtually glimmers in anticipation. “If…if you’re putting the blame on our pack, then…yes. We had scouts that held vigil over our territory, to sniff out threats. Your Alliance flock was marked as one.”

“Did you follow us from the get-go?”

“I…was not there, but the scouts hounded your every stride. They alerted the trolls, with our alpha’s blessing.”

“They’re your allies?”

He swallows once more, close to gulping.

“No. They apprised the trolls in secret, to waylay both of your searches of the ruins.”

With this last revelation, Aruu’s focus marginally dulls. “Very well. ‘Thank you’ for your cooperation, Davot. I believe that’s all we required.”

She swings back her axe, ready to execute him, but it never cuts into its victim. Her decapitation is prevented by a hand that clutches and curtails Aruu’s wrist – Rax. The shaman flips towards her, both flabbergasted and furious.

“What are you doing?”

Rax tactically swaps to their language. “This is not the honorable thing to do, Aruu.”

“Honor? I don’t give a talbuk’s ass for his life! This…creature is an enemy of the Alliance and got a lot of good soldiers butchered! I’m only delivering his well-earned sentence.”

“Did you not listen? He was not one of the scouts and though we can argue he isn’t innocent, is it an Alliance policy to execute unarmed prisoners? That’s not the coalition our people signed on with.”

Aruu grimaces, glowers at her former partner as if to make her perish with an optical strike; a visage that Rax has, sadly, contracted more than once. The only original aspect of it is the realization on the shaman’s features, that she’s committed an error. When Rax relinquishes her hold, Aruu sullenly groans and then slices Davot’s bindings instead.

“Get out of here, before I let the elements rend you into shreds.”
The worgen is astonished with this display of mercy, but he does not bide long enough for them to change their minds. As he flees, Aruu levels a hand in Rax’s direction. “Not a word.” She angles towards the remainder of the group, situating her back against the paladin. “I believe I’ve formulated a strategy to overcome our latest challenge. This cult lured us into a trap of the Drakkari, doomed a lot of our compatriots. How about we return the favor?”

Chapter End Notes

*In game, Drak’Zin doesn't have an underground lair*

*...but that's because you didn't find it! That's definitely the reason and not me making this entire section up*
The now ruins of Drak’Zin has a long and arguably problematic history. The innermost and somewhat concealed chamber in the depths of the complex is one of preeminent privacy, a secret verging on as old as the empire’s lifespan. Once upon a time, it was fortified with layers of sophisticated magical safeguards and sorcerous reflective barriers, to keep its invaluable contents intact and under wraps. Were the empire’s populace itself unsuspecting to the grim, abject reality? Were its leaders?

For unregistered motives, Drak’Zin was abandoned to its fate. One day, the work force and its big name officials collected their people, packed up their bags and walked out. Annals and timeworn manifests have redacted the name from all indexes and archivists have perennially bowed to the wisdom of yesterday. There was nil cause for other convictions.

That is, right up until the Scourge beset them and frightened the Drakkari into executing slews of drastic procedures in order to preserve the integrity and life of their society.

Contrary to some beliefs, the Drakkari do not wholeheartedly avoid the under reaches of the debris, but instead limit their exploration of its deserted riches to the daylight hours. However, as they enter on this day, the head researcher of the Drakkari regiment makes an irregular discovery, which urges him to mandate additional estimates to his guard detail. He thought he had gotten his bearings down here in the gloomy succumbed roads, that there was nothing overall new to lay before his astute nose, aside from historical tool sets and implements. But as he wanders inside today, he treads onto an inexplicable line of fresh dirt, practically a trail. With piqued sensibilities, he follows it until he’s ushered straight in the thick of a scene with a dropped body, the carcass of a deer.

How did it get in here and was undone? It has not entered a decomposing stage, but all the same, it was flagrantly attacked and killed, intended as someone’s dinner. A predator or a conscious hunter? But then why would anyone simply drop a meal and consign it to grow fallow? Something doesn’t sit right here. Thus, the researcher resumes his investigation, all the way to the brink of the nearby wall, where he uncovers yet another lead to whatever trespasser has violated their jurisdiction.

Around neck height, there is a marked outlining of cracks in the wall, damage of some sort that is beyond mere age. A person induced this, potentially via an attack or careless practice. But while the inspirations are fascinating at the best, it’s subpar in contrast with his new revelation – there is a slit in the wall. Not a rupture of atrophy, but a crafted hole, albeit thin. Is there a passage behind it? A secret entrance?

Construing that there’s something amiss here, the chief researcher commands some of his laborers to get busy and pry the hidden avenue open, so that he can dig into it. Takes some doing, but with sophisticated application of hexes from those schooled in the ways of the shadow, the right gadgets and good old-fashioned force, they tear the archway open.

Within the next block of the grounds is a multitude of branches and a more convoluted grid of tunnels. These ones are narrower, but also replete with tokens, seals and outdated imprints on the sides. All very eye-opening, but not enough.

Past one distinct corner, the chief stumbles, to his surprise, into a living being down here. One in his position would irrefutably find the opportunity to come across a ghost of his forebears a literal dream, but this isn’t what he reels in.
In place of this, the creature he spots dawdling over a bench mounted against one of the surfaces is what externally appears to be a human, a man. The framework of this portrayal is lost on him, but in the end, it has little meaning. A human is luxuriating in the heart of Drakkari property. This cannot stand.

But in lieu of retaining his stationary state, the man flinches, reverses a couple of meters and then deforms and reshapes, evoking the gift of his curse. As claws and fangs bear themselves, he throws open his maw and roars a guttural threat.

Coincidentally, the troll scowls at it, as if he recognizes precisely the essence of this entity. He points at the worgen and adamantly commissions his troops in the Drakkari dialect of Zandali.

“Annihilate this fiend.”

The main mob of Drakkari races ahead, piling into this worgen and the upcoming ones that barge in to cut them off at the pass and hem the trolls into this endemic lane. A full-out scuffle breaks down.

Not all are restricted to such a tunnel vision. At the far end of the retinue, a duo tests the credentials of a side corridor, one that radiates with a sense of emptiness. Sadly, they are punished for their nosiness. As they go about inspecting the equipment strewn on the stone tiles and benches, the gaze of the one closest to the exit blackens as an axe rips into the back of his head. For the second, it is identically fast, though in the shape of a summoned ball of molten rock. The last sight he sees is the frowning face of the draenei shaman that terminated both trolls in seconds.

As Aruunel signs them off, she then peers over her shoulder and motions for the rest to march in line. Raxeen does not voice it, but she’s mildly put off by how callously Aruu eliminated the two unknowing trolls, giving her pause for how hard-hearted her old beloved has gone.

They drop speed for a couple of ticks, to permit the shaman a bit of agency on their next phase. “Bekkit, hold this emplacement and guard against stalkers. Rivaryn, if you can, tell your raptor to stay and reinforce her. The four of us will carry on into the guts of the ruin.”

Riv inclines her head curtly, before she presses her forehead carefully onto Razz’s jaw. “Dear, keep Bekkit here safe, will you? She’s a marksman like me, so I’ll be banking on you to shield her as you would me.”

The raptor emits a murmur of a grunt, nearly a purr, as he nuzzles into her ear, affirming their stratagem. He’ll do what is shouldered unto him.

On their progress through the various zigs and zags, they distinguish a load of icons and glyphs chiseled into the stone of the walls, but these ones differ quite acutely from the beasts in the main halls. Instead, it’s like they depict an eerie nurturing, with sequences of alterations. On account of the maturity of the images, the actual message is hard to parse, but to Thariss, it is vaguely familiar. “Don’t suppose anyone might know what all this is?”, asks Riv.

“Actually…”, the night elf expresses tentatively, “…I do, sorta.”

“Sort of?”

Thariss involuntarily shudders as the thoughts materialize in her head. “I’ve bumped into runes and emblems that weren’t unlike these ones. I’m not a total 100%, but they carry a scary resemblance to stuff on qiraji gear.”

Riv is taken aback, blinking in a staggered fashion. “That…insect race your people warred with?”
“Bingo. Nasty bugfuckers. That being said, this stuff looks by far less…worship-y.”

“So, you’re implying…”

Thariss dejectedly shuts her eyes.
“Goddess, I wish I wasn’t getting at anything right now.” Feeling for her beloved, Riv softly rubs a hand at Thariss’ back, despite the armor sort of being an obstacle.

Catching their conversation, Aruu halts and nabs an eyeful of the aforementioned engravings, noticing the shapes of the lengthened extremities, like tentacles, and what may very well be trolls fleeing in unmitigated terror. In the skies above, there is what weirdly could be an entity with an unseemly amount of mouths.
“The Old Gods.”

The grip Riv maintains on her rifle stiffens.
“You don’t think they…venerated such creatures, do you?”

“Impossible to declare at this stage.”

Rax, with Kerashta Rakkan’s hilt resting along her shoulder, rolls it around in her head for a second.
“Wait, Aruu, did Bekkit’s input not attest that this was a research facility?”

“According to one of the specialists we had in our team who could speak Zandali, yes.”

The paladin waves at the pictures.
“Then perhaps we have deduced their field of study.”

By the other side, Thariss’ face scrunches up by virtue of the disturbing ideas it gives her.
“That’s nuts. Only morons would meddle with that kinda menace.”

“Which would account for why they either cut and run, or met a unanimous untimely end”, cites Riv.

“Brush aside these concerns for now and steady your aim”, Aruu commands. “The fighting is ramping up in there and we still have to throw off our adversaries before we can snatch our prize.”

The elves steel their hearts for battle and nod their assents. One thing that Rax has to inwardly validate her former lover for is how decisive she’s grown, how effortlessly she takes the reins and guides troops into her course. It’s not as if Aruu was ever a pushover, but in her younger years, she felt maladjusted to the seat of authority. When did this change, Rax wonders? After the slaughter or upon crashing into Azeroth?

In the roots of the elderly shafts, the fighting is really upsurging, almost to a critical mass where the turmoil could conceivably aggregate genuine fractures in the rock. The worgen are seemingly invested in a desperate undertaking to save their achieved research up till now, as the trolls barrel into their roadblocks and rip the works to shreds. It’s beyond recall that the furry defenders will either be forced to flee or give way.

Concurrently, the quartet skirts the fringes of the room, largely devoting their efforts to bypass flat out engagements. The priority is to abscond with the artifact. Speaking of which, the contraption in question lies on a slab of flat rock, a form of pedestal only nominally elevated above the floor, but still in a hugely central area. Impediments derive from
multiple hotspots on the heading to their payoff, however, through pairs or trios of enemies that batter it out. The alpha worgen Davot hinted at is in the far end of this array of violence.

The mercenaries do not discriminate—they lash against both sides, to cut a swath. They aren’t immediately drawing attention, but creating some kind of hubbub is unavoidable. Thariss, the steel juggernaut that she is, bounces into the forefront.

“Who’s that in the shadows, skulking and staying perfectly still?”, she taunts to some unaware soldiers, just prior to leaping out and punching one of the non-turned worgen right across the mouth. “It’s a Dusksong all up in your grill!”

“Thariss, careful!”, cries Riv, as she plonks down on one knee, curses to herself in a mutter, and snipes whatever portions of her enemies’ bodies that she can cluster in her sight, to support her betrothed.

Rax bolsters their field to begin with, but is required to pivot as she regards Aruu legging ahead, committing the full force of her potency to attain the Splinter of Malorne. As foes vie but meters away, the alpha is beset by the shaman herself, who announces her arrival with a ferocious shout. The large worgen mutates into his true form, but it’s a half measure versus Wog’randash.

They may have plunged underground, but nonetheless the winds ripple into existence to cloak Aruu’s armor and weapons, howling for the blood of her opposition. The alpha’s effort cannot be demeaned as pathetic, for he does indeed put up a challenge for the shaman. As she storms into him, he thwarts her attacks by skipping away, feeling a sweat coming on given how intensely close it was. He then counterattacks with swipes and slashes of his claws.

At the end of the day, he does not have the moxie nor the constitution to stand fast against the berserking thrashes of Aruu’s assaults. She will rout him, of that there can be no second-guessing. In a weak sliver, she hacks into his arm, imbued by the rustling winds, which compromises his odds of victory. But it’s when she kicks his chest and pummels his head that the outlook for his survival is genuinely pale.

Aruu is not one for mercy, not when revenge is on her mind. At least his end is swift, for he realistically cannot grok the swing that follows. She charges the winds with a higher frequency, until they transmogrify into lightning. This energy is instilled in the axe, which she raises and hurls at him with. It sears across his body with such voltage that he can utter no conclusive howl as his body tumbles defeated to the floor.

With the rest of the fight still ongoing, Aruu turns her retinas to the Splinter. The power levels of it is yet surging, overflowing with a seriously grotesque gale. She can hear faint whispers in its proximity, buzzing of doom. She defies the alarming sirens of her mind and goes for it anyhow; she didn’t come all this way to be bested by illusions.

The Splinter itself is shaped like a piece of one meter long bark from a tree, though discolored and with perverse veins now literally pulsating over its shell, in a disturbing rot-green shade.

But just as she grabs ahold of the Splinter and tears it off its resting place, the energy reaches a pivotal moment and goes critical. Somehow, from incomprehensible origins, a rift unshuts from the ground, to either a separate location or an entirely alternative realm. From it unfurls eldritch abominations. Huge and shadowy tentacles grab onto several random fighters, Aruu among them. It seizes her wrist and squeezes hard. As she’s holding the Splinter with one hand, her weapon arm drops the tool in her grasp, giving her no means to defend herself. If she presumed it would try to fight her, she’s at the altogether wrong address, for the limb gradually pulls her in, right in the direction of the rift, which beats like a heart. Those who had the misfortune to be ensnared suffer
the same fate.

She’s gaining both desperation and horror by the futility of her struggle, as she is nowhere near strong enough to yank herself free. She’s about to be scarfed down into the maw, whether she wants to or not.

Due to the touch of the tendril on her body, a link is established and therefore, the whispers gain volume and impetus, getting louder in her deepest trenches. It is discomforting how cutting they are, rummaging within her core.

“It was all your fault. You did not save them. You abandoned them to their demise. The guilt will never cease. You are irredeemable.”

Aruu grits her teeth and the efficacy of these murmured revelations gets to her, eats at her soul and erodes her spirit. She hungered to call for the elements, but cannot assemble the focus.

She can count her blessings, for she does not wallow in isolation. For once in her life, the Light comes to her deliverance, incarnated in the form of Rax, who dazzles the area with her aura. She steeps it in the cleansing qualities of Kerashka Rakkan and slams the crystal hammer straight onto the tentacle’s girth. Though it doesn’t get lopped off, the golden ignition erupts over its skin like a tremor.

As a response to raw instinct, it lets go, retracts from Aruu and discharges a howling shriek, like a hundred wails in tandem, but does not completely dissolve. One final push has to be availed in order to perish the pollution.

“Garamos azghirada vatil!”, exclaims Rax. “You do not belong here, you foul aberration. Go back to the shadows from whence you came.”

Though it endeavors to disobey her admonishment, runes of Light solidify over Rax’s dark violet skin, which all accrue and form a golden spear in her hand. Once it’s completed from top to bottom, she rotates it and takes aim.

She hits the entity square in the center, the hub of all darkness. This is what once and for all breaks its hold on the environment, drawing it into a dormant state, like the sun scattering the night.

Alas, a brief respite is all they reap. The collapse of whatever phantom this happened to be is apparently innately corded to the cohesion of the ruin. A sudden quake takes the wind out of everyone’s sails, which is followed up by breaches and chinks in the floor and walls, that arises everywhere. Patches of the roof starts to tumble down and the dust billows across their visions.

“Uh, guys?”, says Thariss. “Just a wild guess, but I think that’s the cue for us to get the fuck outta this joint.” She gasps and takes a split second step back, narrowly eluding a big chunk smashing her. “Like, pronto!”

“A wise assessment”, Rax replies. “Run!”

The paladin steadfastly clutches Aruu and glances at her ex, who remains jarred from what she underwent, but not to the extent where she will desist tightly squeezing the Splinter. She hence tolerate herself being guided into safer harbors.

As they jump ship and book it, they snatch Bekkit and Razz along the way, a duo that has seemingly gotten out of any and all threats safe and sound. They opt to grab the backway that Davot had left through hours ago, and as they depart, a few Drakkari give chase. Luckily, the trolls are discouraged from sticking with it, when some get buried underneath the falling debris. The chief researcher lets them go, in favor of fleeing scot-free.

Minutes later, the team exits via a hidden hatch in the middle of the forest, off course from the Drakkari. Time to head back to Amberpine, then. Mission accomplished.
Chapter End Notes

Rax didn't say anything of consequence, other than a sort of threat. I just like making up draenei words for her to shout. It's what she does.

This is the end of this mini arc. Aruunel and Section Three will return in future stories.
Zul’Dra is an empire of ice trolls, adapted and invigorated by the cold swaths that many of the central nations view as unflourishable. As of late, the Argent Crusade has, in a sour twist of fate, had to retrace old steps and afford themselves a reminder of this. Or rather, the environment has, because by the Light’s blaze is it cold up here. That is of course right on target for Northrend’s big picture, but the torment has only cranked up.

Zul’Dra is a land on the precipice of either the greatest victory in their entire enduring history, the crowning achievement of hundreds or thousands of proud generations, or a total and invariable extinction.

Infrequent reports and dispersed rumormongering have told the narrative of an all-out free-for-all on the thrashed streets of the empire. Scourge versus troll versus loa versus frenzied elementals versus death knights. Chaos has grabbed the land by the throat and wriggled it around, putting cracks in the seams, but it yet holds, if just by the skin of its teeth. Light knows how long it can retain its stability.

The Argent Crusade has also picked up an invitation from an unplanned source – a group of Zandalari trolls that seek accords with those who desire an end to the madness, but why they would even go so far as to throw down their gauntlets against the Drakkari is a blind spot in the Crusade’s knowhow.

So, why then would the crusaders lurch audaciously into this nationwide deadlock in the first place? Well, partially given its their duty to ensure that the Scourge never goes unchallenged. But there can be no doubt or misgivings that they are overwrought with alarm by the rapid advancement of the Lich King’s minions in this domain. Though they’re not allied with the Drakkari, the prospect of a whole state falling would be an unvarnished catastrophe of the likes which they’d prefer to avoid in every way.

They also cannot refute one of their foremost objectives to overcome, which includes finding the rogue group of death knights with a growing reputation, ones that the Crusade at least possesses an ostensible connection to.

For what it’s worth, the complement of troopers led by Captain Briggton is not the sole Argent-traced presence in all of the zone. Early birds from the faction have put together a base, somewhere in the western strips. The schedule for the Captain’s teams includes a visit to the command post, to get in the loop and earn some reference points of where they can proceed next.

While they have adeptly avoided notice, their luck is a great deal fouler weather-wise. A storm rages in the district they’re traversing now. Not ferocious, but still a blizzard, of vicious snow and cutting winds that practically teem with a propensity to flay them alive.

Their precise location has thus been tough to pin down. They believe themselves to have ambled into southern or southwestern neighborhoods, but few landmarks are ever relinquished from this inexorable climate. They’ve yet to see much of anything out here.

In such refrigerated conditions, Ash’s worry has drifted unequivocally in Melia’s orbit. Even though the priestess isn’t unused to the cold by any means, Ash perpetually sees to it that she’s heated up. She has wrapped the human in more warm clothes than she herself is clad with, which the Lieutenant has not-so-gently alluded to, but Ash won’t leave room for the notion. Melia’s health is key. Her exercised excuse is to hide behind the curtain of a committed second-in-
command, but they both speculate a detached undertone.

With the wind whipping her face and the snow essentially poaching on her skin under the armor, Ash trudges over to Melia and inclines into close quarters to be heard past the howling. “I wonder if we wouldn’t do well by pumping the breaks and setting camp, maybe outlast the storm under cover. At this merciless rate, it’s going to wear us out sooner or later.”

Melia pulls her cap down a bit and lets her other hand instinctively rest on Ash’s arm. “Noble idea, but out here in the open fields, I reckon it’ll do us more harm than good. Beyond that, we’d have to bend over backwards to assemble it and everything might fall apart in seconds with the tempo of these winds.”

Ash opens her mouth – not the brightest idea as snow invades her mouth – but generates little sound to start with. She concedes to her own folly. “Fair enough. But we can’t withstand it forever.”

The skies’ uncaring breath is not all that concerns her. She can’t shake the suspense stitching itself into her flesh. She has this unsettling, indefinable hunch that loitering here will end in tears, like something sinister is up.

Before too long, it dawns on her that this could be more than the aversion to the cold. With stress at her back, she dedicates a quantity of her mental discipline to sweep the breadth of their scenery.

There! She can tag it, the chilling tingle which would only encompass one catalyst, a singular spirit. “You sense that?”, she inquires.

Melia, a little perplexed by the unprompted question, pans to her Sergeant and unsuccessfully combs the countenance. “…sense?”

“Yeah, the magical imprint.”

“Uh…no? Unless ‘magic’ is code for cold, then yeah. Sensing it is the least of what I do.”

“No, not the cold. I….” She grimaces and momentarily falters, until she pats Melia’s shoulder. “Wait here.”

Melia’s confusion increases, hinted at by her speedy blinks. “What? Where’re you off to?”

“Need to have a word with the Captain. Stay where you are.” The blood elf does not solely walk, but as fast as her legs can carry her and the wind pressure permits, she rushes towards their human superior. “Captain Briggton! Urgent news. I have reason to believe that we’re in danger.”

Captain Lionel Briggton is, outwardly, a hardy and moderately bulky man, with fair skin and an ever-present light frown. His dark blonde and dimly greying hair is cut short and above his mouth sits a thick moustache. He’s equipped with a heavy plate in the grey and golden colors of the Crusade, with a tabard over his chest, though a hood and scarf encase his head at the moment. His green eyes set sights on Ash. “Danger?”, he asks in a staid and rough tone, a Stormwind accent unshielded. “I’ll hear your case, Revenor.”

She settles her breath and swallows just before digging in.
“I got this impression of something in the air. Like…itching traces of death’s veneer. These textures are ones I’ve gleaned around varying corners of Northrend in prior weeks.”

He regards her with unmasked skepticism.
“You’re implying that the Scourge is spying on us as of this second?”

“Affirmative, sir. I can’t declare with absolute clarity, of course, but my intuition has proved reliable every step of the way.”

As she is staunch in her opinion, he’ll have to confirm it.
“Not a paladin myself, but I know we’ve got a bunch.” He turns and tracks two, which he points at.
“You two, over here. Can you corroborate Sergeant Revenor’s story of detecting Scourge activity nearby?”

Another human man talks first in line.
“Nothing out of the regular, sir.”

“Hmm”, utters the dwarven lady at his side. “Well, there was the wee prodding earlier. Like uh… an unease on the wind. Cannae identify any solid footprints though, I’m afraid, Captain.”

Ash is marginally downcast with their evaluations, that she is the solitary paladin with clear sight. What does this signify, though? That she’s peerless among her colleagues? Or is she losing her edge?
“I know what I perceived, Captain. Perhaps it’s an illusion, but I maintain that it is sagely to, at minimum, err on the side of caution, maybe enact some preservation measures. One should not take chances up here.”

Briggton exhales subtly from his nose, limiting the exposure of his thoughts.
“What would you have me do? Retreat to Dragonblight?”

“No. That would be a patently clumsy solution to this impasse, but there’s more than one branch to utilize.
I suggest hooking the long way around our intended heading, taking the indirect road to the base. The only matter we stand to lose is time, reasonably some rations.”

“Mm, I’m with you on the discreet method, but we can’t dawdle behind. We’re going to get stuck in the ditch somewhere along and devoured by the storm. Hastening our speed is still the best decision.”

At this crossroad, Ash is quietly catching whiffs of an old impulse, of the overthrown Ashindra. Old Ash would foster a defiant conduct, be at cross purposes with the Captain and plausibly dispute him publicly. But old Ash didn’t make the trip out of Quel’Thalas, of past epochs. She adjusts the slouch of her body and salutes him smartly.
“Aye, Captain.”

She readies herself to resume her place in the procession, but then one of the other sin’dorei – a ranger – wriggles her ears keenly.
“Incoming! North!” the elf bellows and everyone lays their gazes to the mists further up, only to take in the daunting view that washes down – a rain of arrows sailing from the heavens.

Plenty of the crusaders have no recourse past simply staring in boundless misery at the row of death, but they are fortunate to have a gifted priest in their midst. Melia dashes into the center and elevates her hands.
“Light, shield us!”
In the nick of time, she erects a Light-infused barrier, which is enhanced by two more priests in pure panic. With the contributions, Melia manages to stretch it to span the full Crusade roster, the notched and somewhat crooked projectiles slamming and bouncing off its glittering hull. Only one wave of approximately three dozen arrows impact the aegis.

Briggton takes a breath of undiluted relief in private, as to not weigh down his subordinates, prior to looking at Melia.
“Quick thinking, Lieutenant, well done. But we’re not out of the darkwood yet. Archers, nock your arrows and set up stations! Spellcaster, say your incantations and let it soar! Melee units, sharpen your weapons! Shieldbearers, form up on me – we’re keeping the line hardened for the troops. Get moving!”

A looming racket perforates the dense mist, the rhythmic rattling and trembling of bones, ailing moans, and the squeaking of rusted metal on metal, as the Scourge division marches. Hundreds of them, all arranged in impregnable lanes that stream in, breathing plague and infestations. Adherents of the living beliefs of Azeroth, along with the Forsaken, strife with the first detachment of hostile undead, a match up they’re still acclimatizing to. But while they totally down this column and incur minimal casualties, it’s far from over. Soon, soldiers call out for reinforcements from not merely the south, but also east.

To top it off, an influx of exquisitely hardy bunch of elite undead spill in from the western flank, effectively hemming them into an irreversible confrontation. Ash had really hit the bull’s eye, albeit she woefully wishes she had miscalculated.
With aught to grasp, Briggton barks over his shoulder.
“Revenor! You’re on west point! Hold ‘em off and we’ll hack us a way out!”

“Yes sir! Fourth and sixth squad, on me!”
She beseeches the Light for its strength and imbues her sword with its incandescence. Akin to a leading torch, she pounds into a heap of undead and unloads a torrent of bristling might that annihilates, nearly incinerating a trio of Scourge. She follows this up with shattering the skull of a skeleton with the tug of her shield and hammers the chest of a ghoul to the snow with her robust plate boot.
“The Light will not grovel to the Lich King’s filth! For Azeroth!”

Her prowess and exuding willpower kindles faith and trust in her fellow soldiers, and they valiantly chase her, come torment or death.
One noteworthy layer with this pack of undead is how many of them seem to be graced in a higher tier of gear. Some of their pieces are vaguely suggestive of Crusade apparels. Scavenged to play off on the organization, or could this be engorged corpses of their former brethren?
By her side perches Braktog, winding up as her adjunct and bound damage dealer. Given the opportunity, she paints herself into a target, amasses their aim and facilities Braktog’ flying onslaught from a weak fork with his axe, cleaving them in twain.

Eventually, they get sidetracked and mildly fractured, as one marked individual clobbers onto Ash, coercing her into an impermanent duel between them.
Her adversary wields a shield of an equivalent measure as her own, though it’s flatter than the spikes hers sport. A ponderous axe is situated in the meaty hand, and this creature is clearly shorter. A dwarf, based on the thickset physique. His attacks are spacious and heavy, but Ash is too nimble to be trapped, paired with her own superb use of the shield to not just block but deflect damage, letting it brush off her.
Counterattacks are somewhat of her forte, which she exploits to rig a spell in her grasp or body and unleash at instants where her foe botches her slashes. Less fortunate is how the dwarf is on par with her, more than capable to measure up.
To her chagrin, the truth is leagues more unconscionable. As the dwarf rebuffs the first strike in a series, Ash and him alike go in for a close-knit dust-up, which disrupts the headway of either. They end up with their shields jammed together and their weapons convening and grinding at the blades. The dwarf presses his face next to hers, stopping short of physical contact.
“Ain’t lost yer touch yet, eh lassie?”, the raspy, stifled throat expels.

Ash’s eyes fly open in heartrending shock. What in all the sun’s mercy? How could she not have noticed this previously? How could have missed the tattered tabard?
“C…Captain Gryndar?”

The tarnished, undead dwarf stares at her with hollow, lifeless, apathetic eyes. He doesn’t grin, doesn’t quiver with deviousness, nothing but a fallow rift.
“Life can be a dirty ersehole, aye?”

There can be no single shred of doubt that the man lodged before her carry a terrifying similarity to the Captain they were bereaved of, but she can’t avow it’s him through and through. She has never actually allotted it a ton of thought, whether the soul of an undead being lingers. Even in the nightmarish weeks where Quel’Thalas was sundered, she did never gain substantial answers. But there’s the Forsaken. They are undead too and they’ve displayed every sign of retaining their personality and heart. Can the same be said for those in thralldom to the Lich King then?

There is no room for alleging that death has gone soft on Gryndar. His skin is rotten and infested, even beyond the lost color and vigor in his eyes, and there’s a foul biting stench all over. Ash does feel guilty after a fashion, for even carrying such judgments about this man. This same rut of bias is one that her Forsaken allies have to suffer daily and yet they do all they can to protect everyone in and out of the Crusade regardless. She must teach herself to dispense with such skewed ideas. The solution to the sheer concept is enough to unhinge Ash and in doing so, it gives Gryndar an opening. He can’t mark a decent course to kill Ash off in a flash, but he can tilt the odds. With the paladin trapped in a stark state of shock, Gryndar seizes the juncture to push her off. He then swirls his axe around in preparation and steers it towards one who shows his back – Braktog.

Ash barely has time to register the events that will transpire and all she’s able to disburse is to utter a vehement, “no!”, before the weapon is lobbed and plants itself with the sharp edge into the orc’s body.
What miniscule sliver they can be thankful for is that it goes wide of the spinal cord. Sadly, this does flourish a trump card for a skeleton that now slashes right across the poor man’s chest and he loses his balance.

Horror all but consumes Ash, as she comes to realize that her mistake just got her ally, a soldier under her command, injured or possibly worse.
“Braktog! No!”, she yells, though she has no decent vista to distinguish his welfare.

With vendetta on the mind, Ash rises and toggles into full throttle at the undead Captain. Her teeth grits and she gears her mind to finish this charade. The wind is completely sucked from her sails, however, as an oblique diagonal strike knocks her. A shadow, like a piercing wraith, practically comes into being in front of her and levels a foot into her belly, booting her with such pressure that she tumbles backwards, in part as it was so monumentally unseen.

She staggers to the ground, harshly and contracts quite an acute coughing once air resurfaces in her lungs. As she wipes the saliva from her lips, her gaze slowly travels up, recognizing the attire of this…entity.
“Well well”, he says, voice reeking with spite, “the savory morsel that eluded my appetite makes a return visit. Fortunately, you are in our territory now.”
The san’layn she fought with outside Wyrmrest. What has brought him here? In her fall, Ash lost her sword, but it is still reclined in her general vicinity, should she wish to retrieve it and retaliate. That being said, what’s critical here is to not lose sight of him. One misstep and he’ll gorge her, literally.

“I should’ve seen this coming, that a contemptible cur like you was behind this.”

A malicious chuckle leaves his mouth.

“Such delicious aggression. Your blood will be well and simmering when it’s feeding time. Since we did skip greetings on our last encounter, allow me to reconcile – Lord Veysir, underling to Prince Acranius of the August Corona Citadel.”

“I couldn’t care less what your arbitrary titles and ranks are.” She casts herself up on her feet anew. “Are you responsible for this travesty?”, she poses and nods at Gryndar.

“With a little sprinkling of magic from our master, yes. Are they not the picture of splendor? Submit and this majesty can be yours to relish.”

She huffs mockingly.

“Over your dead body.”

“Hmph. How droll.”

He hitches his hand to discharge a deluge of putrid magic in her direction, but as opposed to the miscalculations at the foot of the dragons’ tower, Ash blocks the spell with her shield, enchanted by Light’s resilience. Having no mind for sitting idle, she trots on, proceeding until she’s right above the ground where Vem’tavir roosts. But as she tears it from the frozen soil and straps in for a new coming of blows, Veysir is gone. Did he run off? She refuses to believe he would be dispirited by her so conveniently.

Though Ash is psyched up to the max, her heart pounding like she just sprinted for miles on end, a bell clings in her head as she recalls the peril Braktog was in. She’s scarcely in time to observe as Gryndar stows his pace above the prone orc and stomps on his chest, making him cough up blood. The deceased Captain is going to execute the Private and it’s outside of Ash’s control from this range. She could energize a spell, but she’ll never get ahead of Gryndar’s strike.

Luckily, she is not the lone member on the battlefield who has unraveled these events. From a deviating end, a lustrous streak of holy fire inflicts Gryndar’s top half. The crux of this power fries part of the dwarf’s tainted flesh, enough to stun him and lose the footing on the orc. In its wake, Captain Briggton himself springs into and tackles Gryndar away, providing space for Melia – the root of the fire – to harness the Light’s rejuvenating principles and stitch Braktog back together.

Regrettably, Gryndar did not hurtle down fully, and now that he’s salvaged the axe, they stand toe to toe. Briggton stares grimly at his counterpart.

“What’s wrong, laddie? Lost yer nerve? Or is that just guilt starin’ in ye face, for causing this? Saw the same in Revenor.”

The Captain takes a deep breath.

“I’m sorry”, is all he tells Gryndar, prior to charging, forcing the fallen Captain to reverse, at least for a quick phase. Their shields and weapons square off, creating a real racket, but it appears divergent elements of the Scourge holds contradicting perspectives of where this should progress.

A stack of skeletons, gargoyles and ghouls pour through to corner not just the Captain, but Melia and Braktog too. Ash was wrapping up a couple of clashes for her comrades, but now infers no option besides assisting them and she launches straight for this venue. Her sword, fueled by justice,
rage and a tinge of desperation tears into every Scourge she meets, splitting them in half or batters them apart by the rugged spikes on her shield.

However, as she clears up a subset of the arena, she catches discord from the Lieutenant and Braktog. Greater numbers of enemies approach and Melia gets pressed to cease her healing in order to mount a Light shield to protect both her and the orc. She strives to perform two acts at once, but buffering and remedying require dissonant concentrations.

Here, Ash is faced with a tricky decision – cover Captain Briggton’s behind as he dukes it out with Gryndar and some extra gnats, or unchain Melia and Braktog. A selection she hoped never to make, but fate is rarely compassionate.

When it all comes down to it, she obliges her heart. She scrambles to the Lieutenant’s borders and whales on the undead who have the gall to graze her superior. She unloads a nigh seismic stir of a consecration, blinding and blistering them from everywhere. Melia’s smile at the vision is one of alleviation and gratitude, immensely elated to have a faithful companion like the paladin.

“Thanks, Ash! Keep ‘em where you got ‘em, and I’ll put my mind on reviving the Private.”

“Is he going to make it?”

“Yeah, he’s hanging in there, but it’s by a hair’s breadth.”

A particularly big and mean rotter sets on Ash, but she outmaneuvers it by channeling all of her faith into her shield, forming a bulwark that gleams like the sun. As it reaches the pinnacle, she smashes the shield on the undead, chucking it meters adrift, as it is practically scorched from the purifying essence.

“Concentrate everything you have on him. I’ll stave off these dreg.”

Granted that their deeds prevail on their end, Captain Briggton’s destiny weathers a profusely more calamitous and torturous climax, one that none of them foretell. His handiwork brings a multitude of mindless undead low, and at least transiently heads off Gryndar, but his intuition does not unlock the purview of the entire topography.

In an unannounced vein, he is beleaguered from two angles – Gryndar from up front and Veysir swooping in on the tail. The san’layn leaves the dwarf to keep the Captain busy until the pivotal moment. Then, disaster.

As they cross the line, Veysir draws out claws from his fingertips and stabs them into recesses of Briggton’s armor, the skin surrounding the waist and lower back. As the human gasps in anguish and arches, Veysir bares fangs that seems to glisten and plunges into savory flesh of his neck. Veysir drains the Captains’ lifeforce readily and delightfully, which coincides with Gryndar’s choice to disarm his old ally.

Melia can only draw in breath and gape hauntedly. Though Ash yens to save him, at this moment, as they’re swimming in Scourge pawns, it looks bleak.

Ultimately, Captain Lionel Briggton is not long for this world and succumbs to the crippling might of Lord Veysir. As his partially shriveled body thuds to the ground, many of the crusaders witness and lose heart.

Once again, Melia finds her feet stranded in a quagmire of impossible terms and herself as the shot-caller, where the intended leader, a man she admired, has met an ill-fated finish. In this scenario, as defeatist as it may come off, the odds of even escaping are not stacked in their favor. Ash equally acknowledges this misfortune internally, although her mentality ardently shoots down the concept. She will not bow to evil this day.
“Crusaders, snap out of it!”, Melia shouts from her seat next to an unconscious Braktog. “Get out of your trance and amass in the center! If we’re gonna break off, we have to synchronize!”

With the trio slightly off on their own, Veysir smirks and departs from Briggton’s corpse to come up at them. Intrinsically, Gryndar accompanies him. There is no will involved, only the Lich King’s voice.

“Ah, yes, the tenacious and audacious Lieutenant Haven. How splendid that we should happen upon each other on a fine day like this. We were overdue for it, no?”

Melia’s scowl is almost set aflame.

“Yeah, I’m sure it was wholly coincidental, huh? Sorry that I don’t recall your name. Guess I don’t commit the particulars of pure garbage to memory.”

Veysir tilts his head and laughs, but the dry spirit of it and the fact that he clenches one hand symbolizes less than humor. Nice to know she can get under the skin of Scourge fools too.

“The insolence, the pizzazz! Your mettle is positively invigorating, Lieutenant. Absolutely futile of course, but I do enjoy when my prey squirms. I imagine that I shall keep you alive for more of an extended period than the waste of space I leech dry just now. Truly revel in your sorrow.”

Melia, even if she externally clings to her fervor, does glance at Briggton in passing. He did not merit a grisly end of this nature. He earned a hero’s death.

“I won’t give you the satisfaction, not for a second.”

“All dogs bark in the early stages. You will bend with time. Gryndar – send in the abomination.”

“Right away, my lord”, Gryndar responds and then sounds off. “Out with the abominations! Level these vermin and make them bow to the Lich King!”

In the distance, they hear more rumbling and huge, clanging, rippling and bustling abominations come lumbering, at least a whole dozen. Some of them are larger than the regular type. On top of a few bodies, solid metal plates have been grafted and they all grasp multiple weapons that would be two-handed for normal humanoids. Ash and Melia have yet to lose all hope in this mess, but they can’t deny how it’s waning.

This really is it. If they cannot break free in this round, there may very well not be another. Melia can now authenticate that Braktog is ostensibly going to live, but the question that floats to the top is, for how long? Have her efforts been fully in vain?

For a light interval, the wind abates to a noticeable degree, the rumbling of the fight decreases and their vision past the snow clarifies. They all incur the vibe that this is death welcoming them with its cold extremities, that the grave is their next stop. But then they hear it.

A horn. A deep, booming, resounding horn slices the tumult and cacophony of battle, out in the depths of the mists. Temporarily, the Scourge and the Crusade stall their thrashing, as their eyes are reflexively drawn to the sound. Seconds pass, a season of jarring wait and unspoken worry. Did they in truth overhear the reverberation or was this an eerie instance of symbiotic hallucinations?

A staunch, governing voice perforates the haze.

“The Scourge going overkill for a minor package of Light zealots and naïve tagalongs. What will they ever do next?”

The sarcasm is uttered through the fount of a levelled tone, almost humorless. But it does carry a faint echo, which calls the attention to it, but that was presumably the intent. The speaker who exits the security of the vaporized snow is fairly tall, but not to any monstrous extents. Some might assert that the armor commits that job for her. Heavy-plated garnet red gear
with bronze and obsidian highlights drape themselves over the figure of a toned individual. The shoulder pads, the belt, the gauntlets, and the head of the boots are all accessorized with the skull of beasts, some of them horned. To emulate the death of demons, perchance?

The helmet of the same color scheme fully covers the head, except for a thin elongated gap for the eyes. Inside blaze two icy, dirty blue orbs, staring at the gathered masses. The black and scarlet cloak flaps in rhythm with the wind.
The foremost component of everything that she wears to quantify her integrity is the tabard resting over her torso – a dark, deep mulberry purple, holding an ebon-colored sword in the center, lined in blue.

Among their foes, Veysir is instantly familiar with it.
“And what is this meant to be?” he spits tauntingly and uninspired. “One tiny little knight out here all alone? Is that all your paltry company could muster? I knew you were bold, but not brainless.”

She keeps them waiting for a few more excruciating seconds, until she resumes her striding pace, right towards them, not batting an eye. The weight in each step and her steadfastness has not dropped.
“Not alone. Never alone.”

The statement hangs in the air, but only as a way to derail the awareness. In a timely manner, imminent groans and thuds fill their ears at the fringes of the Scourge contingent. Veysir and Gryndar turn in shock and bear witness to the happenings – a variety of similarly-adorned soldiers swing blades and strike with axes from the cover of the mist on every flank in ambush.

The new arrivals are rocking a wide scope of characters and proportions too, with a tauren, two kaldorei, four humans, two dwarves, a draenei, two orcs and a Darkspear troll. All of them sprint and rightfully lays into the Scourge. Some are working with dual weapons, others the substantial two-handed sorts. One or two cast spells to warp the minds of the bigger Scourge and overtake their mental faculties, as another, one of the humans, lifts his gauntlet and spews out black lightning that raps the ground and a platoon of corpses burst out from the earth to obey his command.

The vanguard, the clear marshal of the team, equals her speed to the tone of her voice, patient but ever progressing. With every meter gained, an aura is dispersed to the onlookers. As freezing as the air is, this knight is functionally embodying her own core of ice. Cold radiates from her body and the ground somehow solidifies in increased layers, below its already incredibly low temperatures. At this width, Ash is also able to discern a supplemental trait – the pale, pointed ears of a blood or high elf protrude from niches in the helmet. The way they’re closer vertically aligned is a tell. She is somewhat flabbergasted by the prospect.

As she nears, one of the Scourge-turned crusaders hustles at her, lifts his sword hand, swings it down…and is summarily cut short by the knight, who grabs it by the wrist. She gradually raises her head and stares straight up at the face of the rotten human, dead eyes into dead eyes. While her fingers clench, the human gapes in distress at how the ice released from her body overlaps his arm, growing exponentially to drown him.

Before he gets fully glazed, the knight employs her free hand to clutch and fetch the hilt of a greatsword that lingers on her back. A glimmering, starving, virtually vibrating runeblade is reared. He can but watch as she pivots the weapon in her fingers, inclines and then thrusts hard into his gut. The undead human unquestionably feels nothing, but his sense of touch is irrelevant as the knight disembowels him at the midpoint, rending it in pieces, letting both be dropped aside.

Once she’s shed the husk from her hold, her velocity picks up and she pushes into the compressed
gathering of beasts, undead and living fighters. The crusaders can identify the cold breeze lashing them, but her powers are utterly dedicated to wiping out her real focus.

One striking element to Ash is that this elven knight does not seem to cast any spells that would affect the other undead’s minds or in any way summon ghouls of her own. She delivers sword blows and floods of ice only. Her blade itself is a lethal vehicle of destruction, but in a moderately lyrical fashion. It next to sings with each thrust, like a dirge, a chord to their demises.

The first person aside from the minions she presses in on like an avalanche is Gryndar. They share no more than a passing glance, before she bears down on him. The dwarf hoists his shield to parry her blow, a collision that sends quivers and racket all across the field. “Think ye can rush in here and upset the balance, eh?” he tells her in a strained tone.

She regards him briskly. “One of the crusaders? You are not the first to fall, but your end will be merciful.” “End? Hah! I-“ He halts as she swivels and distributes a sideways slash, fast enough to stun him. She squeezes the hilt of her sword and it appears to shimmer briefly before she cuts across his shield, wreaking tremors in his body. She jumps up and kicks him square in the chest, letting him do everything short of toppling over. She then fixates the icy air into her grasp, which when aggregated to the preferred shift, is unleashed as a frosty gust that howls as it blasts him, nigh on freezing him in place.

In his floundering, he’s helpless to endure yet another brutal assault, one she is bound to administer. She digs her feet into the snow and propels herself forward, like a supercharged arrow. With the wailing chant of her runeblade, she curves the wide length of it all the way to his throat, entitling the starving edge to lop his head off cleanly. It soars from the sheer potency of the attack and hits the dirt many a second following the body. Captain Gryndar’s final death chimes the next period of the engagement, and without thinking twice, she pulls that chilly gaze resolutely at the san’layn. Veysir meets hers in equal measure.

To rival her, he mounts his hand up and by the force of magecraft, conjures a blade of his own, a corrupted longsword absorbing the blessings of the Scourge. Or curses, as it were. The elven knight absolutely rams into him, steaming like the engine of a dwarven siege machine, but the smoke erupting being far more frigid. Their blades shoving into each other ring with a metallic clink, which festers into a contested shriek.

Though he is a power to be reckoned with, it’s a simple matter for the knight to push him into defensive quarters. Not only physical armaments, but power hierarchies are going head to head. Veysir grits his teeth as he endeavors to suspend his perpetual retreating. “Begone, traitor. The sacks of blood here belong to me.”

Her frosty glare sticks onto his. “If you want them, you’ll have to go through me. Too bad mine is already a chunk of frozen icicles, hmm?”

She scatters his position by secreting an elevated spike of a relentless chilly vortex that incrementally expands and sincerely forces Veysir to shield his face and withdraw. Despite foiling her, she hounds his wake, at intervals pulsing at him and taking a swipe with her blade, which seems to hunger for her foe. If one looks strictly enough, the blade could strike one as literally spawning tremors.
But he is not without his own portfolio of concoctions that he sets into play to unsettle her. With tensions so high, he struggles to brandish one such now, as he seeks the shadows. His physical contour vanishes as he slides into the darkness from where he intends to launch his counterattack. The knight takes a crack at stalking him, but her blade carves nothing more than complete air. He’s a good deal more beguiling than the dwarf and putting him down will stipulate vigilance.

She adopts a spot of patience and rests, watching what he means to ply. It pays off, once she snaps up a predatory impression. A batch of slices and hacking maneuvers are disseminated from amidst the shades, as if the umbra itself gnaws at her.

“You think you’ve got what it takes to challenge the san’layn?! You act above your station, worm!”

A valiant show to be sure, but to no avail. The knight is unfazed and unassailable, at least for this express being. Her runeblade is lifted and deflects every push, discarding their ferociousness as nothing but the byproduct of despair. Her conditioned abilities, her raw instincts are honed too distinctly to fall against skimpy beats like this. With this established, she concentrates on more integral tasks. She scans the field for an outlet, a rift in the storm.

She discovers her prey, a flicker in the light snowstorm that still harries them. As she perceives it, she throws out her hand. It is carried aloft and from the palm, crinkling black-violet energy coils around the gauntlet and upon her command, lunges astray. From afar, she grips the imperceptible organism, wringing him by his very essence and yanks him into the light.

“Come back here.”

While he’s flung into her proximity, she simultaneously pounces at him and brings up her fist. Upon reaching contact and as Veysir is purely ballistic, the knight slugs him clean in the torso, crushing her plated appendage into his chest and flattens his body into the snow. He violently slams into the dirt and hisses in agony. He adapts to the pain and on short notice struggles to rise, but she kicks his shoulder, permitting his sword to fall out of his clasp and he tumbles away.

Now with no channels to liberty, the agony trounces him and activates a meltdown. He lies there flat on the white bed for seconds, beyond the time that would make it unwise for this duel. Just after his eyes open again, she is already standing by his side. He growls at her, but she treads on his chest, driving him back into the snow. Her touch on his skin, even nothing but the armor, transmits the chilled aura to encase him, ever so procedurally.

Her voice spews from beneath the helmet, but this time in thalassian.

“Your mistake was not to oppose us, my fallen brother, but that you presumed the vile monster holding your leash would elevate you above us. We are not merely death incarnate, we gorge on it, like you digest the blood of the living. We thrive in desolation and none of your kind can match us.”

Veysir’s speech is decreasing in volume and resonance.

“You…will fall, exactly like…everyone else. Our King is eternal.”

“Nothing in this world ever is. Your prince is next, but the King’s hour is impending.”

She pulls her blade aloft and then harshly, but graciously, impales his chest, sapping the last vestiges of his vitality out of his dead body. As the lights expire, she kneels and closes his eyes.

“Sleep and bask forever in the Eternal Sun”, she whispers in their mother tongue.

At the event of her rising, the battle in the environs is declining, owing to the massive offensive of the death knights. It is now open and shut that this act rescued at least a majority of the crusaders. Ash and Melia had their own separate skirmish to attend to, but once that they’re in the clear, they face the knight leader, who replicates the same act.
“Trust me, they are better off this way”, she remarks in Common, with an indicative wave at the slews of slain undead crusaders. “They’re counting their gifts, wherever their souls drifted off to.”

The duo is awash with emotions and questions, on the fence where to respectfully commence. Melia ventures a go.

“Well, we’re…in the same boat. Thanks, for everything. But also, uh…who are you? I recognize your allegiance, but…”

The knight beholds the human for a second or two, and then fleetingly peeks at the paladin.

“And to think, of all the people I could encounter, providence chose you.”

Ash draws a blank, her ears jerking in puzzlement, getting the hunch that she has no sense of direction in this conversation.

“…excuse me?”

The knight snorts and then gracefully unfastens her helmet. Below, she unveils a visage Ash is acquainted with. But…that’s unbelievable. All these years and not a peep. She couldn’t have…

“Strike-Commander Shadespire of the Ebon Blade. And you must be the Argent Crusade. Apologies for our tardy arrival.”

She’s different, that much is plain. Her skin has taken a turn for the pale, unnaturally deathly so, cracked in place, and her auburn hair is marginally dwindled, but remains. Her eyes, while sharp as per usual, are now a bitter, frigid, bordering on dirty, blue and the glow is more thorough than it used to be. But her trademark headband is accounted for, as is the unyielding expression that brokers no quarter. Years now since their last encounter, but seems like a lifetime. Ash is virtually lightheaded. What would Rivaryn say?

“…Trienza? Ranger-Captain Sah’nir?”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I’m going to be completely honest - Trienza was in actuality the real reason for the name of this fic. This was always going to be the one where I revealed her (though her initial appearance was meant to be a bit later), but then the last rendition of this story got bogged down in elements I wasn’t too keen on, so I had to rewrite it and then Ash plopped in and...yeah. But she’s here now.

Trienza wasn’t in the original version of the name list at the top, because I wanted it to be a surprise, although a former reader did kind of predict it in a comment months ago. A couple of months after that, because I was bored, I also wrote her DK origin story - Veins of the North - which you can read if you want to. Her profile and a screenshot can also be found in that link at the top of the story. Trienza will definitely appear in several more chapters of this fic.

My preferred theme for Trienza tends to fluctuate between Gwyn’s theme from Dark Souls (not really a fan of the series, I just love the song and its overtones) and Black Blade by Two Steps From Hell. Both are quite applicable to her.
A flying city. Thariss and Rivaryn have between them an ample supply of ordeals, episodes and encounters, experiences that range ages of joy, suffering, marvel, grandeur and transgressions of unspeakable magnitudes. But they can both honestly testify that a sight capable of levitation on this scale, of real palpable flight, is not a phenomenon they’ve ever previously beheld. A few items, perhaps, singular constructions. But fully-fledged cities? Inscrutable.

And yet here it is – Dalaran, whole again. The majestic purple city-state of sorcery, the hotspot for many a magic seeker and student, and second solely to Quel’Thalas as the heart and soul of Azeroth’s arcane pool. Riv can’t rightfully profess that she ever had any substantial relationship with it. She has experienced the streets of it but once, during the Second war, as the battlefields diverted the first Alliance to this realm when it was burrowed in Lordaeron. Nevertheless, it was entailed in her network of geographical knowledge, of places that she could technically venture to, on her leisure. The Third war and the Scourge’s squashing might nullified such notions.

Raxeen is debatably the one figure in their midst not supremely captivated by the spectacle, but she carries no pretentious elitism that she is somehow above the tableau. No, the thought of an aerial city is merely one she is conditioned to, on the fact that she grew up in the same manner of complex. Better yet, one that traversed dimensions. She has witnessed visions and landscapes which eclipse some of their most colorful fantasies.

Dalaran is nothing to sneeze at, though; a city with its own splendor and dazzling overlooks and visuals. In some capacities, the profile of it furnishes Riv with callbacks to her home city. Like the capital of magery, Silvermoon was often legendary as a metropolis of mystical towers, of heights and an outreached grasp for the brilliance of the stars that it could never annex.

The major contrast obviously lies in the colors and the banners, as well as the artistry. Riv would not label herself as a patriot, but Dalaran is not as bright to her as Silvermoon was in its heyday. That said, what the heterogenous Order has achieved here does stand as a monument to the unwavering nature of Azeroth’s mortals, that irrespective of formidable foes and unsafe environments, they will defy every dimension, every rein, to persevere.

What inspired the trio and their pets to make this trip to start with was incidentally related to Riv’s past and present – her sister had posted a letter, which reached them as they located a more tenable refuge. Their sojourn to Amberpine lasted no more than a day or two, where they split up with Aruunel and Bekkit, to embark from the zone altogether. They’d had plenty of the cursed hills by then, where the shadows perpetually created impressions of being spied at. They refused to end up in the same nightmare scene as the Section Three squad.

Upon reentering Dragonblight and Wyrmrest, they were informed that a missive had arrived from Kassari, who invited them as her personal guests to Dalaran. She had news, but could not impart it by letter, for fear of prying gazes. To accommodate their mounts, they elected to trek by the ground route, in spite of Kass urging them to enlist seats on a couple of hippogryphs. It would not have been suitable to stick Razzz, Ilca and Rax’s saber on a bird like that and she won’t even muse on the prospect of ditching the raptor anywhere.
After pushing their way through Crystalsong – an extraordinary and enchanted place in and of itself – they went with the route towards the secured and sealed off arcane bubble beneath the city. A teleporter and a handler were standing in wait, as ‘Ambassador Silvershroud’ had sent word of their visit. In the wake of a cursory inspection, they are collectively transferred right up to the surface. As they materialize and the initial haze of light dissolves, their eyes greet two personalities.

Kass is idling as their figures emerge, with her precious Khroga in reach. The mage flashes an affectionate smile at the sight of her sister. Trying to curtail her effusiveness helps only superficially, as she still has a bolt in her step.

Notably, the both of them are decked out in more fanciful garbs than on their last engagement. Kass is wearing a new set of scarlet robes with golden linings and ornaments. On her shoulders rest cosmetic golden wings, resembling those often perceived on the banners of Quel’Thalas. Khroga is dressed up too, in a darker red with black attendant formations and a symbol of the Horde on her chest. She also boasts fur on her sleeves and as a belt. The duo captures the picture of officials, like emissaries.

Kass bails from her girlfriend’s company and nearly pounces on Riv to hug her.

“Rivaryn! Oh, I’m so delighted you’re finally here! I was so glad when we caught wind of your consent, but you did have me fairly concerned. Your response took a while.”

To ease her anxiety, Riv replicates her smile and pulls back a tinge, to study her little sister, but still with her hands locked at the younger elf’s waist.

“Don’t be. We were simply preoccupied with some light freelance work. Took us a few days to get back to the dragons’ lair and catch up with ongoing events.”

“Ah yes, we heard there was something afoot in the temple. You know, when it hit me that you would be roaming the area, I just about felt my heart skip a beat at the thought.”

“Heh. Well, you got keyed up for nothing, fussbird”, Thariss tells her as she trots up and plants a hand squarely at her girlfriend’s shoulder, her armor clattering as she goes. “I was on hand to protect her all along. She was as safe as safe can be.”

Riv chuckles at her girlfriend’s heroic blustering and slants her head onto the night elf’s torso, but Kass points an exquisitely more skeptical glance.

“Somehow, I suspect you inflated the hardships for her.”

Even though she’s cognizant of her own innocence, Thariss can’t help but exacerbate the tension by smirking challengingly.

“Who, me? Whaaat? That’s crazy talk! Tell her, babe.”

It’s not that Riv is of the belief that Thariss has earned some scrutiny, but if her lover can play, then so can she.

“Well…she didn’t out-and-out misfire.”

Thariss, remaining in a state of mischief, just arches her brow with a mild sense of doubt.

“…’scuse me?”

“Remember the demons in Kharanos?”

Thariss gains a faraway stare, aiming it out into nowhere.
“Eh…I had that one under control. …mostly.”

“Or the attack on Quel’Danas?”

“Got a lil’ red hot, but you weren’t in any serious threat.”

“Plus, you leapt off our ride at Wyrmrest.”

Thariss raises her arms in protest.
“Ok, gimme a break! I had to make an entrance!”

Kass exhales haggardly.
“I’m starting to speculate whether you do this wittingly.”

“What, grinding your gears or kicking up shit?”

The mage wrinkles her brow.
“…does it have to be a choice?”

Thariss aborts her own streak of defensive procedures by laughing. As a result, she hops on over to Khroga, shakes the orc’s hand and pats her shoulder.
“Hey, Steel! How ya holding up, huh? Mage central not getting to you already?”

Khroga merrily reciprocates on the pleasantries, but is visibly mystified by the latter.
“Should it?”

The warrior shrugs halfheartedly.
“Would for me. All this arcane goin’ off, magical knickknacks floating about, the smells past every corner…it’s weird.”

It would seem she does hit home in one way or another, for Khroga scratches the exposed parts of her well-built left arm pensively.
“Hmm. Well, can’t argue with that.” Something, a short flashback perhaps, makes her grimace a tad. “Still settling my nerves around spontaneous spells cracking open all over the streets.”

Thariss emits a dejected sigh and squeezes her nose.
“Welp, that’ll be…a treat. Thanks for the heads-up.”

In the intervening time, Kass approaches the third member of the team, extending a hand to her, which the draenei secures in a smooth grasp.
“Raxeen, it’s a pleasure to have you with us here too. I pray that my sister and her rampaging girlfriend has not incited too much trouble with their hysterical lifestyles for you.”

“…we’re right here, Kass”, objects Riv.

Fortunately, Rax laughs calmly and shakes Kass’ hand in an affable fashion.
“There are periods of strife and distress, but my journey with them has comprised no more hectic bursts than how my former routine was structured. Well, maybe a little more living on the edge.”

With the introductions out of the way, Riv slides a hand onto her sister’s shoulder, to draw her attention.
“So, mind telling us why you invited us here at all, Kass? Don’t you have a Nexus War to contain? Or was it already settled after we took off?”
The younger sin’dorei absentmindedly grabs Riv’s hand to let their fingers be entwined instead and then marginally sways her head.

“No, that havoc has yet to run its course, but with the infiltration program underway, we were coerced to…revise our targets.”

“What? How come?”

Kass sighs, averting her eyes, but she can’t conceal the agitated flutter of her left ear.

“I penned a report to my superiors, where I appealed to them with respect to the struggles at hand that I should assume a direct role in expediting the blues’ ultimate surrender. They…disagreed. Khroga made a few passes at signing up on her own, but I headed all of them off.” The orc just clears her throat and awkwardly brushes her own neck.

“With lack of reliable sustained communication, their message talked me into venturing here, for the sake of tactfulness and partnership.” She aligns herself to watch them anew and adjusts her back with a sense of debonair. “I am here as a representative of the Magister Order, albeit…not the first to be ordained with such a rank. Specifically, I am to bargain, advise and compromise in terms of the Nexus War.”

“So, the war is still on?”, asks Thariss.

In lieu of an answer, Kass motions for them to follow. In the process, she drifts over to Khroga, to wrap her arms around one of the orc’s. They wander side by side out of the teleport reception building, up on the paved streets of Dalaran, where far more people amble along and the whole settlements appear to gleam and glisten. On the brinks of the route, Kirin Tor guards familiar with ambassador nods in brief greeting and a few waves are distributed here and there from ordinary citizens, regardless of race.

“It is indeed”, she reveals eventually, “though the developments for it have reined in. The infiltration of Coldarra and the word going around that we’d prevailed with sabotaging operations, obligated a great degree of blues to fall back.”

Thariss, who now saunters just behind Riv, lifts her arms confidently behind her head.

“Heh. All according to plan, eh?”

“Well, the actual plot we were formulating had the recipe for Malygos’ downfall on the list, but on that subject, we have had to postpone and reassess.”

“What of you, Khroga?”, wonders Riv curiously. “My sister is some…emissary now, it looks like. Were you granted the same honor?”

“Sort of”, the orc replies. “Hasn’t changed much since previous installments – I’m still formally stitched to Kassari as her guard and aide. It’s an arrangement I can live with. But piggybacking on this, I now also stand, like…a proxy for the Horde in this mission.”

“Won’t they catch the drift sooner or later, though?”

Kass and Khroga pivot eyes towards one another. The elf blushes modestly, while the orc curves her lips and caresses Kass’ cheek.

“Heh, don’t reckon they will or that there’ll be a big mess. Strictly speaking, your gesh’og and I are going at this in a gainful vein, so they can’t fire either for costing the Horde valuable funds.”

Departing from her sister’s perspective, Riv actually hoists a smile at the image of these two showing tenderness for one another.

“Hmm. My baby sister is an exterior agent of the Magisters now, is she? I…earnestly don’t know
how to respond to the idea that you’ve become so…”

“High with power?”, Thariss intercedes.

“…I was going with ‘eminent’.”

“Meh. Same shit.”
Kass is ripped out of her bliss to frown at the night elf, prompting Thariss to snicker.

“Sorry! Didn’t mean to grate on ya or anything, bird.”

“Too late for that, isn’t there?”, Kass shoots back. “And I am no youngster, Rivaryn, nor am I a ‘bird’.”

The warrior’s laugh rises in volume.

“Aww, c’mooon. Just being a lil’ facetious.” She plants a hand to ruffle Kass’ hair a pinch. “You know I appreciate you. You’re a big deal now – flying with the other phoenixes.”

It summarily dawns on Kass where the moniker stems from now, though she isn’t super into it.

“Hmm…I suppose”, she mutters.

“How ‘bout I buy dinner for us all to make up for this bust?”

“…it occurs to you that, as ambassadors, Khroga and I eat for free, yes? As do my guests?”

Ostensibly, it had not, hence Thariss now scratching her jawline in rumination.

“Huh. What about dessert? Drinks?”

Kass opens her mouth to disregard her ‘generous’ offer, but then suspends and trades it for a separate response.

“…if you can find a slice of Tirisfal mild and a barrel of Blackrock ale, we could have a deal.”

Thariss scrunches her face up bemusedly and gives it a think.

“Hmm. Well, cheese peddling ain’t my greatest talent and I dunno about all that being-…” She comes to a standstill and veers her gaze somewhat flabbergasted at Kass.

“Hang on. You actually drink that stuff?”

The mage keeps her secrets and points down another road.

“Here, this way. We won’t visit the Violet Citadel anytime today.”

As she strides along, she also tries to pick up a secondary topic.

“Have any of you ever set foot in Dal-…” She puts herself on hold, reflects on the phrasing of the inquiry and then restarts.

“On second thought, I take it that Raxeen and Thariss are unlikely to have passed by here in the past.”

“Uh, yeah”, the warrior attests. “Dunno how we framed it last time, but teaming up with Riv in the Eastern Kingdoms last year was like, my first ride.”

“And I have inhabited this world for barely a year at that”, explains Rax. “It does bestow its onlookers with a striking illustration, however.”

Kass nods unhurriedly.

“It is a fine settlement, I will concede. Dalaran was originally a human-only city-state, a theater for their wizards and sorcerers to assemble, oversee and cultivate their skills with the arcane, away from the condemning glimpses of non-magic users.”
Rax stares at her nonplussed.
“Condemning? Humans spurn the arcane?”

“Mm, in a sense. Humans in that era, like the kaldorei, were skeptical and draconian, as far as magic was concerned.”

“Uh…well, I wonder why, eh?”, Thariss utters pointedly.

Kass rolls her eyes in an unimpressed manner.
“Yes, yes, there were grounds to why, and the same was applied to these formative casters.”

“You shrug that off like a piece of piss. Can’t have anything to do with the fact that the arcane did almost rip a hole in the core of Azeroth and drown us all in demon shit, can it?”

Naturally, the Arcanist takes exception to that and holds up a precarious finger.
“Now, stop right there. The arcane was utilized for a nefarious intent, yes, but it was not the cause of the Sundering. The implicit culprit was the people behind the rituals.”

“The Highborne, you mean.”

For a second, Kass exhibits a flash of indetermination, prior to recuperating.
“That’s…not-“

But Thariss has no desire to point fingers and raises her hands.
“I know, I know. Not all of ‘em. And no, I’m not saying the sin’dorei are complicit. Wouldn’t be sleeping with one if I did.”

They hear a sigh from the hunter, but Kass clears her throat to loop back around.
“…at any rate, when the humans bumbled into trouble, they of course contacted the elves, the quel’dorei that had mastered the art of magic use for generations by then and scurried for aid. After months of deliberations, our people established a functional, though erratic, relationship with the human leadership of the city. Subsequently, while primarily human, Dalaran was to be co-ruled by the quel’dorei, with memberships of gnomes, dwarves and goblins years down the line.”

“Then uh, the humans make no biggie over the sin’dorei?”

Kass skips a beat and then breathes from her nose.
“Well…in all fairness, I believe that falls on who you choose to solicit. Dalaran – omitting all the neutral zones – has one quadrant each dedicated to the Horde and the Alliance. More concretely, they are portrayed by the Sunreavers and the Silver Covenant respectively.”

Being somewhat perplexed, Riv blinks.
“…who? I…don’t recognize either name.”

“Erm, yeah, same here”, admits Thariss.

“Nor do I”, Rax says, in line with her companions.

Kass huffs in a displeased manner, though not funneled at the team.
“No, I don’t imagine you would, for both are relatively modern fabrications. The Sunreavers consist of sin’dorei, many of them former residents of the city or Kirin Tor students with a propensity to repopulate it. The…Silver Covenant is a contingent of quel’dorei, aligned with the Alliance, who contravene them.”

Riv’s befuddlement gains momentum and she widens her eyes.
“…w-what? I must’ve…missed a letter or two. When did the quel’dorei actively begin to fight their own brethren? I had overheard references of disputes, but…”

The discussion compels Kass’ frown to reappear and deepen, as she crosses her arms, though her anger is aimed at a singular target – the destination with flapping Alliance banners. “It may be out of spite or prejudice, it’s unclear. You see, the Silver Covenant is of the impression that the Horde has no place and no right to stay in Dalaran, that we’re fundamentally riddled with pitfalls and the Sunreavers are borderline Alliance traitors.”

All of her disclosures funds Riv with higher influxes of shock. “Alliance…traitors? Is this genuine? We left that coalition years ago, even before the Scourge.”

Kass’ voice now gets louder. “Right you are! And when we pleaded for support after the abomination of a contemptible human prince and his zealots slaughtered our people, what did they do? The humans took advantage of us, manipulated the survivors for their own gain! We did not betray the Alliance, the Alliance abandoned us!”

The others, Riv included, are a smidgen startled by her rebuke, and a few inhabitants in the vicinity throw stunned glances at her, which she notes imminently and aspires to rectify. “…forgive me. I didn’t mean to…yell.”

“Ah, it’s okay”, Thariss assures her. “You’ve definitely earned the right to be mad, on account of what you guys suffered.”

Riv, with a troubled gaze and a hand stroking her forehead, looks a bit overtaken with it all. “I feel…outright jumbled. Why would our own kin go this far? Quarreling and feuding with one another only leads to increased misery for our people as a whole. They have to see that.”

In exchange, Kass shrugs. “Oh, I don’t know. I mean, you left too.”

The hunter’s expression and ears droop guiltily. “…that’s…true, but I didn’t do so out of hate for you or anyone. I simply didn’t…concur with what had transpired. I’m not an Alliance goon.”

“Not saying I’m one, but some could disagree”, Khroga suggests.

Thariss props up her hands. “What, cuz of me? I’m no Alliance mainstay. Never said the kaldorei should join ‘em anyway.”

“I know, Dusksong, but elements in the Horde view all night elves as Alliance lackeys.”

Riv unnervingly massages her own nose. “And these…Silver Covenant consider all sin’dorei to be Horde sycophants.”

Now it’s Kass who becomes unsatisfied, but not chastising. “That…is an apt sketch of our situation, yes. Excuse my earlier outbreak. We did not summon your team to quibble. Your point was relevant, though, Riv – the sin’dorei and the quel’dorei should be in union, we should rally to stem the existential calamities breathing down our necks. It does make me question whether the quel’dorei are enchanted with doom, for they’ve declared that they’ll never accept us until we swing Alliance flags on Silvermoon’s rooftops once more.”

It’s no surprise when Riv looks truly disheartened by the news.
“This is so…sad. After all we lost, all we were subjected to…”

In her grief, Thariss ascend as a beacon of relief. She reaches out and takes her lover’s hand, pulling her in.
“Hey, come here. Don’t wash yourself with this stuff. You’re gonna get flooded.”

Riv breathes out through her nose glumly and tilts her head into Thariss, finding it delicately consoling, which boosts her.
“That’s fair, but…”
I may have grown disillusioned with what befall our society, but I can’t gloss over the conceit that this is grounded in a fear of what I could have turned into during the war. What if it’s the same for these Silver Covenant? For me, the Sunwell’s rebirth took some of the pressure off that torment and stress. I do still love Quel’Thala and its people.” She settles on her sister and holds out her hand, an act that Kass does not fail to copy. “And my newfound bond with you is near and dear to me. I would trade it for nothing. For the quel’dorei to erase all we’ve ever accomplished and went through…”
She bites at her lower lip, conferring a limited survey of the Alliance end of the city.
“Did the reunion at Quel’Danas not matter at all?”

“Oh, I trust that it did”, remarks Kass, “but not enough to sidestep every single grievance. They still despise the Horde, for what they committed in the Second war.”

“But…” Riv wavers, squeezing Thariss hand as she tries to discern how to interpret it all.
“I know that I enlisted with them in the Second war-”

“You mean you were commanded to, by Captain Sah’nír.”

“As she was ordered as well, yes”, Riv corrects. “And I acknowledge that I did and that I respected them, but… the Alliance has only pressed us for more since that era. But regardless of the circumstances, why does their eagerness to side with humans supersede their own community, their own nation?”

Kass has no answers, nothing but a dismayed shrug.
“You tell me. I’m sorry, Riv, but that’s an inquiry best maneuvered at the Silver Covenant, not me.”

With her hand lingering on Kass’, she clutches it with an empathic undertone.
“It must be rough, contending with these forms of affairs.”

The mage exhales, expandingly beaten down.
“I confess it’s a sour climate at every occasion we convene, but I cope with it. Luckily, I have Khroga to bolster me. Without her, this crucible would be ten times worse.”

Gladdened by the credit, Khroga pulls her hand down to Kass’ free one, lifting it to brush it with her lips.
“While I’m around, I’ll always reinforce you, zak’tro.”

Kass’ smile makes a comeback, as she’s engulfed in adoration.
“You’re too good to me sometimes.”

“No such thing.”

The mage relinquishes her hand from Riv and delays her pace to coil her arms along Khroga’s waist, with the shaman dipping her head down to entangle them in a tender, yet voluminous kiss.
Afterwards, Rax rewinds. “Unless I am mistaken, I do not believe you have quite elucidated why you called for us, miss Kassari. There is no assistance we can render regarding the discourse on the war, is there?”

Having gone off the beaten path, Kass flinches with moderate embarrassment. “Oh, of course! My apologies. And no, not exactly. But I’m currently in the midst of staging a fresh mission, which I hope to set off within the time frame of a week. It will hold weight for the outlook of the war…in theory. Unless you’re terribly opposed, I want you in that team. Your trio has demonstrated exceptional aptitude and enterprising performance on every instance that we’ve coordinated.”

Riv, pleased that her sister has faith in them, takes a gander at her companions. “Well, I’m excited for more opportunities…”

“If it fortifies the efforts in the war, to quicken its conclusion, I concede”, Rax verifies.

“Oh yeah, bring it on”, Thariss agrees. “Long as it pays decently.”

“Absolutely!”, Kass confirms. “I was afforded a considerable endowment from the Magisters. If you’re lucky, I might even be able to skim off a bit from the Kirin Tor coffers”, she says with an added playful wink at the end.

“Hah, that’s what I like to hear!”

“In the meantime, you should feel free to explore the city, take in the sights. I’ve arranged for two rooms. I presume that a split is what you prefer.”

“Quite right”, says Riv.

“Have you…received any word from Nadelgosa?”, asks Rax tentatively. “At Wyrmrest, she seemed to have withdrawn in the company of her brother and sister.”

Regrettably, Kass can only wave it off. “Alas, Dalaran must not have dropped into their thoughts. Nothing so far, I’m afraid.”

“Ah. I thank you nonetheless.”

Concurrently, Thariss trains her eyes on her fiancée, pulling the hunter in and nuzzling into her cheek. “By the way…you wanna check out the bed in that room or what?”, she whispers.

Riv’s ear flits, but in an intrigued capacity, as she inhibits the hint of a coy smile. “Tsk. That’s the first thing to erupt in your mind, is it?”

“Well, we’ve kinda been sleeping neck-deep in snow for like, weeks. Or months? Can’t even fucking count the length anymore. Just saying, it’d be pretty sweet.”

She arouses a giggling fit in Riv. “Fine, fine. I’ll indulge you. But this city is saturated with all sorts of pleasures. Perhaps later, we could…wander around?”

Thariss flashes a crooked grin, exposing her fangs. “Want me to spoil ya, huh?”

“Well, as your future wife…”, she insinuates teasingly.
At least she inspires a laugh in the warrior, who encircles Riv with her arms and uplifts her into a thriving kiss, one that the blood elf is more than delighted to respond to. The very sensation of this union and to feel the awaiting thrill of a holiday of sorts, however ephemeral, is rejuvenating. “You got it, gorgeous. I’ll show ya how to have a good time, despite knowing fuck all about this place.”

Chapter End Notes

Riv has a calming break, while Ash incurs a near-death experience. That's just how the cookie crumbles sometimes, I guess
A faded limelight

Following hours of hard environmental heckling and incessant levels of frozen degrees, the blizzard that created the impression of chasing the Argent Crusade has thinned out and all but degraded. The wind has not all-out subsided, but it’s one that they can walk off. The aftershocks of the battle versus the Scourge brigade was a stark one. Though their numbers held strong, they have lost several stalwart, trusted and influential figures, not to mention the actual leader, Captain Briggton.

As much as she was gravitating towards it, Melia was conscious of that they couldn’t push forward in the disheveled state that they’d come under and had to put additional progress on ice. In contrast with the death knights and the Forsaken, the living needed some shuteye and to relax for a while. The Forsaken crusaders did not protest the motion of a bit of downtime, though, for they too had been burnt out by the toil of combat.

There aren’t a ton of alternatives out in the snowy moors, in no small part due to the Scourge’s thoughtless onslaught, as they’ve ravished a path of murder and devastation of Drakkari homes. It’s nothing save wreckage and ruins now. The crusaders can at least be grateful that the Ebon Blade cottoned onto them, for the knights’ immunity to the cold and their flexible ‘gifts’ have bestowed them with many answers to grievous plights. Together, they designed and planted a camp out here, a temporary shelter from when the snowstorm appeared to know no bounds, where they could tend to their wounded troops and mend their broken spirits. The latter also involved food and what drinks they could spare.

Once Ashindra and Melia have fixed and consumed a light meal, the Sergeant touches on a looming affair.

“Is now not the optimal moment to have a chat with our rescuers, see what they have to say?”

Ash comes off as more stoked by the idea, while Melia is somewhat dizzy on the heels of Briggton’s death, and to once more be hurled into the dome of leadership. She toys with the conceit of deconstructing these disturbances with the paladin, but then recalibrates her internal fluctuations, to weather the twisters. Her hands lower the mug she had been drinking warm tea from, to remain heated, and draws in some air.

“Yeah, it’s probably due now. Let’s see what they’re up to.”

Traversing the campsite, they track the Strike-Commander to an independent retreat of the Ebon Blade quarters. She hasn’t stashed anything fancy here, or even so much as a bed, just a cobbled together table of rocks and broken tiles. On top of it lies a mishmash of maps, records and reports, not all of them registered with Ebon Blade signatures.

By her sides are two people, two other female knights in identical regalia as her own – the one on the left is a night elf with grey-orchid purple skin and short violet-pink-ish hair that has seemingly wilted to this color. To her right is a moss green troll with longer blue strands in a ponytail and fairly lavish ivory and slightly yellow tusks. The troll is better preserved than the elf, as far as vibrancy and animation goes.

Peculiarly, the two latter women are apparently fooling around a little to a tempered extent, joke-wise. The troll mildly bumps her elbow into the elf’s side, who regards her with a light frown, before pushing back with her own shoulder. The troll smirks and jabs a finger on her waist, which is naturally covered by armor and even though the elf bears a drier expression, she still retaliates with a favor in the same style. The sole reason they discontinue is by virtue of Trienza - plainly the one with the topmost position and seniority of the three - shifting to glare at the two, but not as
harshly as one could presume. She just looks a tad done with their antics. For the two living women, this is a tempting insight into death knights and their dynamics. Not as austere and rigid as everyone had been led to believe. Then again, maybe this deduction should be a given, in light of how wildly and indiscriminately rumors spread. And who wouldn’t be hasty to denounce undead as nothing but depraved sociopaths? It is the stereotype.

At this close distance, the duo also translates another kernel of truth, characteristic to Trienza. She does not exude a wintery wind on a nonstop basis. She is like any other person outside of battle. Well, barring the whole being dead part. Melia stays in proximity of Ash, on the brink of clasping her hand, but with the responsibility of being Brigston’s replacement, she stays firm, her heart stout. This is the leader of a prospective ally, but she doesn’t want to be deemed weak or sentimental to a fault.

Trienza, who isn’t wielding her helmet anymore, keeps up her rather curt and cold exterior. Ash didn’t rightly know her to any intimate value pre-invasion, but she’s acquainted with the stories told by Rivaryn. Her ex’s words were not horror tales of legends and nightmares, but if memory serves, Ranger-Captain Sah’nir could be a severe personality, hard-boiled and hardline, but not ruthless. Emphatically the type of person who would head up an uprising, should she be freed from her slaver. She wasn’t patriotic as much as loyal; more so to her fellow soldiers than her King. That she would now handle a sword, as opposed to a bow, also fits the bill. She was adaptable, resourceful, a ranger first and foremost, without the same affinity for animals like Riv.

Melia is stuck in a state of being swamped with emotions and dread for the dictates she has to issue, but thankfully, as they arrive, Trienza doesn’t give them a hard time. With a tiny fraction of awe, the crusaders are greeted gregariously by the Commander. She faces them and dips her head with respect.

“Lieutenant Haven, Sergeant Revenor, well met. Are you doing alright?”

The priestess smooths out her sleeves and clears her throat.

“Yes, thank you, we’re making do. Your concern is gratifying, but we’re not fully in shape, I’m sad to relay. Plenty of internal injuries and illnesses to address. Our troops aren’t in a great place.”

“Your restoration spells aren’t operational?”

“Well…the Light is malleable, but not indefinite. It tends to be favorable for shutting exterior harm and numbing pain, but beyond that, it grows dicey.”

The Commander nods slowly, her face neutral.

“I see. Can we render additional assistance?” She disrupts herself before an answer has even been expended. “Hmm. I must profess that I don’t quite know what that would consist of. Our reputation isn’t founded on any healing abilities.”

Melia’s lips coil into a scant smile.

“It’s okay. We’ve got what we need to scrape by.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Are you the commander of this detachment?”

It may not have been her intent, but the inquiry does throw Melia off balance at first. She has imagined it, felt it, absorbed it, but not…expressed it out loud. But now she has agency in the matter. Time to own up.

“I…suppose I have to acknowledge that, yes, I am. We’ve got two Second Lieutenants, a few Sergeants – including Ash here – some Corporals, but…as the solitary First Lieutenant in the bunch, I’m the ranking officer, so the torch has flumped to me.”
“You don’t sound enthralled with the notion.”

Melia subconsciously fidgets with the sleeve of her robes, avoiding a direct engagement with Trienza’s eyes. “We just lost our true CO, a man I held in regard. It’s…rough and not an outcome I ever salivated for.”

Now grokking the tone at hand, Trienza ruminates on this case, to frame a valid reaction. She nods upon discovery. “My apologies. I can relate to your predicament better than you may suspect. In the fall of my homeland, cruel fate levied much of the same on me, and even more ghastly on those who endured at my demise. But you shouldn’t lose hope. The fact that you’re still alive, still prepared to make heavy and pivotal decisions, and took the majority of your people out of the onslaught you went through, is a good sign. Take heart that your Captain would not have regretted his sacrifice if you persevere. Trust me, I speak from experience.”

Melia has to give props to the elf, for her chest now feels a little less ungainly. “I…thank you, Commander. That does make it somewhat easier.”

“Don’t mention it. But since we are now communicating lead to lead, I believe it’s only pertinent that I introduce other elements of my cadre and troops. The duo here in my company is Sydela and Lah’kur, my aides.”

“…your aides?”, Ash repeats.

“Yes. They assist me with a bevy of tasks and duties.”

“We’re mainly her bodyguards”, states Sydela flatly, the night elf. Her voice employs a reflection that resembles Trienza’s, possibly a standard among death knights.

“And advisors”, adds Lah’kur, which also substantiates their assumptions about the voice reverberation. “We trained under her in separate batches, but independently developed a bond. We serve her stronger this way.”

Melia’s eyes suddenly bug out. “Hold a sec – Sydela? I know that name! Weren’t you in-“

Sydela has a marginally sedated appearance, but not as strictly as Trienza. “The Argent Dawn, yes”, she cuts short. “Shocked that you remember. Haven, right?”

The Lieutenant nods slowly, still swimming in these evocative streams. “I…yeah. You were one of the fatalities at Naxxramas.”

Hearing these quite poignant assertions, Ash’s gaze flickers back and forth. “Were you two…friends?”

“No”, Sydela abruptly corrects, “but there weren’t many of us, so it isn’t hard to keep records of faces.”

“Yeah…”, says Melia with far less conviction.

“Why did you join the Dawn?”, prods Ash.

The kaldorei reflexively stares down at Ash’s tabard – dissimilar, albeit pulls at her lifeless heart.
“Revenge.”

“For what?”

“The undead liches under the Burning Legion killed my brother at Mount Hyjal and then brought his body back to fight me. I…had to put him down. As the Dawn sent out a call for allies to vanquish the Scourge, I was quick to snatch it up. Thought I’d shatter their menace for good.”

Ash pensively kneads her own arm.
“And then…” She exhales. “My condolences.”

The kaldorei shrugs, though it’s undistinguishable whether it’s a trained response or not.
“It’s a done and dusted deal.”

With a silent intermission, Ash surveys the stance and height of the troll, now that they’re up close. She’s taller than Sydela, arguably even superseding Thariss, whom Sydela is evidently below. The kaldorei operates a modified moonglaive with Ebon Blade-esque runes, while Lah’kur keeps twin one-handed runeaxes at her belt.
To her slight surprise, she notes patches of moss on the troll’s skin, partially inserted, though much of it is shriveled and withered now. Perhaps it has effectively retained its integrity by means of the various necromantic agents that synthesizes her undead form.

“Wait, I thought you were Darkspear, but…you’re…Amani?”

Lah’kur lets out a faint and smug laughter, docking her hands at her hips.
“Figured it out, did ya? It be a long while since I saw home, but yes, your guess is on the mark, lil’ elf.”

“How did one of the Amani come to join the Ebon Blade?”

The troll narrows her icy blue, almost white, spiritless eyes.
As for me, I was amid the fallen in the outskirts o’ the Scourge attack on your elven lands. Led one of the groups which were to launch attacks on your people, as the undead went on a slaughtering craze. We of the Amani, having been robbed of our own territory from your ancestors, we wanted to exploit the opportunity provided.”
A wistful whiff washes over her, as she rubs her right tusk.
“Unfortunately, I was too thrilled, too itching for blood and in the thick of our assault, we rammed right into a Scourge division that they be leaving for finishing stragglers.” She snorts and shakes her head with just minor regret. “We fought long and hard, but our defeat was inevitable. We were overwhelmed, taking our dying breaths side by side with the elves. The undead and their necromancer masters didn’t care who we were, other than more flesh for the pile.”

Quite a tale, and one with flighty judgments. Ash isn’t sure what to make of it.
“It doesn’t erm, bother you then, that you now take orders from an elf?”

Lah’kur shrugs in an unruffled manner, not displaying any major ill effects.
“Not really. Things have changed now. As Commander Palesun here is so fond of tattling – we are all Ebon Blades now.”

She gleefully smirks at Trienza, who merely swivels her head. It’s a reference which neither of the duo gleans, but they can comprehend the nickname.
“Let’s press forward”, states the Commander. “Lieutenant, what have you done with your casualties?”
“The uh, the dead?”

“Precisely.”

“Well, we’ve preserved them for the time being. We endeavor to bring them along until-“

But Trienza waves her hand in rejection.

“Burn them.” Ash blinks and Melia is left summarily baffled. “You may seek to ship them all back home, which is commendable, but unsound. For the sake of your team’s stability and to negate the Lich King’s reanimation range, you must dispose of them forthwith.”

Well…at least she’s direct, if a tinge too blunt. Melia rubs her hands together as she deliberates on her reply.

“I uh, don’t necessarily take issue with that wholeheartedly on a pragmatic degree, but…their families might.”

“Hmm. Granted, but we must consider the bigger picture. If you do require materials to return with, then sift out personal effects, mementos. I do appreciate the gist behind letting their homes have closure, but out here on the tundra, a corpse is a hazard. The bodies must go, for better or worse.”

Despite a measure of reluctance, Melia tracks the logic and relinquishes her protests.

“Alright”, she concedes tentatively. “Reckon that you’re right in that this may be the path we have to travel.”

“I endorse this selection, Lieutenant”, utters Ash, showing her support. “The safety of the team comes first.”

As the conversation washes off, Trienza picks up on a sixth person that approaches, a human. His helmet is detached, hence why she can visualize his face.

“Ah, Wilthorn. Come.”

For a second, Melia freezes up, prior to rapidly swirling to aim at the incoming figure – a human indeed, his skin a shade darker brown than hers, with traces of grey now in death, his thin wavy textured hair and full beard a faded black. Half of the south side of his face is faintly scarred, as if someone has burnt or boiled that section. Even so, it cannot be mistaken that this is the man she can identify with, a man she’s well-versed in.

She detects her throat dehydrating, and so tries to swallow, shortly ahead of greeting him.

“H-hello Wilthorn. It’s uh…it’s been a while.”

Sadly, he is either in a similar embroilment or there are outlying values infringing on him. He’s outwardly uncomfortable, merely able to proffer a nod, his new ghostly eyes hardly meeting hers at all. Is he ashamed to stand in front of an old friend, or does he foster a grudge, holding her culpable for his affliction?

Whatever the case, he maneuvers his gaze at Trienza, borderline pleadingly. “Commander.” The same quivering, muffled inflection as the others.

Trienza likely carries sympathy for his quandary and inclines her head.

“This is Wilthorn Siddall, my second-in-command. He has served me since Icecrown.”

Melia swallows once more, but in this occasion legitimately unclogging her throat.

“I…figured that. We’re…acquainted.”

She discerns how Ash subtly caresses her back, an effort she’s immensely grateful for, that she has anyone at all. Does Wilthorn? Is this his family now, his friends?
“Commander”, he speaks calmly. “I’m reporting in regard to our campsite’s safety quality. We haven’t scouted this neighborhood a whole lot. I reckon its time for a turnaround, and I volunteer to head the commitment up.”

The high elf rubs her chin with a level of unease.
“Yes, I believe I’m on board with your evaluation. Fine, grab whomever you estimate as significant and go a few rounds.”

He salutes her crisply and then affords Melia a terse final look, before donning his helmet and unceremoniously departing.
“Wilthorn, wait”, she reaches out, but he doesn’t stop, unwilling to engage.

Ash grazes her fingers over the priestess’ arm.
“Are you okay?”, she whispers.

A couple of seconds passes, until she briefly dips her head.
“I’ll handle it.”

“You can go find him later.”

“…maybe.”

As they are not privy to the particulars of this murmur, Trienza redevotes them onto their conversation.
“We have a case at hand that has to be sorted. Namely, your Crusade and its status. I could be swayed to deploy my platoon to stand vigil with you, on your trail to a nearby base, should this be your ambition. However, I must warn you that we cannot conduct the full length of the trip. We are also on a pivotal mission, you see.”

Ash’s ears tingle with captivation.
“What kind of mission?”

“Not a confidential one, if you’re curious, though it harbors a covert angle. We’re stalking a san’layn, going by the identity of Prince Acranius.”

A scarce frown descends upon the paladin’s brow.
“That rings a bell. The san’layn I squared off with, and whom you slew, I can swear he cited that name. Deriving from some Citadel, correct?”

“Quite so – the August Corona Citadel. An extravagant name for a necropolis, but not impregnable. We aim to lay waste to the facility. The Lord you vied with was one of his subordinates.”

“Then who, more specifically, is Prince Acranius?”, wonders Melia.

“As I referred, he is one of the san’layn. The word is of ancient thalassian origin, meaning roughly ‘Darkfallen’, which in and of itself is well-founded, for they were once quel’dorei and sin’dorei. They are undead in nature, subsisting on the blood from mortal creatures, unequivocally routed at the sentient races of Azeroth. Prince Acranius is entwined with their chain of command, only a step or two beneath the Blood Prince Council. Their ultimate leader is known as Blood-Queen Lana’thel, who serves the Lich King. I know very little of her, but I speculate she was once a Magister, albeit not one with optimal clout.

As for Acranius, he is at the moment prospecting Zul’Drak, hoping to find some manner of power to devitalize and quicken the reaping of this nation, means which supposedly does exist in some
remote location. Thwarting the Scourge and terminating them altogether is the primary objective on the Ebon Blade’s agenda. This is why I’m of the belief that hunting and eradicating the Prince is instrumental towards that goal. This is our current task and by extension, the demolition of his Citadel. The Drakkari may not be our allies, but if their people fall wholesale, then the Scourge will attain a massive quantity of strength and proportions.”

Unfolding the truth, Ash comes to a realization.
“Well, as a matter of fact, the Argent Crusade shares an identical mission. Lieutenant, don’t you agree that it would be apt to pursue a partnership under these conditions?”

Melia’s expression isn’t imbued with dissent, just a smidgen of reservations.
“Uh, well, the direct framing of this inquiry isn’t wrong, but I’m fuzzy on the assets we’ve accrued. The Crusade has injured, which is a notable chunk of our numbers. The knights we can spy around the premises, is that all you’ve brought?”

“Let me assure you, Lieutenant”, voices Trienza sincerely, “that every individual death knight is a ferocious entity, a veritable storm of carnage, beyond the larger mass of mortals, which should not be underestimated.”

“I…yeah, I wasn’t-“

“But no, it is not. We don’t have more Ebon Blades in the works per se, but rather allies which we are to assemble with – a regiment of Zandalari trolls are to be brought on board in a few days. Hence the tight deadline.”

The priestess guides her next query at the troll.
“Erm, knight Lah’kur, was it? I’m not especially educated in troll international politics. Are you better apprised of these Zandalari?”

Lah’kur is moderately confounded by the question.
“…huh? Ya asking me? Eh, In short, no. Can’t tell ya anything broadly, for during my lifetime, we never had a close relationship with them islanders. It be many a century since the ‘Troll Wars’, that Amani and Zandalari fought together and we last had a stable dialogue. We ‘disappointed’ them, by losing to your people and the elves. Never met a person from Zandalar.”

“Oh, okay. Do you know any stories of them?”

She shrugs casually.
“Tall, sturdy, old, bigheaded. That’s about the sum of it.”

Their assignment at hand is report to a Crusade base and Melia does not yearn to shirk their duties, but in the same manner, this is conclusively a mission of some magnitude. Seconds elapses, up till Melia narrows down her call.
Alright, I’m enacting an executive decision – we’re going with you. But, there’s some caveats we’re straddled with, chiefly that we’d have to somehow restore or drop off our casualties and stock up on supplies.”

“Death knights have no attachment to the nourishment of the living”, Trienza enlightens them, “nor sleep for that matter. But I am positive that the Zandalari can assist you on the latter front. In fact, they may possess magic to guarantee both.
As for the circumstances of the injured, we can warrant them a day at the furthest, potentially two, but then the columns shall have to march. We will have to assess where and how to unload them, if it’s made essential.”
“Yeah, I…reckon that’s the max we can ask for. I’ll confer with my other medical personnel, and we’ll compile some diagnoses.”

“Terrific. Then we shall delve into the rest once you’re finished.”

In the fallout of the talks, prior to both sides parting, Ash attempts to touch base with the Commander.

“Trienza?”

The judgment to use her name – and first name to boot – amasses the sensibilities and inquisitiveness of the aides. Trienza halts in her pace, taking a gander over her shoulder.

“Yes, Sergeant?”

Her tone is colder than earlier, stiffer. Ash nearly gulps, aware that she can’t trip up now, or an avalanche might devour her.

“I uhm, was wondering if we could…have a chat.”

“About?”

“There are…matters that we should possibly discuss. Certain…issues.”

Trienza bequeathed her a handful of seconds to arrange her premise, but with it exposed, she rebuffs the remainders.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I am party to this invasion explicitly to fight the Scourge, Revenor. I presume you endeavor to carry out a quest not unlike mine.”

“Yes, but-“

“Then let’s not linger on unnecessities. This is our duty, our burdens, and we should focus on fulfilling them. The past is irrelevant.”

But is it? If it were, for what reason would Trienza ardently gun for the Lich King?

“Commander-“

“Time is of the essence”, she accentuates. “There are far too many heavy fates at stake. Either you and your Crusade join us on the journey, or we will leave you behind in the snow. There are no grounds for redundant talk – patch up your wounded and prepare to depart on the allotted period.”

Before she has more to say, Ash dispenses one last-ditch bid, though it may appear misspent.

“Trienza…Rivaryn is here. On Northrend.”

The Commander muzzles excess grousing and both of her aides are now more riveted than ever, with Lah’kur’s eyebrow rising and Sydela’s ears flickering.

Nothing but wind fills the brittle silence, but Trienza doesn’t comment. With her back turned, she disengages, the thumping of her boots that crack the snow ringing in the area.
Captured by a tempered wind

It’s silly, really, the whole thing. Rivaryn was anticipating another ordinary meetup with her sister, perhaps a conversation about the war effort or a brand-new duly-paid mission. Just having a sit-down and a face-to-face with Kassari isn’t an activity that she has had to experience in years anyway, so she would’ve been a-okay with that being the turnout.
And while the latter is indeed a project which seems to be in the pipeline, Riv had honestly not figured she’d be sitting around in a fancy room getting pampered.

Well, ‘pampered’ is a strong word. They haven’t exactly received a line of servants that see to their every need or had their meals delivered at their doorstep, but the quarters they’ve lent is more than she’s accustomed to; a full-room carpet smooth like a lynx’s fur, arched windows with adequate lighting, tables at mid-height and not a couple of inches too tall – like kaldorei style – or too short, seats aplenty with ornamental cushions and at the top of the list, an extensive and nigh-divine bed.
And then there’s the all-expenses-paid-for meals at three times a day, as well as drinks – though the alcohol is not always served up in a continual line.
But on second thought, does this cost anyone anything whatsoever? Are the dishes and beverages they partake of prepared somewhere with resources and manpower or conjured up by the mages? Do they hire full-time paid staff or utilize enchanted cleaning implements? Was the woman at the lobby real or the handiwork of an illusionist? She has never fully understood the logistics of arcane day-to-day spellcrafting, a fact that her deceased parents would likely be uncontrollably ashamed of.

However, while Riv is meant to enjoy a quasi-holiday and kick back for a bit, she has never been one to rest on her laurels; or better phrased, she believes sitting around bereft of purpose is a hard pill to swallow and steadily gets restless. She can feel how her hands squirm, aching for something to fidget with. Although, she would for her part describe it more as if she delights in this specific method of winding down, by keeping her brain stimulated.

Currently, she’s seated with a bunch of tools from her kit on and adjacent to her body. There’s a micro-adjustor, an arclight spanner, a hammer, a torque wrench, pliers, as well as nuts, bolts, metal plates and more parts and trifles. With these instruments, she’s attempting to mold a decent frame for a new gadget. She’s been rocking a scope attachment for her rifle a couple of years running, but perhaps a decent shift has now emerged where she should accessorize, expand her horizons.

For months, she’s been leafing through various engineering-made goggles, special rigs employed by all walks of tech life, from hunters to spellcasters to warriors; though mainly gnomes and goblins. This could far and wide be a marked upgrade to her style and combat maneuvers, while not necessarily excluding the application of scopes for long distance, but rather diversify the manner she battles in close- to mid-range. Or that’s the aspiration. She’ll have to wait and see how sprawling the progress will be, later down the line.

Her imagination is not wholly locked onto the evolution of her profession, however, as she’s additionally dazzled by the sights and smells of Dalaran, its people and those who come by as guests, like the trio and their pets. She considers it very curious how the inhabitants cope and carry forward, no matter the hardships and dangers of Icecrown. In fact, some demeanors might indicate they’re sprier than ever. Granted, they are floating kilometers up into Northrend’s sky overhead, which does shelter them from the perils at large, but Riv is positive that if the Lich King put a meaningful operation into action, they would be in real hot water – or cold, as it were.

The drifting reflections are curbed by the rustling of the door going ajar and as she flips to it, she
perceives her dear wife-to-be slinking in. Or rather, she dips her head inside, with a mysterious smile on her lips.

“Sup?”

Riv, sitting over a violet carpet on the floor in a pair of blue shorts and a black tank top, blinks bemusedly.

“Hey. Uh, just tinkering a bit.”

“Tsk. You nerd.”

Her brow creases, upsetting the long black eyebrows.

“…I’m an engineer!”

On the opposite end, Thariss finds her fiancée’s fussing to be a source of great entertainment.

“Yes that your excuse for everything, grease nose?”

“What do you mean by that? And I don’t have grease on my nose!” In a self-conscious capacity, she dabs her fingers over it to validate her assertion.

“…do I?”

Thariss chortles.

“Anyway, I got a lil’ something to show you. You all set for this, babe?”

Disregarding the previous eventuality of dirt on her face, Riv now redirects another batch of curiosity at the night elf.

“Show me what?”

“It’s a surprise. Wouldn’t be a good one if I told ya first.”

Rounding her eyes and barely shaking her head, Riv gestures with her hand to proceed.

“Yeah, okay. I’m standing by, I guess. Technically sitting, but…”

“Oh, you better be, because this is gonna be fucking stellar.”

“…was that a pun?”

“I’ll be blowing you away, hot stuff.”

“Will you stick to that spot all day and play it up to the max, or are you actually unfurling it at some stage?”

In turn, Thariss strolls inside and it hits home instantly for Riv what she was getting at now – Thariss is decked out in a high-quality navy-blue suit, presumably of human design, with a burgundy tie and a tall collar. A one-sided cape is draped over one shoulder, extending to her hand. There are silver pins on her collar, down the middle of her torso and white stripes on her loose sleeves and legs. Her face wears an exceedingly sly and sensuous smirk too, crossing her arms as she leans against the door frame.

“Sup, fine-looking? Come here often?”, she jests.

Now that Riv reiterates the blinking motion, it is out of sheer astonishment as she gradually checks her beloved out, obtaining a good, long and exhilarating view.

“What…what is this?”

“Oh, this thing? It’s a lil’ gem I found in a store nearby. Gotta look fresh when I take my fabulous
“fiancée out, right?”

“Hmm. I don’t have any objections per se, but...was it costly?”

Thariss shrugs lightly.
“Nothing I couldn’t afford. We don’t spend a lotta the gold we earn.”

Rising, Riv begins to half-circle the warrior.
“It is...awfully classy. Quite graceful too.”

“Mhm. Wanna touch the texture?”

Riv tilts her head back and snickers.
“You’re ridiculous.”

“Serious talk, though – it’s totally soft, like a moonkin’s feathers. Super comfy to wear too.”

Riv commonly regards Thariss’ charm as thoroughly captivating and nigh irresistible, but she won’t abide herself to be baited by it. She does have a substitute and stops a few meters afield, posing her hands at her hips.
“What’s all this for?”

“Oh, we’re gonna have a grand old time, babe. You up for finding some dandy establishment where we can grab a bite to eat?”

At the outset, the hunter opens her mouth for an added input, but then glances pensively at her own attire.
“I don’t know. There’s nothing on hand in my wardrobe that’s suitably sophisticated to match yours.”

“Ah, don’t worry yourself on that part. Lotsa boutiques, vendors and shops are open for business right now, including a few tailors.”

“How did you even pinpoint one that could stitch a suit in your size? You’re huge.”

The night elf reflexively smirks and pushes herself away from the frame, up to her full size.
“Tsk. Thanks, I hadn’t noticed, shorty.”

Riv narrows her eyes as she pulls them up, though she is intimately acquainted with Thariss’ pranking tone and therefore doesn’t get herself geared up for any arguments.
“You know what I mean. You’re...bulky.”

“And hot?”

“Isn’t that a given?”

“Mm, I do like you putting it into words, though, gorgeous. As for the storefronts, according to the peeps I chatted with, they’ve claimed there was a big influx of kaldorei customers, what with my people’s induction into the Alliance and all that prattle. Therefore, people are stocking up like nobody’s business. I visited this master tailor guy, a human. Knew exactly what I was in for.”

Riv nods.
“That is a logical result, I suppose.” She dusts her pants off and then approaches, skimming her hands over the fabric, discovering that her fiancée was not messing around.
“Wow, you’re right. It is very smooth to touch. Reminds me of some thalassian cloths.”

“Told ya.”

With the hunter now in such an immediate avenue, Thariss stretches her hand out and tugs Riv just a nudge closer, prior to sliding it along her hair and the second going on a cruise down the blood elf’s back, which sends tingling delight across Riv’s skin. Her emerald vision ascends, looking straight into Thariss’ white ones, trying not to let the haze of thrill consume her.

“You…put this on specifically to entice me, didn’t you?”

“Who, me?” she asks wryly. “You seriously reckon I’d need to cobble a lure together for you?”

“Rides on the circumstances and what you covet, I expect.”

Thariss exposes her teeth and fangs in a self-assured style.

“Naah. I know you’re too crazy about me to decline.”

Riv does compress her eyes, but inwardly she acknowledges the level of truth to this statement.

“Dream on.”

Unfortunately, she isn’t being relinquished that easily, for Thariss distinguishes the quality of it.

“Is that a challenge, babe?”

She seizes Riv’s chin in a moderately firm, albeit not harsh grip and drifts ever so close. She can detect her lover’s lips parting involuntarily, which is precisely what she’s aiming for. She reins it in just barely short of pecking Riv, but near to the point where her breath can still wreak its imprint on the sin’dorei’s skin.

“Sure you don’t wanna retract that declaration?”, she asks huskily. “Don’t lie and tell me you aren’t dying to lemme seal this deal.”

As profoundly as her base instinct is to retain a notable layer of dignity and composure, Riv does in fact nibble at her own lower lip, unable to restrain or camouflage a proliferating desire.

“Don’t…pick on me”, she whispers, though at a meager, faded volume.

Thariss’ expression intensifies to a grin, avidly aware that Riv is bolstered by it too.

“Or else what?”

“I’ll be…very cross.”

“Uh-huh. Gotta do better than that, gun girl.”

In general, Riv is not one to catch an overt bait. She’s not difficult to jeer or agitate, but she doesn’t stand for anyone spurring her on. She can, as a rule, head herself off and refrain from playing Thariss’ games. But today, whatever the cause may be, she crawls right into that bait barrel. She clutches the hem of the front end of the suit coat.

“Stow it.”

And then, skipping any other warnings, she yanks Thariss down that last trail, with surprising vitality in the warrior’s mind, who gets dragged into a kiss. An exquisite one too. It’s one that, for once, makes Thariss feel a little fragile in her knees, for the huntress truly squeezes her lips onto Thariss’, the faintest of possessive bites wrapped within.

Upon ceding her occupation of it, Riv is titillated somewhat by Thariss actively being drawn in, like magnetized to the exuberance and assertive nature of the kiss, inherently craving for more.

With Thariss’ lids fluttering open, Riv gets a dim intake of air, as the night elf squeezes her hips unintentionally.
“…getting me gized over here, babe.”

And the tables have turned, as Riv now displays a smile emanating confidence. “Shouldn’t have dared me then.”

“Hah. You know that’s not fazing whatsoever, right?”

They nuzzle their noses in a more affectionate fashion and rekindle their kiss, but this time with a value of tenderness and warmth, predominantly as Riv doesn’t want to stoke their passions too vigorously at this time. As they split to a small degree, Riv resurfaces an earlier topic. “You do genuinely look snazzy in that outfit, though. It’s a tremendously fine aesthetic, with a taste competence I hadn’t predicted from you.”

Thariss’ ears slant with a fraction of dissatisfaction. “Geez, thanks. Suspecting nothing but trash from me, huh?”

“No, more of a…casual vibe. You almost exclusively purchase garments of that value, like loose plain shirts and leggings. But this is quite astounding.”

“Hmm. Yeah, guess I got my fashion on form for once, now that you mention it.”

Riv goes on a brief trek in a circle, to study her a tad more meticulously. “You know, I’m wondering if you might be capable of sporting clothes in a similar pattern during our wedding.”

The wedding. Yeah, that’s an event Thariss doesn’t often review in her mind’s eye. Probably overdue for a reinspection. “It does feel seriously cozy and limber, yeah. Dunno if it’s ideal for a spectacular day like that, however, especially when it’s a kaldorei one on the table. And like it or not, beautiful, mom is gonna demand a say in this show and she’s bound to have a…unique vision, well and truly. If I were to go out on a limb here, I’m putting gold on that it’ll be in the memory my mother’s setup to boot.”

With such a sincere layout, Riv tries to be frank for a moment, her features solemn. “And you’re fine with that?”

“Well, I mean, yeah. It’s cool, I’d get where she’s coming from and…it’s tradition. Shae adhered to it, and I’ve had uncles and aunts do the same. Gotta respect that. Plus, mother had a knack for crispness, and it’d be…nice to replicate it a little. As far as I can fit it, essentially.”

As Thariss is not doused in sorrow or cynicism, Riv is glad, but also rounded off. “Alright then. Less wedding talk, more present, I think. Where should we go today? Are there any…diners or canteens that caught your notice in the neighborhood? Haven’t strolled for a glimpse myself.”

“Yeah, clearly cuz you’ve been locked up in this scrambled workshop of yours. Working on a day off too! And you claim not to be a nerd.”

Riv balks and opens her mouth to gape, somewhat incensed. “I—this isn’t working! Not for me.”

Thariss spreads her arms smugly. “I rest my case.”
With a sizeable sigh, Riv massages the bridge of her nose.
“You are…hopeless sometimes.”

“But, well, I’ve caught wind of plenty of vouches for this joint called the ‘Legerdemain Lounge’, main tavern in Runeweaver Square. The Underbelly – section underneath the city – hosts a few… hives with acquired tastes and potent drinks. My kinda hangout corner, but not for everyone. Oh, and I overheard there’s also a ‘deluxe restaurant’, apparently, adjacent to the Violet Citadel. Dubious if we can reserve chairs there or not, though. Could barter with Kassari to gain a favor, if we’re into it.”

To some, the thought might have its temptations, but Riv merely smiles and shrugs it off.
“I don’t believe that’s necessary. The Lounge sounds lovely to me. That being said, I do require a set of garbs to wear and I’m not fully convinced there is anything in my bags that would apply.”

“Let’s go chat with your sister then? We can pass up on the restaurant, but she likely has a few dresses, I bet, something of thalassian design.”

“Oh, that isn’t a shabby idea. Kass is prone to haul her stash around, which in this case is an asset.”
A curt breath exits her nose. “I do wish I had remembered to bring a selection of the clothes Javynna sewed for me. The risk they would be torn or dirtied was too great, which is why I stored them back home. And now I regret it. Guess that’s my own fault.”

“Too true. But before we get you a few new collections…”, says Thariss and tugs a bit on the bottom of the tank top, only to glide one of her hands underneath it, eliciting a delicate gasp from her lover, “…maybe you ought to…get undressed? To try ‘em all out, you see. Not all that practical to cocoon yourself in clothes, right?”

The tenacious and moderately calloused fingers float across the toned surface of Riv’s abs, constructing a gradual journey further upwards, with minimal resistance. Being caressed and relished by Thariss, both physically and mentally, is one of those things she can commit to unconditionally on most days, no fuss or foul, but not in every instance. She sparsely arches her eyebrow.
“Uh, shouldn’t we, you know, locate a couple of outfits first?”

Thariss steers her gaze squarely at Riv’s, tilting her head in the same mischievous effect that her ears peak.
“Mm…debatable. Would it be too much to ask for a pre-meal feast of a gorgeous huntress?”

Riv promptly giggles and diverts face.
“You are voracious some days.”

“When I’ve got such a tasty lady, how could I not be?”

Though she’s conscious of the fact that she’s foregoing her own preceding skepticism, Riv readily indulges the warrior and obli ges the physical yearnings, as Thariss grips her waist, presses her lips onto Riv’s neck and marginally grazes it with her fangs. The wisp of a sting on her skin and firm tug on her figure surpasses an inner limit of Riv’s subconscious defiance, and she permits herself to be unclad and in vivid pace guided to the foot of the bed, which she bumps into and bounces onto its silken sheets. Dinner can be delayed a few more hours.
Day by day, mile by mile, the Argent Crusade has done its utmost to measure and match the unrelenting march of their new allies, the Ebon Blade death knights, a feat that is not uncomplicated. It’s not as if the empowered undead make it purposefully strenuous for them, as rigorous regulation is simply particular to their souls. They don’t even correspond with the Forsaken, for those types of undead were not molded with the same discriminate hand. The Lich King wanted his knights pristine, elevated to a class all on its own.

Strike-Commander Trienza has heightened the impression among the living of the Ebon Blade’s capacity for charitability, however, as she goes to great lengths to hold her knights at a velocity which shouldn’t burn out their comrades. The other knights also periodically assist with a variety of tasks, from carrying bags or containers, to lifting or boosting the wounded that require an extra hand. An unease slithered in among the crusaders initially, but this gradually flushed away when no cause had been made prominent. Melia has speculated whether the knights’ generosity is out of necessity, to keep everyone in line, or if they’re genuinely helpfully inclined, to be viewed as people and individuals just like everyone else. The Forsaken abounds with the latter, so why not? It’s why she endlessly maintains an open mind and welcomes any and all support.

The procession of the synchronized two factions have thus far made but one accelerated stop in their travels, to drop off a section of the wounded. The greater part still clamored to stick with it and wrestle with their respective internal agonies in order to stay and fight with their comrades, but some were too far gone to return to service anytime soon. Some fortune was actually administered out here in the otherwise bleak existence of Northrend, as another Crusade crew had composed a fragment of an outpost that weren’t on any maps from recent weeks. They consented to transport the injured troops to the nearest base, when conditions allow it.

In the ensuing days of the delivery, the dual team commenced a journey that pulled them to the east, to the square arbitrated by correspondence between the Ebon Blade and their far-off allies. They elected a sizeable square in amidst the ruins of a Drakkari town, which would give them space to discuss, but also the groundwork of a shelter. As they arrive, however, to their suspicious bewilderment, the Zandalari are not yet in attendance. With their decelerated pace by nature of their partnership with the Crusade, Trienza had expected the trolls to beat them by days. It’s unclear if this is out of a mindful conspiration, or if they too bumbled into adversities.

Melia, as head of the Crusade detachment, wanders up to her counterpart, backed by Ashindra. The early afternoon sun has peeked through the thick cloud layers to a middling degree, and though a cold wind snakes over their bodies, no snow falls from the sky. The frosty snowstorm hasn’t rejuvenated to full strength in a few days, but it has previously been there as an ever-present blur in the periphery, mitigating their perception and on occasion playing tricks on them. The danger that it’ll be reborn is a consistent worry.

“Commander, what’s the situation?”

Trienza shakes her head, the elongated frostbitten ears sloping somewhat anxiously. “I don’t have a clue, to be honest. This was the designated path we were to convene at. Their leader
struck me as competent enough to comprehend elementary map instructions, but…now I’m not as positive.”

With a pensive rubbing of her chin, Melia peers over the frozen wastes, the barren forests and dilapidated constructions immersing her horizon. 
“Hmm. Want me to send out a search party?”

“No, that’s impractical. I already have Lah’kur on-“

Speaking of, on that exact second, the troll’s voice erupts from the top of a hill to the northeast. “’ey, boss! Ya be wanting to look over here. Reckon I found ‘em.”

Trienza is unaware of what specifics are entailed, but she trusts Lah’kur’s judgment and nods sharply.
“Sydela, with me. Wilthorn, maintain the perimeter in my absence.”

The human death knight salutes her, a tendency which few of their kind mimic. Old habit. “Yes, Commander.”

Melia looks his way, but he doesn’t reciprocate. He hasn’t shed his helmet in her presence since their first accidental encounter. Simultaneously, Trienza glances over her shoulder. “Lieutenant, join us.”

The priestess twitches and blinks, slightly baffled. “What? Oh, right. Yeah. Uh, Ash-…” She coughs correctively. “I mean, Sergeant Revenor, come with me, please. Lieutenant Foghorn, hold down the fort while I check this out.”

A light-brown furred tauren paladin in the center of their troops inclines his head. “Very well, ma’am. But…be careful. Earthmother guide you.”

She smiles reassuringly. “Thank you.”

The five figures traverse the distance of the rise, trailing Lah’kur past rocks and more fallow remnants of Scourge’s razing of Drakkari civilization. Lah’kur pays it little mind, but for Melia the allusions framed by this havoc is…haunting. So much death, so much malevolence. Lah’kur proves that she flew off quite some span across the snow, for it’s a good twenty minutes and the mounting of another hill until they get to where she planned to guide them. Up here, the wind is no longer as implacable and what distinguishes itself is instead a muffled thrum, clatter and drums originating in the next district of this subspace in Zul’Drak – the notorious chorus of battle and war.

Lah’kur signals for them to form up, as they perch against a boulder and stare out across a clash of forces on a grimy, torn and open frontier, that they hadn’t foreseen, not to this scale of participants. It’s a battlefield they’ve come upon alright, where the two sides duking it out consists of undead on one end, while the contrasting crowd is a disparate representation of trolls.
“There they are – the Zandalari.”

The numbers in this division are a narrow tier up from the Crusade squadrons under Melia, but although they represent a lone culture, they demonstrate a deep range of fighters and schools. Judging by their heavy armors, blades and shields, the frontline row is a set of warriors, boosted by queues of archers that launch arrows from overhead and shamans that make the earth tremble. Shadow magic enrolls with those of the elements, summoned by hex priests, and rogues fly out of
the mists to slink daggers in from behind.

But it’s at this juncture that they begin to diverge from the conventional. More hunter types with beastly companions reinforce their brethren, commanding humongous reptilians, dinosaurs of gigantic proportions. They are pursued by an entire pack of trolls that themselves cast spells and transform into approximations of dinosaurs.

Sydela tilts her head with fascination.
“What is that? Zandalari druids?”

“Aye”, replies Lah’kur. “Lotsa stories of the weird mojo they hoard in their isle, ya see. But I figure you’d not see this form in your homeland.”

The undead kaldorei turns her head.
“No. Ours are…furrier.”

The one occupying the slot of leader for this undivided company of Zandalari is a druid no less. The form wielded sports great tusks like all trolls, but in favor of the bear spirit of kaldorei and tauren, it’s a manner of dinosaur none in the unit have borne witness to – a compact scaled beast with chunky short legs, a stump of a tail and considerable spikes all over its back and head. The entire being looks severely fortified and each step is heavy and ponderous. It lets out an emphatic roar as it rams a bundle of Scourge skeletons and ghouls, chucking them in every direction and they soar as if they were mere toys. The druid doesn’t halt for a second, leaping to stomp another skeleton and then head off the attack of an abomination, which makes a go at slamming its fist into the druid’s back, but instead has its own arm shattered. Clearly, this is a damage-soaker.

In due time, the Scourge options to mount a substantial retaliation and dispatches a flesh giant, the undead iteration of the storm giants native to Northrend. The ground quakes beneath it, the snow dispersing in all vectors and in the wake of its roar, a fetid bile spews out. The chief druid shrieks their challenge to the giant, standing firm on the spot. The mindless giant is seduced by the threat and storms at the infinitely smaller entity, looking ready to smash it into the dirt.

But precisely in conjunction with the giant slipping into range, the druid emits a different type of shout, a signal. From the sky, six flying druids – pterrodaxes – dive and grip the giant from one corner each. With cooperation and dogged strength, they heave it into the air, further and further, until they can safely drop it. Helplessly, it descends to the ground and shatters onto the rock-solid frozen earth, due to falling for hundreds of meters.

In the center of the troll formation rises a few robed Zandalari that magically erect a golden domed shield. This spell is intricately familiar to the Crusade members, increasingly so as they fire off lights that scorch the undead on impact.
“Whoa”, exits Melia’s lips. “Are they…troll priests of the Light?”

Irrespective of how haughty she views them as, Lah’kur smiles.
“Oh yes, ya can bet your short ass on that, but I doubt they're disciples of the Light which you know. They must serve Rezan.”

“Hmm. Who’s that?”

“One of the strongest of spirits, call himself the ‘Loa of Kings’. Self-important ass if ya ask me, but they say he doesn’t lack for power.”

The head priest in the association pulses a shout or prayer in Zandali and behind her, the image of a ghostly devilsaur in ornate armor materializes for but a second, scattering an echoing rumble. From the sky rains the wrath of Rezan, in righteous brilliance.
Another characteristic which catches Ash’s interest hails from some of the warriors. “Wait, those soldiers on the front lines. If they have priests, do they also train…?”

“Paladins?”, finishes Lah’kur. “I reckon so. Zandalari got holy warriors. I hear stories ‘bout them – the Prelates, devotee warriors of Rezan. Ya can lay gold on them being vainer, though. That be the Zandalari motto, or so the tales from my youth go.”

With the priests becoming more noticeable, an organization of skeletal necromancers take their chances on befouling their abilities remotely. Dark magic swells, the air is in brisk speed saturated with deathly energies and the light barrier takes a real beating.

The head druid does not look satisfied at all with this development and with that in mind, orders some of its fellows and Prelates ahead to counter this horrid business, before shifting into its real structure – a dark-grey skinned female troll with an abundance of Zandalari stone patches, rather thick tusks and long bright red hair, a portion of it in a ponytail. Her long sloping ears possess a multitude of golden earrings. Her attire is light, a mishmash of cloth and leather which does not conceal her arms. In her hand rests a wooden staff with fine gold accessories, foremost being the symbol of a claw at the top. It’s difficult for the knights and crusaders to gauge it from their post, but her eyes, like all the Zandalari, glow lightly, similar to practically all elves.

She lifts her hand and a brown-green magic surges in her palm. She shouts in Zandali, which Lah’kur can vaguely overhear and translate to the rest of the detail. “You think you can barf your petty vile-drenched mojo on us?! We are Zandalari!” From underneath the skeletons come a groundswell of thorny vines that wriggles around their legs, trapping them. “You are nothing!” She snaps her hand shut and the vines clench the bones of their legs, dragging them down into the earth’s embrace.

As her deed is done, she gazes past her shoulder to quell her concern that one key person is unscathed – the head priest, a woman with green-grey complexion, longer thinner tusks that bend sideways and black hair with a long braided ponytail and side buzzcuts, who smiles fondly and nods at her.

In turn, the druid mandates a renewed vigor as they swoop down on the Scourge. The undead do not flee or surrender for it is not in their nature, but by the end, their remaining endurance is insufficient to put a dent in the Zandalari defenses.

As triumph seems inevitable, the druid leader raises her staff and sings out to her allies. “Victory is ours! Zandalar forever!” And the trolls of all callings cheer.

From their fraction of a hideout on the hill, Melia and Ash wield impressed facial expressions. “Wow. That…was pretty fantastic.”

“Yeah”, Ash agrees. “They handled the Scourge expertly.”

Trienza regards them, but gestures at the aftermath of combat. “You see now why I did not waver in enlisting their aid?”

“Mm. Figure we should’ve done the same”, says the priestess. “Should we head down there and meet up?”

“Once we’ve gathered our troops. It would be improper to emerge without evidencing our own qualifications.”

“Fair enough:”
But they never get to venture that far. The druid in charge of the Zandalari regiment hooks her nose up, sniffing a distinct stench locked in midair and without stalling, commands her troops to steer towards it. This just so happens to be the hill where the five are observing from and they imminently watch how flying druids circle their position from the sky, while the Prelates rush to cut them off, lest they hightail it.

Melia contracts a nervous exterior and Ash tenses up, brushing her sword’s hilt. Trienza is undeterred, but both Lah’kur and Sydela shares Ash’s defensive response to this development, as it’s only suitable.

“Uh, boss?”, asks the Amani. “Maybe we should…make ourselves known?”

Trienza rises to her full height.

“Yes, I believe the time has come. Follow me.” She doesn’t stagger for a second as she meanders into the open.

The Zandalari all feast their eyes on the diverse trio of undead and a pair of living which saunters to them, fully exposed, not shying from the spotlight’s glimmer. The lead druid creases her brow and switches to the cruder Common tongue.

“And what have we here? A trio of elves, both dead and alive, one of the short-eared easterners and a rotting troll from a lesser tribe. Is this what the Lich King trusts can kill us?” She sounds highly unimpressed.

Trienza rejects it with a shake of her head.

“We are not your enemies, people of Zandalar. My name is Trienza, Strike-Commander of the Ebon Blade. We are the ones you were meant to rendezvous with.”

The troll stares at her incredulously and her eyes narrow with amplified suspicion.

“That so? And we are expected to simply take your word for this?”

“If it was not the truth, would I not have called an attack?”

“Not if this is a ruse.”

The two women continue to bore their eyes into the other, never budging, sparking jacked up apprehension throughout the perimeter, until someone finally interferes.

“Akilvah! Dammit, stand down!”

The person who prohibits their quarrel is an older man, a smaller and marginally hunched Zandalari with lighter grey skin, grey hair, slimmer frame and somewhat crooked tusks. He showcases warmer, thicker clothes due to this climate. Trienza is acquainted with his likeness and inclines her head.

“I did tell you we would converge with the Ebon Blade and that I had spoken with an elf, yes?”

Akilvah, the druid leader, peeks at him in disbelief.

“You know this undead, old man?”

He levels a stern gaze at her, clutching a bag that hangs over his shoulder.

“I did tell you we would converge with the Ebon Blade and that I had spoken with an elf, yes?”

The blatantly younger – and stronger - woman practically glares at him, but more so petulantly than to challenge him.

“Hmph.”

Cor’zel’s accent does not emulate his Zandalari origin as much, whether deliberately or not.
“Commander, I apologize for the delay. As you can observe, we ran into some…obstacles.”

“We determined as much”, admits Trienza. “And it was an inspiring performance.”

Akilvah snorts dismissively.
“The fools thought they could hinder and break us, but we discovered the scheme for the attack beforehand and staged an ambush of our own. Their first and most grievous mistake was to take the Zandalari lightly. Learn from that indiscretion, elf.”

Trienda is cognizant that some hold her people and the kaldorei in an aloof light, that they are snooty and stuck-up, and to some degrees, she could’ve conceded in the past. Elements of the quel’dorei leadership condescended the other races of the Alliance as ‘younger’, child-like. She can spot plenty of that posturing reproduced in this woman, in her stance and poise.
But no, that’s not quite accurate, is it? The trolls came first, Zandalari included, a civilization with roots older than any. It’s the elves who have simulated them.

“Come now, Redtail, let’s try to be cordial for a change”, espouses a fresh voice. “They aren’t flashing us with any fighting spirit, right?”

The gathering turns to behold the sight of the silver-robed first Rezan priestess coming towards them, one who Akilvah appeared most keen to shelter. The druid visibly loosens up as she approaches, and the priestess – plainly with a gentler expression and a tad shorter than the druid – embraces one hand and nudges her forehead against the other woman’s cheek, whispering in Zandali. Akilvah grows marginally embarrassed, but she reciprocates the affection.

Once thereafter, the priestess bows her head slightly.
“Greetings and blessings of Rezan upon you, mainlanders. I am Cherile, one of his faithful.”

Trienda motions at her comrades.
“These are my aides, Sydela and Lah’kur. The two coupled with us are Lieutenant Melia Haven and Sergeant Ashindra Revenor. They represent the Argent Crusade.”

Cor’zel nods knowingly.
“Ah, yes, our people extended invitations to them as well. Greetings from Zandalar to you both. I am a Chronicler, but also an advocate for the illustrious Prophet Zul. I was tasked with commanding this expedition. Our goals consist of finding, evaluating and preserving any knowledge, artifacts or contraptions that are of use for supplementary study, prior to their erasure by the Scourge or the native Drakkari themselves.”

“And exterminate any hostile undead”, adds the druid acutely.

The scholar exhales with resignation.
“…yes, if you insist. This is my head of security, Akilvah. She-“

“Can speak for herself, thank you”, she demands and glares at the others.
“I am Akilvah, Battleclaw of the Raptari.”

“The…Raptari?”, Ash repeats. “I’m unfamiliar with that organization.”

“Druids, warriors and hunters who serve the great Gonk – Lord of the Pack, Loa of the Hunt.”

Lah’kur mutters scarcely over a whisper.
“Ya follow what I mean? They all be this high and mighty. Stupid rockheads.”

Sadly, Akilvah’s ear twitches vigilantly as she homes in on the undead troll.
“What was that, Amani? You have something to yap about us?”

The knight is moderately startled and flinches.
“Uh…”

“Speak up, or return to your damn dirty forests. Go back to being throttled by the elves, like that dimwit Zul’jin.”

The mocking of her leader, a man she admired and were blood-sworn to in life, gets the knight’s inner fire bursting into existence.
“What did you say?! You wanna fight, ya spineless fucking islander?!"

Akilvah virtually growls and transfers into a battle state.
“Do ya worst, moss-face.”

The enmities are really heating up and may very well reach a critical mass, but before it gets ugly, Trienza slams her fist into the Amani’s stomach, to hold her back.
“Lah’kur! Stop this.”

Out of trepidation, Sydela aids her by clutching the troll’s shoulder, albeit leniently. But Lah’kur is raging, gritting her teeth, the inner death knight fury molding with her indignance.
“Did ya hear what she fucking said, boss?! I’m gonna rip that loa-forsaken throat out and sip from her golden—“

“Knight, listen to me!”, Trienza commands, with such authority that Lah’kur is reluctantly brought out of her frenzy. The high elf grips her chin and twists the troll’s head downwards. Despite being a whole lot tinier, Trienza still asserts respect from the Amani. Her chilly eyes scour those of Lah’kur and glowers intently.
“Cool down, now. Do as I command.” A tad quieter, she also adds, “you are better than this.”

Lah’kur ‘breathes’ heavily out of her nostrils, even if no actual air enters or exits her lungs; a pure automatic response for her anatomy to parrot that of the living. With concentration and discipline, she recovers and retracts the anger, stowing it once more.
“Sorry, Commander”, she replies softly. “I didn’t…mean to…”

Easing up, Trienza nods, relinquishes the chin and pats her chestplate tenderly.
“I know. We’ve all been there. Wash off her words. Don’t let it get to you.”

Across the field, Cherile echoes their act, speaking delicately, but with admonishment in Zandalari to her beloved, hoping to make her understand the foolishness of brewing a clash out here.

Meanwhile, Akilvah’s troops stand ready to retort.

Trenza pivots to the Zandalari.
“On behalf of my subordinate, I apologize for this lapse in judgment. We did not strive to offend.”

Cherile dips her head in acknowledgement.
“Accepted and we extend our own regrets. My wife has a hotheaded tendency.”

Akilvah huffs and averts her face.

Cor’zel approaches again, rubbing his hands together a smidgen nervously.
“I trust this does not break our previous contract, Commander?”

“It does not”, Trienza declares. “We both seek the same end point still and our combined forces can achieve it more handily than independently.”

“Agreed.”
“Our units are stationed twenty minutes to the west, by our original meetup location. I suggest we rearrange and resume the discussion there.”

Cor’zel bows and points ahead.
“Very well. Lead the way. Battleclaw, coordinate your forces.”

Akilvah grimaces, but abides.
“Yeah, yeah…”, she mutters and throws a stink eye at Lah’kur, who herself reins any further animosity in, to not disappoint Trienza. The druid then speaks in Zandali.
“Zandalari, move out! Let’s see what these mainland braggarts have to exhibit for us.”

Chapter End Notes

I just...I had to make another pair of gay ladies. I need a gay troll couple.
I was pretty glad that Bfa, and the Zandalari especially, released before I got here. Helped influence a lot of how this chapter turned out. I did want them here from the start (since they did appear back in Wotlk), but I hadn't determined in what form or to what degree.

After some consideration, I have chosen to do away with writing out the accents though, at least to any greater extents. It makes me a bit uncomfortable doing so, what with the origin and potential stereotyping nature of it
A wolf's unrest

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s not rarely that Thariss has referenced her general disdain for the cold reaches of Azeroth. Winterspring in the borders of her own people’s grounds is one region that she had a vested interest in steering clear of at any given moment. Northrend had in many respects demonstrated its status as a simulacrum of Winterspring’s primary frigid horrors, but at a significantly wider scale, to the point where Thariss sometimes has had nightmares of desertion in the white wastes.

She can scarcely fathom how or why, but she had underestimated Northrend. The tundra, Dragonblight’s glaciers, the Grizzly Hills – they were all child’s play when likened to the ascended altitudes of the Storm Peaks.

When they tuned into citizen accounts of this sector, there was no praise or high cherishment, oh no – it was made clear as a spring day that they were heading into lands of peril and gales galore. It’s a territory with heavy, cutting winds, sometimes so stinging that they can cut into flesh and given the unbridled cold temperatures of this continent, logically cause malady and blisters. And yet for some ineffable reason, they went anyway. This is an especially rude awakening after a bunch of magically relaxing days in Dalaran, the first sign of leisure they’d achieved.

It was late in the night – or early in the morning, resting on one’s interpretation – that Kassari had come and knocked on their door, imploring them not to make a fuss, but they had to exit the city posthaste. She’d borrowed a flock of dragonhawks from the Sunreavers and she wouldn’t elucidate the terms, but celerity was of utmost import. Picking up their grounded mounts would be a possibility too, for the hawks could carry one each.

This is allegedly the mission she had laid the groundwork for and what the team will be graciously reimbursed for. That is, for the degree of risk and labor which it encompasses.

They originally headed for the goblin town of K3, an access point at the foot of the mountains, so to speak, the bottom-most area where one can go safely without having to brave the heights. The goblins at the settlement were neutrally-aligned and more than thrilled to sell anything required to anyone. Kass asked to purchase climbing rigs, although she doubted it would be integral for the journey.

At the moment of noting, they’re traversing a mountain trail, a ledge up against one of the myriad gargantuan pylons that form this realm, hoping to get to its ceiling.

Having recommended that they all dress for the weather, Kass is garbed in warm, heat-preserving clothes. She has eschewed her robes to instead pick up a set of wanderers’ leggings and a jacket, plus a thick fur cloak that holds the brunt of her front shored up, with a fur hat for her head. Atop her shoulder hangs a secured bag, its fate a mystery to her compatriots, excluding Khroga. She maintained that there was no great substance for them to glean in what she carried anyhow. Magister business, essentially.

A couple of days have elapsed since they embarked from Dalaran’s surveillance radius, where they invested one night at K3 to recuperate and work themselves up, physically and mentally, for the more strenuous portion of the journey.

Out here in the snowy wilds, a few more nights have had to be dedicated for rest, to sustain their energy. Up until this stage, Khroga and Kass shared mount spaces with Thariss and Rivaryn, but the elevation they’ve hit now is too steep to proceed with great speed, hence their feet drag them onward.
Despite that this isn’t the first day on this route, Thariss has not waned from her disgruntled state, which is observed on her grimacing expression and heard in her grouchy voice. “Did we really have to leave so suddenly?”, she asks as she pulls at her scarf to tighten it. “I was super getting into Dalaran and all its drinks.”

“We did bring some of them in our bags”, Riv hints a few steps ahead. The night elf is guarding the rear.

“Meh. Not convinced it’ll be enough. The beer will be cold, but can I genuinely luxuriate in it while my ass is an ice block?”

Kass rolls her eyes in a vexed manner. “Can you cut back on your wailing, Dusksong? Dalaran won’t vanish tomorrow and we shall put up a fire on our next break. You can delay for a couple of hours.”

“Easy for you to say! Betcha aren’t expecting to do the heavy lifting here, like me. Already dragging two sacks, if ya forgot!” She huffs and corrects the straps by the one on the left. “What was it you felt was so damn essential out here anyway? Some magic history or whatever?”

“It would behoove us all if you utilized your ears for once.”

“Well, it’d ‘behoove’ me if you didn’t try to put me to sleep with some tedious tale that doesn’t matter for shit.”

“It’s relevant to our responsibilities in Northrend, you lunkhead!” She squeezes her hands and looks up at the sky. “Ugh, kaldorei!”

“Kass…”, Riv states with light rebuke in her voice.

“Yes…yes, I know. Sorry.”

It would appear Kass’ general loathing of outdoor settings far from any type of civilization is getting to her too, in spite of the ribbing of Thariss, which evidently inflates her exasperation. Riv makes an attempt at mollifying both, by taking her fiancée’s hand and addressing Kass. “What was it you spoke of prior to our departure, Kass? A magical site or…something to that effect?”

“Naming it thus would in all likelihood be woefully inadequate, for it’s not merely any magic. I ransacked the Dalaran library and managed to discover the location for a battle between a prestigious mage and Sargeras himself, so many eons ago. By their written accounts, the Kirin Tor has performed a multitude of inspections, reviews, arcane experimentations and cleansings. They in turn informed me it might be exceedingly hazardous, on account of fel residue, but this could not abolish my inquisitive proclivities.”

She places one of her gloved hands under her chin pensively. “I appreciate that calling on a warlock was a viable alternative, but I find myself lacking trust for the judgment of their ilk; ergo, giving them and their organizations a pass. Their liberal consorting with demons is disconcerting…and misbegotten.”

As a couple of seconds go by in the completion of her statement, the trio regard one another. Thariss eventually issues the question in disbelief. “What…did you just say? One mage had a dust-up with Sargeras? Like, the Sargeras? Ol’ demon king of legend himself?”

This induces a shimmer of a smile from Kass.
“A single mage indeed! Granted, it would be disingenuous to declare that she fought by her gifts alone, mind you. Her name was Aegwynn and she was a Guardian of Tirisfal.”

Raxeen, strolling in the center of the group, tilts her head curiously at her two longest companions.

“Is this appellation one you are acquainted with?”

“Yes ain’t” says Thariss.

Riv sways her head in the negative.

“I’m afraid not. I know Tirisfal, as it’s featured in quel’dorei legends. It’s a region in the lost kingdom of Lordaeron, and was where our ancestors made landfall after they were forced to emigrate from Kalimdor. I’m…less informed of any ‘Guardians’, though…”

“And I wouldn’t have thought so”, verifies Kass, “for it has all been terribly confidential for a tremendous sum of centuries. I can pass along an abbreviated edition of her history, though I urge you to keep the variables to yourselves, lest the wrong ear catches it and begins interrogating you. It’s a pity it has to be this way, for this is a quintessential component of Azerothian history, a landmark in the chronicles of this world, on par with the War of the Ancients. While the kaldorei fulfilled their part to safeguard Azeroth from the Burning Legion in Kalimdor, the Eastern Kingdoms were left unchecked. In Quel’Thalas, we oversaw our homeland’s thaumaturgical barricades and enchantments by taking advantage of the Sunwell to stave off Legion intervention, but what of the rest of the continent?”

She postpones the answer for a few seconds as an intense gust slams into their bodies, a prelude to the swelling of their levels, but it soon winds down, to revert to the previous moderate harshness. Kass remedies the seat of her cloak and pushes on.

“The Convocation of Silvermoon is a term my sister will be familiar with, but for the rest of you, it was the institution which once ruled Quel’Thalas in coordination with the royal house. Some 3000 years ago, they called a meeting as demonic activity was on the rise. They ordained that a countermeasure had to be enacted and defenders appointed. The Council of Tirisfal was therefore designed in secret, in affiliation with Dalaran and the Kirin Tor. They were to channel a portion of their arcane reserves into a single being, who would be imbued with astonishing masses of energy – a Guardian of Tirisfal, as it were.

Functionally, Aegwynn was a human mage, more than a thousand years ago, one of these chosen champions to ward our world from demonic intrusion and impact. Coincidentally, she was also the second to last Guardian. She served for the larger section of a millennium, though some decried her for hoarding the gifts bequeathed to her, which was not fully devoid of motivation. But from all the sources I studied, she was by far the most enterprising, proficient and flexible. Doesn’t necessarily denote she was in their favor – as she went rogue, she became hunted by the Council as well. They assembled a team of elite guards designated the ‘Tirisgarde’ to hound her, but once this effort was considered fruitless, they too were administrated to combat demons instead.”

The others hear how the Arcanist is running into a tangent, and consequently, Riv steps in.

“Sounds like you admire her a bit, Kass.”

The mage blinks and gazes at her sister, her ears perking guiltily, but she collects herself on short notice.

“I…yes, I won’t shy away from owning up to this facet. Aegwynn was a sensational figure in the thaumaturgical records…explicitly so for a human.

Sadly, neither she nor the Council would endure forever. According to the Kirin Tor’s tomes, all living councilors were slain by the corrupted last Guardian, Medivh. As for Aegwynn, on the back of depositing her borrowed powers into her heir, she fell into obscurity and none know if she met an ill-fated end like her critics and fellow mages.”
“Uh, right”, utters Thariss in a brief intermission. “But we’re not actually chasing her, are we?”

“Oh no, not by any stretch. The platform we’re heading for was where she fought Sargeras once upon a time. Or one of them, that is; the logs are in conflict of how sprawling the true battlefield was.”

Her narrative is impeded by the eruption of a fierce and chilling wind that eats onto their skins and Kass shudders, pulling her gear closer. The rest keep it together. The procession soldiers on, toiling further and further up, but this time, the wind will not relent. With little other means, Kass leans into Khroga who’s first in line.

“Khroga, dearest, could you potentially…you know…?”

The orc takes a gander at her and even if she can outlast the weather, smiles faintly and nods.

“For you, zak’tro, anything.”

She floats ahead of the group, her black braided hair whipping back and forth, and motions for them to stand by, while she resists the tormenting conduct of the wind to settle apart. She unhooks and plants the head of her two-handed axe into the snow, gripping the hilt. She buries her hand in a pocket and removes some fresh, soft and untouched earth, which she sprinkles out to the gust’s enclosure, to do with it as it wishes. Then, she raises her vision to the roiling, capricious clouds, which are currently no more than an infinite compound of billowing greys, intermittently cut by enraged blue lightning.

“Glacial northern wind, hear and deem my call worthy! I am Khroga Steelfang, daughter of Germark and Shrokit, student of Farseer Harmega and disciple of the elements. I plead with you to supply us with your blessing and to give us passage throughout this domain of yours, solely until the event where we’ve entered our destination. Then, we shall withdraw in peace.”

The storm carries on battering them for several more grueling seconds, but then finally, her cry is ostensibly permitted, and it recedes to a slim degree. It does not lighten all their loads, but grows less oppressive and the cold does not flow with such a crushing presence. Khroga properly evinces her tight bond with the elements on this day.

As she is satisfied, Kass trots over to her beloved and rewards her with a heartfelt kiss and smiles endearingly as she caresses the shaman’s cheek.

“I knew I could count on you, as ever.”

Khroga shrugs nonchalantly, but with a sly undertone on her lips.

“Was a breeze, really.”

The mage giggles and pecks Khroga’s nose. Sooner or later, they roll up on the summit, one of the lower platforms on the peaks by estimation and still discernibly near K3, which insures them from more radical dangers. As she has done on a score of occasions up the path already, Kass casts a detection incantation, drawing an arcane rune in the air, which builds into multiple orbs and circles on its own.

“Yes, this is it – the real one. We’ve arrived.”

The platform by itself is fairly unexceptional – it is but one of the rich amounts of grand landscapes which grasp at the heavens in this province, teeming with sheets of snow, ice and the desolate, barren terrains.

The trio does not get a bead on anything uncanny, nothing that would instill an aura of incoming demonic hordes, let alone the mastermind and overlord of the Legion of all things. But for the moment, it does evoke a response at least – as the mists part and they put their eyes beyond the edge, the environments of Northrend lie bare before them, as far as the horizon.

“Uh, is this area safe to operate on?”, Riv asks her sister. “No excess demonic taint or…unstable
“No, I would deduce there isn’t”, Kass claims. “What we do require, however, is to establish a summoning circle in a central post. I wish to manipulate it to gauge the exact spell properties of this…neighborhood. I can even dispense your individual burdens – Raxeen, can you drill down on the vicinity with the Light’s lens, ensure I haven’t missed any peculiarities? The arcane isn’t as tuned to contamination of this variety, as you well know.”

The paladin dips her head in recognition.
“With ease.”

“Thariss, you’re the biggest and strongest by some margin, yes? Perhaps you could put those muscles to good use and dig out some of the snow in the middle? And possibly erase some of those huge boulders?”

The night elf smirks and pats her left bicep.
“You got it, fussbird.”

“I can scout the perimeter, if you don’t mind”, Riv suggests. “And we should put Razz and Ilca on guarding the road we came from.”

Kass taps a finger on her lips, but ultimately nods.
“No qualms with those offers. Please proceed.”

With Rax showering the surroundings in theoretical golden searchlights and Thariss either heaving rocks or shattering them with overwhelming blows, Riv enacts some reconnaissance, a measure that is finished with time to spare. Having a slight pocket in her schedule, she glides over to her sister, noting that Kass has grabbed an item from her bag – a chunky, puzzling and marginally illuminated tome, which has to have spellcrafting attributes. She’s cross-referencing and translating the contents with a small notebook in her second hand.

Riv slides down and tips her head to get a superior angle.
“How’s it coming along?”, she inquires in thalassian.

The younger sister exhales wearily and gestures with concession at the tome.
“Slowly, predominantly in light of the obtuse nature of the linguistic source”, she laments. “I have had the opportunity to flick through others back home, but they’re persistently a real chore.”

“Hmm. Is it, like, integral to what you want us to organize?”

“With regret, yes, it is. Without this text, we’re stuck in the mud. But the brunt of the work has been processed, thankfully. I merely have to decipher a couple more phrases.”

Believing it’s best not to ask further, as she honestly doesn’t comprehend squat of what it says, she instead broaches a dissociated subject.
“So…you and Khroga”, she addresses with a smile. “You’re very cute together. Don’t know if I’ve pointed that out before, but she is so sweet to you. It’s adorable.”

The younger sister blinks, a bit discomposed and then rubs her nose as she regards her treasured girlfriend. A light blush comes upon her cheeks in parallel. Or is that courtesy of the cold?
“I won’t deny it. Khroga is…on a level of her own, in terms of people I’ve dated. Perhaps it’s because she’s from a distinct culture, or maybe it’s simply who she is. We went to Orgrimmar together, did I tell you that? She brought me to a romantic dinner, orcish style. It was boisterous and hectic, but…ever so lovely. We drank ale, ate spicy boar steaks with
fried tomatoes and brown beans. Greasy, but jammed with flavor. Loved the whole lot.”

Riv’s face shines as she listens.
“Glad you two get along and that you broaden your horizons.”

“Mm, indeed. Starting to get the impression that you were correct – staying in Silvermoon all the time isn’t practical or appropriate. I know some of my peers frown on our relationship – as they do with words of yours – but I couldn’t care less. She brings happiness into my life.”

“Everything else is trivial”, the older sister agrees.

As this topic is gaining momentum, Kass takes the lid off an adjacent one, scratching the back of her neck.
“Erm, Khroga has expressed the desire to…reserve an appointment with her mother. I acceded to it, but internally, I’m uneasy, on edge.”

“Ahh, naturally. I’m aware of these intuitions, but you shouldn’t let them fester. I’ve been in your position more than once, but also in a paralleled scenario.”

Kass strokes a hand over her own neck as she watches Riv with intrigue.
“What did you do?”

“Heh. I was extremely fretful as I was to meet Javynna for the first time, which was only enhanced as it unfolded out of the blue. In the end, I inflated the whole thing, as she is one of the most lovable and tender people I’ve ever encountered. And now, we’re even gonna hold the wedding in her homestead, whenever we have a date to go for. She softened us up to it.”

At first, Kass is unaffected by the phrase, all but glad that her sister contained her own personal drama and now has a great future ahead of her. Could allude to Kass repeating the same idealistic notion.
But then…
She’s stunned, her eyes widened with realization of what exactly was stated.
“Did you…did you say…wedding?”

The hunter nods casually.
“Yeah. What?” She stares at Kass as if it was a completely banal question...but then covers her eyes and bites at her lower lip.
“…oh shit. I hadn’t…”

That’s right. She never told her own little sister that she and Thariss had resolved to go to the next step and get hitched.
“Rivaryn Anela Eli’ssah Silvershroud!”

“So. I can explain-“

“Now you elect to give me this piece of news?!”

Riv swallows and shrugs, though infused with a notable flavor of apprehension and embarrassment.
“I wasn’t like…deliberately hiding it.”

This rightfully looks to have shaken Kass, underlined by the spontaneous delivery.
“How long you were intending to exclude me?!”

“It…just slipped my mind, Kass, that’s all!”
“Slipped your mind?! This is monumentally instrumental to your life! And I’m your sister!”

Riv’s ears spasms, as much from bashfulness as caution.
“Well, I mean…at least this way, you’ll listen to me.”

“I would’ve listened to you regardless of the circumstances!”

“Without yelling?”

A cogent query, which stops Kass in her tracks.
“I…that wasn’t-“

Their companions are totally left out from this debate, as they’re clueless of the words’ value, but Kass is gated from any additional tongue-lashing by Khroga.
“Zak’tro, it’s done. I’m all up for going ahead to form the circle.”

The Arcanist sighs and glances with discontent at Riv, who smiles and winks.
“This isn’t over…“, she whispers, prior to extracting herself. “Raxeen, I’ll need a hand from you in a minute. Khroga, continue.”

The shaman spreads her arms to disparate sides.
“Earth, rumbling and crushing, come forth! I solicit you for the assistance of one of your children!”

In answer, some of the boulders Thariss had chopped apart or pushed aside come together to forge an earth elemental, three meters high at minimum. Khroga stares at it and then dips her head, mentally assigning it to use its massive stone fists to dig. Meanwhile, the shaman fetches her bag and extracts a number of items, some possessions – a pair of gloves, a necklace with a bone trinket, a small worn leather holster and so on.

“Raxeen, if possible, could I consult you to bless this tiny crater? To lift any potential traces of the demon’s pollution.”

The draenei is a tad nonplussed, but she doesn’t refuse.
“As you wish, but I am no Anchorite, so it will not be as constructive.”

“Not an issue.”

Nevertheless, shebeckons the Light’s grace to rinse this enclave and excise the fel which were to eat away at its core – all in the draenei tongue, of course, making it incoherent to the listeners. If nothing else, it’s a wonderful language to their ears. A radiance beams from her, an illumination which comforts Riv while she sticks to her fiancée. More and more reminiscent of the Sunwell’s new characteristics.

Khroga and Kass then sync up, snagging one sector each to put the ritual into effect. It’s the shaman who spearheads the performance, following the mounting of the items in the center of the field unearthed by the elemental.
“Spirits of air, the northern wind, grant us sight beyond the veil. Set our hearts ajar and our lungs with a purging chill.”

Concurrently, Kass chants in an esoteric, mystical language, harsh and virtually unviable to pronounce, reading straight from the tome she brought. Its words glimmer and glisten more actively than earlier. In turn, the skies and air coiling around them gradually propagate a darkness and the wind’s temperature reduces drastically, seeping into their veins. It’s an unnatural, eerie vibe, not meant for mortals. Not meant for the living.
As the seconds pass, ghostly apparitions come into being, as a vision of the past occurs. A bunch of figures step into the borders of the summoning circle and the group can identify their purpose to traverse the mountains.

Additional ambiguity surfaces when it’s made conspicuous that these figures are undead – knights of the Scourge. Some of their skin looks putrefied, rotten and there are blue flaming eyes where there should not be. One in their entourage is rather overtly an orc, a grey-haired man with a corroded tusk and a compilation of visible scars, who is prone to have been of a mature age even before his reanimation.

In this procedure, Kass’ eyes are blazing in pink, like the ambience of the arcane embodied.

“Khroga, take a closer peek, will you?”

The shaman breathes in slow and then does, examining him. Trailing a fair few seconds, she avows the presumed.

“It’s him.”

Kass wavers fleetingly, a smidgen sorrow-filled.

“Can you...authenticate it?”

“There’s no merit to it. I’d recognize him anywhere, dead or alive.”

With a sparse collection of climaxing casts, Kass terminates the ceremony and the canopy on her eyes vanishes, targeting Khroga once more. Imitating her, the air and skies resume a semblance of normality.

“I’m sorry, dear, that it had to be this way.”

The orc exhales from her nose, tapping the back of her hand onto her chin, gaze lowered.

“Yeah…”

The trio, on the other hand, are quite hungry for unveiling the facts.

“Uh, Kass?” pokes Riv. “What was that language you chatted in? And who were those soldiers? The Scourge?”

“Smelled of undead to me anyway, yeah”, comments Thariss.

“Well uh, yes, we haven’t been...perfectly frank with you”, the mage sheepishly discloses. “We didn’t lie, not by definition – we were here to investigate and gain info, but...not explicitly concerning the Nexus War. This was...an errand of personal design. I found a codex detailing the notes on the battle Aegwynn fought against Sargeras. That’s powerful stuff and I believed the residue from arcane and fel mingling could be pressed as an advantage to conjure phantoms of the past, just not the faraway past.

The language I was iterating in was draconic, the bronze dialect. It stemmed from a book I…borrowed from Kirin Tor’s library.”

“A.k.a. you jacked it from ‘em”, Thariss jabs.

“…I will return it at my earliest convenience!”

Khroga, who has gathered up her belongings and stored them in the same container, weighs in.

“The orcish man you probably spotted was none other than Germark Steelfang.”

The brow on Riv wrinkles.

“Wait, Steelfang? But that’s…”

“Yes. He was my father. He died back in the Third War, against the Burning Legion. Mother and I
were…not strong enough to assist him. He fell as a hero of the Horde and of Azeroth, which was to be declared as our new home at the time.”

By reflex, her hand goes to her axe, which she tenderly brushes the hilt of.

“He was of the Blackrock clan at birth, though he left their fold ages ago. My mother, Shrokit, was from the Frostwolves, a somewhat unconventional union. She now lives in Razor Hill within Durotar, a peaceful and undisturbed existence, where she pitches in to support and mentor young hunters along their new path. We buried father years ago, immediately at the end of the war and the erecting of structures.” She frowns, her sight sharpening. “But it would seem the Scourge did not let his body rest. I’m unsure when he was…brought back, but he’s a death knight.”

She lays her gaze at the trio, ceasing on one at a time. She raises her axe and plants its blunt end on her shoulder.

“I must find him. If he’s allied with the Ebon Blade I’ve caught wind of – rogue knights – then…well, I’ll wait and see. If he’s enslaved to the Scourge, then honor demands that it be my hand who puts him down for good.”

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**Chapter End Notes**

_I know I did more waffling on established lore regarding Aegwynn and the Guardians, but that'll be an element of Kass' future stories_
In the bleak ruinous land of Zul’Drak, the unorthodox congregation of three factions have gained ground on their excursion towards the August Corona Citadel. They have thus far not perceived its flying contours, but there is an inarticulable atmosphere of its presence. This is in spite of its proclaimed enormity. Trienza has maintained that they will come upon it eventually, but it should have flown somewhere to the far east, to sweep for its target.

The strip they’ve entered now is, as per Cor’zel’s claims, somewhere in the center of Zul’Drak and the landscape and environment have altered. No more does the snow set once it touches the ground. The Scourge’s necromantic taint has gained a foothold here, slithered into the soil, withered and blackened a disproportional slice of the flora. Lingering here for too long would be hazardous. The druids and the priests of various disciplines have to enact vigilance by way of their independent magics, to stave it off.

With a day of actually combating the undead hordes, the rallied factions make camp in a location which has been secured with blessings and plenty of guards, as well as makeshift barricades. As they erect tents and other temporary sleeping accommodations however, an explicit divide occurs – each of the three more or less go off on their own, disconnecting from their allies. There is an irrefutable latent tension being sown. Technically it’s been there since the dawn of this partnership.

For years after the Scourge massacre, Ashindra was sparing with compacts consisting of races outside the sin’dorei, when factoring in the egregious losses they withstood. By way of Riv’s awakening of Ash’s forlorn soul, her priorities and world view has turned over a new leaf and she has the growing desire to forge cohesion rather than rebuffing it.

As Melia converses with a few of her priests, Ash approaches and waits for her turn. It is far from a lengthy period that elapses, until the priestess frees her schedule up for her second-in-command; she always has room for the paladin.

“Lieutenant, I-“

“Ash, c’mon. You know you don’t have to use that in private.”

The elf’s ears vaguely bend backwards, and she flicks at her nose timidly.

“Ahem…yes, absolutely. Melia, I wanted to put forward a suggestion – I should try to ease some of the anxiety in our site, by talking to some of the Zandalari.”

Though Melia blatantly has her own wedges to treat in this regard, as she peeks at the troll contingent, she acknowledges that constraints won’t serve them.

“Alright, I won’t forbid it. I imagine we could do with a bit less suspense in the air. But uh, don’t say anything untoward, okay?” she cautions.

Ash smiles knowingly.

“Worry not, humility and I are closely acquainted now.”

As she scoots over to the troll battalion, a great deal of suspicion and misgivings are lined up at her position, perhaps raw antagonism too. Trolls and elves have seldom been allies. With the Darkspear it runs counter to that history, but these are Zandalari – the first and oldest, the manifestation of troll majesty and dignity, at least in their own purview and those of a rich section of the world. Ash has no set belief on that mark, but…damn, they are tall, higher than kaldorei. In some cases, even above tauren.
Upon locating a sign of them, Ash finds her way down to two individuals – Akilvah and Cherile, the only duo she knows by name, excluding the Chronicler. They’re stood outside a tent, chatting away in Zandali. The priestess is smiling heartily, while Akilvah has her arms folded, somewhat more reflective. As the druid chuckles at her wife’s comment, Ash clears her throat, garnering their attentions. Akilvah’s inherent nature leaves her frowning, but Cherile is cooperative.

“Sergeant Revenor, wasn’t it?”

Ash pulls uneasily at the collar of her armor.
“Indeed. Ashindra Revenor.”

“Welcome to our camp. We hadn’t anticipated a guest.”

“Yeah, you said it”, adds Akilvah sharply. “So, what ya think you’re doing here, elf?”

Cherile’s brow twists with discontent.
“None of that, Redtail. They’re our associates.”

“Bah. You’re too easy on them.”

The priestess face softens as she nods at Ash.
“Can I interest you in some Mari leaf tea? It’s made by some of the finest brewers in Zeb’ahari.”

The paladin feels stupid for being ignorant of both names, but she endeavors to recall that she should be on her best behavior.
“Uh, yes, I’d be most obliged.”

Cherile fetches some from a few people who’re steaming it by the neighboring tent and then gestures for Ash to join them as they sit down at a table positioned in the center. Plenty of trolls stare her way, but relent on noting her company.
“So, how are you doing?”

Akilvah is unresponsive, but Cherile sighs dishearteningly.
“I must confess that the Scourge’s vandalization is influencing me, in the negative. I have known few Drakkari throughout my relatively short life, but I’ve had the privilege to listen to an assortment of their histories and legends, read documents and scrolls on their feats. Are you informed of their legacy?”

The sin’dorei shakes her head.
“No, but I am intrigued.”

“They were a proud nation once, stronger than they’ve been in centuries, rivals of Zandalar, Amani and the Gurubashi. In many respects, they were the most ingenious and inventive of us. Though the temperatures sunk drastically as the northern continent was created, even before the Sundering it was chilly in the north and yet the Drakkari endured, prospered. With the Sundering’s eruption, the Empire dwindled, but the Drakkari would cope, founding the nation of Zul’Drak. For several millennia, they’ve prolonged communications with our homeland, though there were a fair number of cracks visible.
That this”, she utters and elevates her hand, “would be their fate, for an invading, dishonorable and godless army to consume and push them into desperation…they deserve better. This is a transgression onto life and all trolls.”

Akilvah, though less ardently, can do nothing but go onto the same tune.
“Mm. Personally, I can sense the intricate, twisting corruption in the land, upon the earth. It’s like…a vile stench that tears at my nose.”
Ash sips a small share of her tea, minding how the warmth stings her throat, but the flavor is most pleasing. Reminds her of west coast cider back home.

“I do too”, she acknowledges. What she doesn’t address is that it’s unbearably familiar of Quel’Thallas post-invasion. Better they don’t know.

“Is it equal, though?”, the druid disputes. “Yer a Prelate, aren’t you?”

“Uh, well, the proper classification in our ranks is ‘paladin’.”

“Same thing, though, right?”

It would appear she piqued Ash’s interest.

“Now I’m curious. Is it in earnest? I’m not especially knowledgeable in the field of your combat departments.”

Akilvah rolls her eyes with aversion.

“Ugh, I don’t wanna yap ‘bout that. The Prelates are a bunch of pains in the tail. If you’d like to listen to that drivel, go bother them.”

Cherile smiles wryly and nudes her shoulder into her wife’s.

“Oh please, don’t be that way, Redtail. She is simply immersing into our culture. What is so bad about sharing?”

“I’m not a freaking guide.”

Although they’re fooling around, Ash’s eyes flicks at a precise word.

“Hmm. ‘Redtail’. You’ve invoked that nickname previously. Do you mind if I ask whether it’s in reference to her hair?”

The druid squeezes her own nose and groans in a troublesome fashion.

“Don’t get her started.”

Cherile, conversely, laughs.

“That too, yes, but it’s a little more varied. It’s a story that goes back a few years now. After we met and glommed onto that we fancied one another, with accordingly dispensed batches of teasing and flirting, Akilvah thought to court me and brought me gifts. The first and most defining was what in Common is labelled a ‘Redtail Loach’.”

Ash looks mystified.

“A…loach? Isn’t that a breed of fish?”

She overhears Akilvah breathing out and what can be deemed as cursing in Zandali, while Cherile snickers.

“Bull’s eye!”

“She…offered you a fish?”

The druid inhales and glares daggers at her.

“…shut up, elf!”

Her wife continues to giggle and caresses Akilvah’s cheek in her cranky setting.

“She was clueless as to what made for a satisfactory present, so she procured what she personally found delicious. Her favorite meal.”

“…worked, didn’t it?”, mutters Akilvah.
Cherile grasps her chin and navigates her in, eyes chained as one.
“Decidedly so, yes.”

They brush their noses and foreheads together, a variant of a kiss. Ash puts her sight aside in a fast fashion and tries to find a different topic to pitch. Her mind visits the notion of the Light.
“E-erm, so…I saw you casting spells in battle, bright rays and flames. What was that? Knight Lah’kur spoke of a ‘Rezan’. Some manner of…dinosaur?”

Cooling down their passions, Cherile steers back to Ash and nods.
“Yes, Rezan is the devilsaur loa - the King of Kings, the God of the Hunt, the Sun on the Planes.”

Akilvah grumbles.
“He wishes.”

The priestess relocates one eye at her wife.
“Questioning the almighty again now, are we?”

“No…I just figure he ought not get so possessive of the hunt, when Gonk is categorically more apt in that realm.”

“Gonk is a hunter, sweetheart, but Rezan is the concept of predator made manifest.”

Ash finds the matter outside of her theological perception, so she pushes ahead.
“From my point of view, the all-around fascinating factor was the light emanating from the devilsaur. Is Rezan a being of the Holy Light? Never caught wind of a creature of this caliber in the past.”

Cherile tilts her head, somewhat confounded.
“The Holy Light? I’ve heard it cited, but I…don’t know what that entails. Rezan is a loa, a god. His rage can take form and it blazes with the impetus of the sun.”

“Oh. Erm, well, the Light among my people and much of the Eastern Kingdoms is a divine entity, a reservoir of energy of unfathomable proportions, unaccountable in its might and grace. It’s the power I wield, due to my faith.”

The priestess wriggles her head in the contrary.
“Forgive me, but I’m unversed in this…”’Light’, but I do know what it constitutes to put one’s faith into work for offensive output. In that sense, yes, there are analogies between our Prelates and your paladins.”

In the environment, even if she isn’t engaging in the discourse, Melia is low-key observing and paying heed to its central points, for she does discover herself intimately gripped by its colors. But this is up until she notes someone just outside her visual boundaries, in the corner of her eyes – Wilthorn. The knight is striding with steady steps out from the Ebon Blade camp, to who-knows-where. A scouting patrol, mayhap. Even if he’s been reluctant to at all rally with her, Melia can’t help her heart of hearts. She desperately favors to speak with him, to get some answers. But won’t he merely…?

No, she won’t let this pass her up. More than a week has gone by. Now is the optimal hour of their reunion; or at the very least, that she gets to lay down evidence that her consideration hasn’t dwindled.
“Wilthorn, wait!”, she exclaims, urging him to glance over his shoulder, only to narrowly flinch as
he recognizes who is on him. In reaction, he faces forward and speeds up.

Melia widens her eyes, amazed that she’d wreak such a response. Is he fearful of her? Should she retreat? No, she can’t enable this curtain of unease to rule them. She pursues and bides for when they’re outside the camp, partially out of earshot, before she cries his name once more.

“Wilthorn!” Louder now, assertively. But he won’t budge. Well, neither shall she.

“Wilthorn, stop! I just wanna talk with you!”

“Not interested.”

“Please, give me a chance!”

“There’s nothing we have to say to each other.”

“On the contrary, I’ve got lots!”

He doesn’t in any way, shape or form stutter for a moment. He’s dedicated to fleeing her proximity as he briskly as he can.

“Well, then you’re alone in that.”

“Light-dammit, will you-…” She clutches her robes and raises it so the bottom doesn’t graze the earth.

“I can’t keep slogging through this crap on the ground!”

“Then go back.”

“We’re supposed to be allies!”

“Then as your ally, my tip for you is to return. Can have that one for free.”

Melia grunts. Why must he be so hardheaded?

“Just let me get one thing explained! I simply seek the answer to one question – why’d he make you like this? Why were strictly you transformed into a death knight?”

Altogether impromptu, Wilthorn halts dead in his tracks, his stance rigid and wired up. Step by step, he shifts to face her, detaches his helmet to unshield the scarred complexion and stares with his icy, deathly eyes.

“How the fuck should I know?”, he blurts, voiced laced with hurt and anger. “You think I enjoy being like this? That I asked to be cursed and strut around like a sack of rot and have every asshole glare at me like I personally slaughtered their families?”

His old friend dithers, having foreseen that she’d wind up in this roadblock, but doing little to nothing in order to prevent it.

“No, I-“

“Don’t assume you can invade my life and demand to receive everything, Mel! The Wilthorn you remember is dead. Get over it.”

With not a thing left to mete out, he spins on his heel and breaks away, having had enough of drama and heartache. The last he’d dream of doing is causing pain on one of his best friends, but he can’t tend to this in the mockery of life he’s devolved into.

But if he’s banking on Melia’s submission to the verdict, he has another thing coming. She’s aware that this is untrodden and shaky ground, but the prospect of losing out on her one ticket to her past life is unacceptable.
“Bullshit”, she spits.

Yet again, he loses his gait, but this time prompted by a rush of shock.
“What…what was that?”

“I say bullshit to your showy cut-off! The Wilthorn I know hasn’t quit you. I’ve chatted with your commander. She praised and listed you as one of the worthiest knights she’s ever tutored and brought under her wings, as noble as they get. She told me that, while your skin may fail and your heart burns with endless torment, there remains a soul in there. It never abandoned you.”

Did she genuinely express that? Would she? Wilthorn doesn’t prod and Melia wouldn’t own up to it regardless. It’s of little consequence, for it performs the crucial final push. The knight has full-on lost his stamina, his shoulders declining. A stone’s throw away from cutting their ties, but he couldn’t even knock that one out. What to do now?

“You honestly gotta hear me say it? Why he’d raise a nobody like me?” His tone is more precarious, a shred of vulnerability.

Melia copies him, inserting affection into her own.
“You weren’t a nobody. You were my friend and a fine guard.”

“But not a hero. Not a great commander, not the first in line for promotion or destined for greatness. I was a lone guardsman.”

“But a fantastic and well-loved one. Seriously, I wouldn’t kid around with this, Wil.”

He sighs from his nostrils, collects his willpower and looks straight into her grey eyes. Ones he’s shared glimpses of joy, sorrow and fire with for no small count of years in a more fertile reality.
“I opposed him.”

Melia’s brow furrows unsettlingly.
“What do you mean?”

“In Stratholme. That day he rode in and raised hell… I formed one of the fiercest resistances that he’d ever witnessed from anyone. I stood insistently against him, dictating that he doesn’t hurt anyone innocent, ill or no. He took a crack at feeding me a bite of the zealous horseshit he pulled out of his ass, but I wouldn’t have it. I told him no”, he says, pinning his own hand in front of him. “He wouldn’t get so much as pat a single one of these people, not while I still stood. He was…stunned, y’know. Not only that I wouldn’t give him the time of day or hear out his wacky paladin garbage, but I – a single commoner – was telling the oh-so-fucking-mighty royal brat he wouldn’t get his way.” The passion and fuming in Wilthorn is mounting as the evocative inner images return to him.
“T ook three of his men to cut me down. I still got…the look in their eyes as they did, etched into my light-damn head. Felt more dead than whenever I spot a mirror. The sickest shit was that Arthas retained the memory of my defiance in the core of his mind, so when it was prime time to cook some death knights up, he raked around for my carcass.” He half-chuckles, half-huffs, with a calloused undertone.
“That sonuvabitch slaughtered us ‘for our own good’. To this day, I can’t believe he vomited that dreck in our faces. People nowadays say Arthas’ gone evil, but you know what? Fuck that. His heart was rotten long ago. He never sought a cure to the plague for a moment, went headfirst to carnage. Killing everyone was easier.”

“Wil…”
He lifts his torn, dismal gaze at her.
“You see why I didn’t like staying near you? This isn’t my old self, Mel. You can’t—…I’m not…”
He’s ashamed, Melia can sense it.
“I wasn’t eager to be this way, never sought a…messed up second life. I’m nothing but a walking, talking, decomposing pile of flesh. If it wasn’t for Commander Trienza, I woulda…”

He deserts the road he was on, glances at her and waves in defeat. It resonates with Melia more than he could ever know. Though they’ve been separated by time and existence, the common threads are intact. A spark stays on.
She wanders up to him, plants a hand on his armored forearm and gestures at the exterior of the environs.
“Come on. I’ll join your patrol.”

“Mel…”

“We don’t have to speak. Walk with me. Please.”

For the next hour or so, they spend it in silence, examining the scenery and scoping out enemy presence. It turns out being the first oddly serene event Wilthorn has tasted in multiple years.
The call of hearts

A dot, a slight ping, a twinkle in the murky umbra of a stringent landscape. The harsh and unforgiving peaks of the northeastern zone of Northrend lies unchanging, unchallenged in their looming poise as the zenith of the continent. When Rivaryn’s team mopped up the ritual concocted by her younger sister and cleansed any fragments of their deeds here, the decision was quickly locked in place to start back for the dragonhawks. They had no more business to attend to here and frankly, everyone was quite hyped to issue their farewells to this mountain once and for all. Never again will they put up with its gales, its thick bed of snow wishing to swallow them or its sheer drops into a falling oblivion. They shan’t be booking any holidays up here and the walk to their flying mounts will be the last they have to grind.

But Raxeen has quietly, little by little, sparked a doubt at this deduction. A recognizable hunch is nipping at her thoughts, urging her to meditate upon their truth. She remains close-lipped on this standpoint for a fair degree of the journey, however, sampling its scent to ensure herself that she’s not overdoing anything and relying on profound mistakes. She does have a track record of belaboring her personal dilemmas.

But halfway on the trek, she can hold it no longer. “My friends, can we suspend our pace?”, she beseeches them. “I believe I may have discovered something pivotal.”

The other four halt in their steps, waning those of their mounts in kind and shift to peer at the draenei who wanders in the back. Riv’s ears perk with interest, Kassari rubs her arms to stave off the cold, Khroga scratches her nose and Thariss adjusts the seat of the straps of her bag over her shoulder. “What’s up, Rax?”, probes the night elf.

The paladin’s white eyes, while facing them, carry the signs of a far-off quality. “For an hour or two now, I have detected a…mental pull. I reason it has to be Nadelgosa. No one else has the aptitude to send me these tingling touches.”

Riv blinks with unawareness. “…tingling touches? Is it some form of spell you’re talking about?”

“No, nothing so monumental. Thus far, I did not feel it warranted attention, but…” She slips one hand in under her armor and fishes out the medallion granted by Nadelgosa, the sapphire glittering in the light of the midday sun scraping through the clouds. “This necklace I was gifted? It is not mere jewelry, but a magical instrument. She branded it ‘Inter-Physical Essence Transceiver’. It contains a modicum of Nadelgosa’s essence inside, which validates me to psychically bond with her.”

All four women are astonished, Thariss most of all. “Whoooa. For real? Never run into a dragon of any size or age who’ve accommodated a close-knit link like that. She gotta have a mighty thing for you, my pal.”

A wisp of smile crops up on Rax’s lips. “Very possible.”

“Okay, if so, then I have to ask a direct follow-up”, comments Riv. “Do you know of Nadelgosa’s present whereabouts?”
In lieu of an answer, Rax scowls and tries to concentrate, targeting that innate brush in the crevices of her psyche. But seemingly, she encounters a few snags.

“Rhavjaka”, she curses with disappointment. “Apologies, I cannot manipulate it to pinpoint her. I have yet to sufficiently practice all of its myriad aspects and the arcane is not my forte. I do hold this sustained intuition that she is on her way, however. I…cannot phrase it in a manner which suitably pieces it together, but distilled, it is as though a finger jams more thoroughly into my skin for every minute. There is a whiff of…desperation too.”

Thariss’ ears angles skeptically.

“Hmm. And you feel we should loiter here for her?”

“If she desires to convene, yes.”

“Why? Can’t we go to Dalaran first? Getting the hell outta here is more up my street.”

“We do not yet occupy all the facets of this mystery. She may not be a member of our team and she has escalated the pitfalls and hazards for us, whether wittingly or unintentionally – where I personally barely escaped with my life in the last mission. But she proved a worthwhile friend, one who gravitates towards endangering herself for the sake of altruism, allies and family. We would be remiss to disregard that she was verging on death’s doorstep too. If an ally of yours issued implorations, would you not find it in you to hear them out, if nothing else?”

Rax’s impassioned speech leaves Thariss raising her arms with an indication of laying down her dissent. Riv, having instantly jumped to Rax’s side prior to the appeal, guides her sight to her younger sibling, since she’s heading the excursion.

“Kass, you figure we can stick around and hold off for the blue drake?”

The Arcanist dips her head affirmatively.

“Positively, yes. There’s no need to rush. I…do require some time to prepare my prospective case to the Kirin Tor, at any rate.”

The draenei smiles with relief.

“Thank you, my friends. Your understanding is gratifying. I shall not forget it.”

Riv replicates an approximation of the expression and brings a hand to Rax’s forearm.

“You said it yourself – we’re a team. Your troubles and heartaches are ours, Raxeen.”

The paladin shuts her eyelids and inclines slightly to pin a placid kiss on top of Riv’s head.

“Light bless your spirit.”

As they chat, Khroga pulls off her backpack and rummages inside.

“Alright, if we’re gonna sit around here, we better get a fire going. Got some of the wood we bought in K3 here.”

She removes a few pieces of finely sliced logs from the interior, prompting her girlfriend to gesture at the ground.

“Arrange a fireplace and I shall ignite it for us.”

Next to her, the far taller kaldorei glances at her questioningly.

“Why can’t you do it?”

Moderately taken aback, Kass reflexively draws her hands to her chest.

“What? I…I don’t know how to accomplish that.”

“Oh, so, hold up – you can cast balls of fire from your fingertips, summon portals that chuck us
halfway across the world, spawn arcane barriers that bounces off scores of separate attack types, summon time-locked illusions from weeks or months ago with the help of freaking bronze dragon spellbooks, but you can’t place a couple of wood chunks in a neat setup?"

Silence, for multiple seconds, with Kass staring at her, coalesced emotions of being aghast and embarrassed.

“I-…you-…this isn’t-…
I’m a Magister, you dimwit! I live in the city, the tall dazzling towers of Silvermoon, not in the grimy muck and unkempt dirt beds of the woods! I’ve dedicated my life to mastery of the arcane, not the trite monotony of meandering in the middle of no man’s land! If my whims compel me to travel, I simply teleport to another city and voilà, we’re there! I would duplicate such an act here, but…”

“But ya can’t.”

Kass’ ears slump with faint concession.
“…for now. But this will change!”

Thariss, sensing the scent of her victory, smirks and folds her arms.

“Uh-huh. Also, aren’t you an Arcanist, not a Magister?”

It drives Kass up the wall how effortlessly the kaldorei gleans how to poke and tick, to say just the right term or remark to ruffle her feathers. The mage clenches her hands and glares at her with a salty flavor.

“You…are insufferable.”

But this is where it ceases. Both of them are bumped marginally away from one another by Riv getting in the middle.

“Okay, that’s enough, you two. Let’s not bicker on the edge of a damn cliff, shall we? We’ve got tasks to complete and a tomorrow to anticipate, so let’s settle down, take some food out and focus on rationing our warmth and energy for the night.”

Diverting to her sister, she sets a quick kiss on Kass’ cheek.

“Khroga will fix the lumber. Get a spell up and running, will you?”

Becoming somewhat and quite unexpectedly deflated, for she didn’t have a presage that she’d be admonished like a little girl doing something bad, Kass deflects her gaze with faint chagrin.

“…fine”, she says with a small pout coming on. “I will.”

With her opposition quelled, Riv spins to her awaiting fiancée, who’s now exceptionally fascinated by what she’ll get up to. But in parallel with what was performed on Kass, she plants a second kiss on Thariss’ cheek, though this one infused with amplified passion.

“Fetch some supplies out of our storage, dear. And don’t forget the animals. When Razz’s tail wiggles like it’s doing now, he’s getting peckish.”

Thariss’ ears spasm up and down, in this case a mark of her overlapped amusement and bemusement.

“…has anyone ever told you that you can be super motherly sometimes?”

Even if she’s still a tad dissatisfied with their irrelevant squabbles, a light smile materializes. She pulls playfully at Thariss’ chin.

“Maybe yours taught me a few tricks. Now get moving.”

In the ensuing minutes, Kass kindles the lumber with flames of the arcane and the entourage mounts up their cooking kit.
“We will stay one night”, she notifies them. “If she hasn’t sprung up by early afternoon tomorrow, we have no choice but to push ahead and Nadelgosa can find you in Dalaran, if she’s able.”

The subsequent hours are, thankfully, peaceful and muted, censored of any words of rivalry or unrest.

Fortuitously, no more than one night drifts away on the skies, for in the icy but settled morning, they catch wingbeats in the upper altitudes, and as they rear their eyes up, they spot azure scales soaring to them. Nadelgosa charges up her velocity and roars in greeting as she picks them out in the white-laden landscape. The group, who’re munching on some basic breakfast, distinguishes that she appears unscathed. This dulls their former concerns, punctuating with Rax.

The paladin is first on her feet – or hooves – and approaches the drake who touches down on the snow in a surprisingly gingerly style.

“Nadelgosa! It is a joy to see you in one piece. I-”

Partially to Rax’s astonishment, after she transforms to her high elven form, Nadel dashes over to her. She entwines her arms behind Rax’s neck, leaping into the draenei’s, and buries her face onto Rax’s chest.

“Oh, Raxeen! I’m delighted you’re here too!” Her sparkling blue eyes assemble with the draenei’s white.

“I believe this demonstrates…the medallion’s success”, she declares timidly.

With a heartwarming smile, Rax plants her forehead onto the drake’s.

“So it does.”

They spare openings for exceeded intimacy for a later date, and Nadel shifts to distinguish Rax’s friends. Riv copies Rax’s lip motion and waves her hello. Thariss distributes a curt nod.

“Yo”, goes the kaldorei. “Where’s the lil’ sister?”

Nadel moderately releases Rax, but doesn’t desert her – she clutches one of the paladin’s hands, crossing their fingers.

“Stellagosa has flown to a secured site. She is at work nursing our brother to health.”

“And Deradgos?”, enquiries Riv.

“As it stands, he’s alive and revitalizing. His condition merely necessitates a longer period of rest. I was with them, but duty called me to take off. I will outline the particulars later down the line, but for now”, she pauses and zips her eyes from them to Rax and then back, “what is your business in the Storm Peaks? I exerted my arcane prowess on Raxeen’s medallion to gain pursuit, but I hadn’t predicted I would track you to this land. These mountains are terribly perilous, no locale for creatures with an absence of wings.”

Her perfectly apt question prompts everyone else to go, “Uh…”, and maneuver at Kass in a sketchy fashion, who technically brought them under false pretenses.

“N-nothing at all”, spouts Kass a pinch too hastily. “Nothing of…greater relevance. We were solely here to…extract resources for the war effort. Yes, that’s right.”

Nadel appears lost on why Kass sounds so evasive.

“O…kay. I do not grasp why this would impel you to climb atop the spires of a barren venue such as this, but…”, she sighs and shakes her head. “In the end, it’s of no consequence per se. I did not
fly here at lightning speed to interrogate, but to solicit your aid.”

Thariss leans her head doubtfully to the side.
“…wait, you need us to pull you out of a pinch? Again? This is like the third strike.”

Riv creases her eyebrows disapprovingly at her fiancée.
“Thariss, cut that out.”

“What? I can count. It is the third in line.”

“Clearly”, Rax highlights for the warrior, “we shall hear you out.”

Nadel dips her head in thanks.
“I’m grateful. On this day, it’s a question of my grandfather, Senegos. I can’t speak to the
undivided debacle, but…something has befallen him. Stella and I have been deprived of contact
with him ever since Deradgos was apprehended.”

The hunter fondles her own chin at the name.
“Hmm, Senegos. You’ve brought him up before. What was he doing all the way up here?”

“Well, in the aftermath of our brother’s imprisonment, a great concentration of Azurewing dragons
traversed the seas to engage our lord, Malygos. Grandfather pleaded for the life and salvation of
his grandson, but when it seemed for naught, he told Stella and me that he hadn’t lost heart. He had
a gambit in store that he intended to weave. He and a couple of the others were to search for a
select item, an artifact or sorcerous tool he was familiar with and was counting on its capability to
persuade Malygos to see reason.”

Thariss scratches the center of the length in her left ear and peers down.
“Huh. What kinda thingamajig could do that?”

“Whatever it is, can’t possibly be a painless process to get one’s hands on”, Riv infers.

The drake shrugs.
Sadly, I must attest that I’m equally in the dark. I’ve read lists and inventories on all manner of
trinkets, arcane pools and wellsprings, ancient tablets and enigmas, the whole lot reserved among
my kind’s collective awareness and scriptures. But not even the phenomenal nature of the creation
developed by our grandfather in days gone by, which we were to transfer over in our fake
bargaining as you may recall, was sufficient to pique Malygos’s attention, so I can’t realistically
foresee what he knows that I don’t. Then again, he too is ancient, comparable to the Spell-Weaver
himself.”

Rax brushes the rear of the drake’s hand and looks at her unsurely.
“But if your grandfather had a program to follow, then why did you not stay tuned for its launch?”

Nadel pivots to gaze right back at her.
“What? That’s madness! We couldn’t sensibly delay that long! You saw what state my brother was
in when we unchained him. Had we been even a week slower, he might have suffered permanent
trauma.”

“Ah, that is…a compelling point. My apologies.”

“It’s fine. All the same, the case took a turn for the worse, when I days ago incurred a horrifying
impulse – a cry for aid from grandfather. It was curt and rigorous, but dry on details. What I had to
go on was a magical marker which implied here somewhere, in the Storm Peaks. It occurred to me
that I had to depart at once. I left Stella at Deradgos’s bedside, told her to reside with him as I
formulated an investigation. But for all the self-assurance I showcased, more question marks soon protruded. The area I soared into was the quarters of the frost giants."

The group all funnel ignorant sights at her.
“Erm…what’s a frost giant?”, asks Riv.

“Do they have ice coming outta their asses?”, Thariss attaches.

Nadel rolls her eyes, mildly irritated by the comment half straying her center.
“How juvenile of you.”

“What? It’s a legit question! You said ‘frost’!”

“If you’re unfamiliar with their characteristics, it’s plain – they are a local race of giants, who roost in this province. And yes, they do boast buildups of ice emanating from their bodies. They’re relatively scarce and unsociable, keeping to their own. At first, they threatened me, announcing that I was not welcome into their domain any longer. They were fed up with my sort in their icy territory and would house no more ‘greedy blues’ that harm their community. But I stayed put, pleaded with them that I wasn’t hostile. I let slip that I was led here, that my own family made their way to these holdings. I inquired what was done to them and if the giants had detained my brethren, but they became flabbergasted, a shade affronted. In reality, it was the other way around – my people assaulted them, unprovoked.”

Kass expands her eyes astoundingly.
“Why would they ever do that?”

“I know! I was similarly appalled and startled! My grandfather, one of the most endearing dragons in existence, descending upon a gathering of civil and primal creatures of Azeroth? Impossible. Unspeakable! It would be a heinous violation of his core values. Unfortunately, the giants couldn’t point me to where they’d gone, once they were chased off or why they had committed an outrageous act of such magnitude. My one recourse was to proceed with my own detective work. And this is the premise of my hurried arrival. I require your support in this trying time, to dig deeper into these unknown features. I can’t stand on my own in the lethal stretches of the Peaks. If…if you can afford such generosity, naturally.”

The earliest to retort, per a bemoaning delivery, is Thariss.
“Goddess…the entire idea of pissing around in ice-town for a moment longer, let alone days, maybe weeks, is just…pure fucking agony. I’m not a fan of Dun Morogh, I hate Winterspring’s whole décor and I’ve got more appetite for swallowing my sword than to live on Northrend.”

In the corner of her field of view, she identifies the upset eyes of her fiancée and thus sighs and shrugs yieldingly.
“...but, guess we can pitch in, if there’s literally no other dumbasses who’d be so stoked to jump face-first into a freezer.”

As a reward, she earns an approving smile from Riv and the hunter nods at Nadel.
“We’re in.”

Nadel gasps, throwing thrilled expressions at all three.
“Oh, thank you, thank you! I was certain I could entrust you all to take on this quest!”

She hugs Rax, who cracks a benign smile and nudges her nose into the drake’s short blue hair.
“We shall liberate your grandfather like we did your brother, no matter what has ensnared him.”
“And there is none I’d put my confidence in more.”

In the midst of their adoring union, Riv swings to address her sister.
“Kass, Khroga, are you coming along?”

But the Arcanist shakes her head.
“It’s a pity, but we are demanded in Dalaran to…tie up loose ends.”

“We’ll hunt down a bird to send if we catch news on…well, ‘the thing’”, hints Khroga.

“But we also bear a second issue, which is liable to further complicate your task – we can’t lend the dragonhawks to you all the way into the mountain depths. We’re already pushing the confines of their versatility by travelling to these frigid shores.”

Nadel injects herself once again.
“You may all rest easy, for flying isn’t a criterion – there are flat surfaces and organic roads beyond these tiers. It will be slow, but I can transport you one at a time to that level, whereupon we can substitute for your ground-excelling mounts.”

Thariss suddenly overlooks her abhorrence for the winter lands and grins at Nadel.
“Ooh, what’s that I hear? Ol’ Thariss gonna get to cruise on the hardheaded drake at last?”

The drake steers her finger at the kaldorei ominously.
“Do not gloat. I won’t hesitate to punt you off midway.”

Zoning out from their contentions, Kass extends her final words to the unit.
“Good luck to you, then. The compensation you’re due shall be pending your reappearance in Dalaran. I am a woman of my word and you’ve done us a great service.” Following this proclamation, she embraces her sister.
“Play it safe, okay? Don’t run into anything recklessly.” She stares reluctantly at Thariss. “I expect you to shelter her with your life, if need be.”

Thariss pops her fists on her own hips.
“Relax, fussbird. That’s like my everyday mission.”

Riv pinches her nose unhappily.
“I’d appreciate if neither of you went about undervaluing my efforts.”
Tomorrow's hunt

In the forgone clefts of eastern Zul’Drak, in the peripheries of wintry hills and forests immersed with husks of trees, just south of the Altar of Quetz’lun, a division of Scourge minions wander the now desolate and pillaged civilization of the Drakkari. The bulk of the legions of enthralled undead have not yet trespassed to these stretches of the nation, but the lackeys in question are no ordinary troops or underlings. They serve a personage and eminent figure of the Scourge, Prince Acranius of the San’layn, who has slunk this far for an exquisite and immensely precarious initiative. A large collection of regiments was sacrificed to reap this favorable outcome, to mislead the Drakkari defenders. Though, in all fairness, it was a paltry trade to conceive. What does thousands of fallen numbers matter, when their ultimate master can synthesize an unending tidal wave of them?

The champions and patrons of the Light have been unable to stalk their polar opposite rivals, at least to the dead’s knowledge. If this wasn’t their state of affairs, the Scourge would know. The adherents to the Light – notably the paladins – can trail and sift out the rotting crux with their tracking expertise rooted in their faith, but what they seldom cotton onto is that this is a double-edged sword. Just as they can assimilate the groundswell of the unnatural, the undead can smell the quirks of the Light’s aura. It’s so tangy that it pricks their putrescent shells and bristles their backs.

That is, unless an aberrant substance conceals the sacred sheen. Paladins rapidly learn that the laborious virtue of stealthing onto undead can be stymied with the assistance of other undead. Today, a small scouting crew of the shambling dead find their senses unqualified to discern precisely this fragrance of an ambush, as they forage the environs of their assigned headquarters.

Marching by a specific white-covered hill, they don’t pick up on the shadow rising from it prior to the last second, where they veer to behold a dark-armored warrior looming. Typically, a misstep such as this would’ve been a tall order, for even if they are not the peak of attentiveness, the aroma of the living is feverishly inviting. But this combatant, cased in a red and obsidian armor stacked with skull insignias, has no beating veins in her anatomy.

Wresting her runesword from her scabbard, her legs disengage from the earth in one go, flying at them in a full whirlwinding velocity, making it midway there ahead of the patrollers even drawing theirs. But though the living prevails their mindless and uncontrollable creations, some of these reanimated beings do possess pre-programmed maneuvers from their masters, to counter unforeseen events like this. In response, the skeletons and ghouls endeavor to sever their ranks and leverage their superior numbers to fence her in. After all, what can one fighter accomplish against all of them?

But this tactic is sketched out without all the parameters available in this scenario. Without forewarning, on their flanks, an accompaniment of two fighters – a tusked agile beast with scales and a heavily armored red-haired blood elf reflecting the sun’s beams – leans into the rifts of their defenses, as their commitments were tethered to the first attacker. The first of the aggressors front and center, the death knight, heaves the tip of her blade into the sky and bears it down on a skeletal shield-bearer, carving its brittle bones in twain. The snappy and slim druid goes at it from down low, taking a swipe with her claws at a few ghouls, rending their putrefied feet from their legs and generally enacting mayhem. The paladin that had been ensconced in the shadows of the death knight, rams into a trio of undead mishmash of parts, guts and skin, crushing one with the plates of her spiked shield and then steeps her blade in the Light’s justice, to cleave its allies like butter.

A tally of the minions dislodges from the storm, to hoist their bows and avail themselves of the
recouped range, but again, faulty facts interfere with their chances. In the rear of the motley group, a fourth woman – and who they can actually distinguish as a human – climbs up on the hill, her robes rippling in the brutal wind coming down from the north. Her hands courses with Light. She singles out the paladin in their fighting pack and flings a golden string of energy into the redhead, flooding her with its restoring powers, but it doesn’t pause. Attuning to the paladin’s concrete Light voltage, she activates an ingrained link between them and cords their two souls to a frequency which she can apply to invoke the Light’s safeguards. Without warning, the blood elf has to draw in air sharply with wonder, as a transitory lucid gold barrier flares up around her from within, encompassing both the druid and the death knight into the mix.

The initial file of arrows that they discharge had not prefigured this result and to that end, all the effect they have is pelting the shield and then drop harmlessly to the ground. The aegis, amounting to nothing but a summary life cycle, collapses. Making quick work of the already ruptured row, the melee trio cleans off the scraps and decomposing flesh from their tools, nails their attack nodes onto the leftovers and rushes them, resembling spears staking their prey.

Conclusively, the soil lies dirtied with clumps of the Lich King’s pawns and minor splotches of blood from the odd scratch or cut that passed the hulls of the paladin’s armor or the scales of the druid. Trienza, Ashindra and Akilvah stand as univocal victors, though they do not spare a moment to bask in the success. Melia had bolstered them from her slot on the hill, but now jogs down to pray for the Light’s mending hallmarks, clogging every superficial laceration or fracture. With the obstacles cleared, Trienza unclasps her helmet and together with Ash, leads her eyes onto the exhibition in the grey skies a few miles to the northeast – a red, purple and black behemoth of an edifice, a floating capsule with four girthy, bulging and spider-like tendrils on the rims. It isn’t Ash’s first run-in with the Scourge’s aerial transport vessels, but this example is dissonant from the general varieties, several times more massive, with offbeat fickle sparks at the roof.

“Look at those measurements”, the paladin comments in thalassian. “It outmatches even a great degree of our buildings back home. I’ve viewed city blocks in Silvermoon that were a fraction of this capacity.”

“So it does”, Trienza concurs. Her monotone and reverberating voice doesn’t infuse Ash with swelling disquiet at this juncture, but she can’t in good conscience avouch a complete absence of it. “It is a byproduct of its administration, when a san’layn runs the show. Even so, it is no match for Naxxramas.”

Ash perturbedly screws her ears backwards.

“Oh. How…informative.”

As they revert to the slope, Akilvah transforms to her original troll form and creasing her brow, she nudges one of the bodies with her foot.

“These bumbling piles of flesh weren’t much fun. Died kinda abruptly, didn’t they? And I here was, getting pumped for a proper scrap.”

Melia in the meantime hastens to her second-in-command.

“Ash! Ash, are you okay?”

The paladin’s ears perk up with confusion.

“Uh, yeah?”

“You’re a hundred on that? You took a nasty blow to your back, I saw it.”
Blinking, Ash reflexively glances behind her. That’s when a faint twinge settles in. “What? Oh, now that you mention it… I believe my armor weathered the burden of it, though.”

Melia exhales with a subtle shiver to expel her tension. “Too high on adrenaline, I bet.” She gestures with her finger. “Spin around and I’ll put an extra cover of healing on you.”

The paladin faces her commander, who’s now no more than a couple of meters out of her reach. “Hmm? No, I’ll be okay until we get back to camp. We should-“

“Ash”, Melia interrupts with an inflexible tone and stares at her sternly, “I won’t hear it and I’m not about to let you bleed for the next half hour. Do as I say. I don’t wanna make this an order.”

With how friendly and informal the two of them are wont to be on nearly a universal basis, Ash sometimes loses sight of the fact that Melia is her ranking officer. Reluctantly, she buckles and submits to the instructions. “Yes, Lieutenant.”

During the process of this disagreement, Trienza stands by and observes, hooked by their doting attitudes. When she has previously in this journey questioned them on the subject of their relationship, she was donated no elaboration, only refusals. But to her, it’s a given that this duo shares more than an incomplex officer-and-second dynamic. Perhaps it hasn’t even registered with them or they actively cast off its credibility.

A fifth and final member of this detachment unfolds himself as the combat wears down – Cor’zel pokes his head out over the hill and assesses how clear the coast is, before he selects to join them. The Chronicler fastened onto the militant representatives like a fifth wheel and he sits on the opposite side of the coin. He ambles down the descent, unmoved by the gore and havoc on the snow ahead. In favor of being shaken, he’s busy cherishing the craftsmanship of the faraway necropolis.

“So, this is the August Corona Citadel. The Scourge’s unsightly and abysmal depravity in our world saturates me with revulsion, being conceived by fiends from another, which befouls their already abject nature. But, likewise, I am a man of science, a student of history and architectural revolution and the Scourge undeniably parades a groundbreaking proficiency with interlaced magic and comprehensive mineral composition. Sensational craftsmanship, truly.”

A tightly wound gap ensues after his statement, as all the women grow troubled at mixed levels. Eventually, it is Trienza who bucks his point of view. “Do not be so quick to pour praise onto them, scholar – the necropolises weren’t invented by the Scourge, for they date back to the nerubians. They were incorporated into the Lich King’s army on the heels of their defeat.”

The Chronicler tugs his fixation away from the construct and guides his eyes to the death knight. “I apprehend this fact well enough, Commander, but it does not degrade the achievement. For after all, are the nerubians now not servants of the Lich King? The Scourge is a conglomeration of provenances, cultures, arrangements and privileges.”

It’s vague, but Trienza’s brow knits as her glacial eyes cuts into his mien. “Yes, because the Scourge devours and despoils the cultures it comes in contact with.” A volatility has entered her voice, though it is yet only simmering. “Would you in all seriousness esteem such cold-blooded values for life?”
Akilvah frowns faintly at her superior too.
“Sounds more like plundering to me.”

But Cor’zel bears his hand up in a lecturing way.
“Ah, but these northern invaders are not alone in their habits. Commander Shadespire, wouldn’t you agree that your race in life sculptured their existence, homes and future onto the sacred sites, bodies and graves of the Amani trolls and their nation?”

Trienza doesn’t wince, and her low emotional feedback is on form, but that does not omit the fact that she does prove marginally dissuaded by his incisive comment.
“That…was a long time ago, in a polarizing era.”

“Weunequivocally, but would you contest the veracity of my evaluation?”

The knight’s hands are clutched, one on the hilt of her blade, but she doesn’t otherwise flash her fumes. It takes a good three seconds until she utters a terse word. For better or worse, she takes solace in that Lah’kur is not attending.
“…no.”

The scholar angles one arm behind him and lifts the other in a fashion which is meant to enhance his side.
“Precisely. I don’t personally laud the Scourge’s butchery, nor would I welcome their blighting of my homeland, least of all the full length of Azeroth’s continents, but I can respect the strength and brilliance of military acumen and triumphant conquest operations. I do with your elven kind and in that spirit, the Scourge as well. What separates you is temporal aspects. In a thousand years, should they be intact, we may well gauge them differently.”

Trienza veers away from him, her grip all but trembling.
“They won’t.”
Ash, who hasn’t said a word in this objectionable discourse, is impressed by the Commander for managing to keep her utterance so cool. Then again, she does boast centuries as a Ranger-Captain under her belt.

Akilvah repeals some of this balance by shaking her head in disbelief and disgust.
“Ya got a skewed head on that puny figure, old man.”

“I recommend you do not get fixated to the point of blindness, Chronicler, for it’s prone to leave you dead in a ditch.” Some bitterness has entered her sound now, which sticks out to Cor’zel, but he doesn’t reflect on it.

“Right”, says Akilvah. “With our launch site captured and everyone on their feet, I gotta wonder – is there a sly battle plan in the works or what’re we meant to do about the big death spider in the air?”

Trienza inclines her head.
“I have been deliberating on its position. It strikes me as being in an ongoing static mode, possibly with boundary patrol teams to pick the environment clean. The Prince we’re grappling with – Acranius – is a man I’ve happened upon in the past. He’s colder and overtakes Lord Veysir in his calculating frame of mind. Bares a superiority complex, but in a smarter fashion. I haven’t completely discerned why he decided they should break and set down their roots here, though. There isn’t anything of rich relevance here, as I see it.”

“I speculate they discovered a piece of the puzzle which they pursue”, Cor’zel weighs in. “This would of course signal emphasis on acceleration for us, lest we lose momentum.”
With her hands free and as she held an ear in their direction, Melia dips in too. “And how do you figure we’ll get inside? We don’t pack a ton of flying capabilities, if we rule out the druids of the Crusade and Zandalari. They’d fare well, but they’re not good for a full complement.”

The Commander elevates her left hand and indicates the underside. “This can be resolved by accessing the ground-sourced transporters. Every necropolis is equipped with arcane air-to-ground teleportation generators. This is due to their inability for practical landing; they were unloaded straight from the nerubians’ subterranean tunnels, so they haven’t been fitted for surface conducts. That being said, the stream is double-barreled – there is no option to discontinue the flow in only one trajectory. In other words, if we can get it triggered, jumping in won’t be a problem.”

The druid in the posse folds her arms and scrutinizes Trienza with unhidden mistrust. “You’re informed on an awful lot of the Scourge’s facilities, procedures and systems. I wager the devilsaur’s share of undead underlings don’t know squat about all this.”

With her eyes gravitated at the necropolis, Trienza articulates in her droning tone. “I was one of death knights harvested ahead of the curve by the Lich King. After reanimating and perfecting my qualifications, he assigned me to the rank of Chief Instructor of the Icecrown Citadel’s first series of knight training. I was cultivated as one among the minions he stuck tightly to his heart, regardless of my desires. A few years later, he rearranged my seat to oversee the conditioning of a new frontline necropolis, Acherus. But this was a ruse - he phased me and the entire fresh knighthood of Acherus out, dooming us for the measly benefit of an onslaught on the Argent Dawn and Tirion Fordring. He meant to send us all to the meatgrinder”, she whirls poignantly at Akilvah, “again. It was merely on account of his dwindling strength in this location that we procured independence. And now, we mean to pay back his sickening enterprise in kind.”

The druid shuffles her mouth and tusks a tad tentatively, flicks her nose, but doesn’t add more quibbling to the pile. “Right.”

Synchronously, Ash stares at the other elf with thinly veiled trepidation. Trienza has paid so intensely following her gallant and selfless death in fruitless intent to buy her people more time. Ash has hit up the multifaceted members of the Forsaken in the Crusade, but she nonetheless can’t hammer home the existence of coming back to Azeroth as a shell of one’s former self, and then be robbed of all semblance of autonomy. She wishes she had a touching comment in store for this occasion, but alas.

As no one rises to cut her off again, Trienza redirects her frigid gaze at their center attention. “Anyhow, I believe we can put our numbers into action as an advantage. If we merge all three factions, we can break them down into three or four formations, to be deployed in ambushes. Tucking everyone into the necropolis is wrong-headed, though. Rather, it’s in our best interest to let the attacks serve as an opening and smuggle a minor band inside. This intrusion team’s objective would be two-fold – eliminate Prince Acranius and sabotage his headquarters, to put it out of commission. Crashing it into the ground should suffice.”

Being one of the principal military minds, Akilvah taps her own nose as she weighs the premise in her head. “You got a preference for this unit?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes – myself, Lah’kur and Sydela, with approximately three to five
troops from the Crusade and your own forces each. Walthorn shall lead my knights on the ground.”

Akilvah doesn’t dilly-dally and nods unswervingly.
“This checks out. Then I’ll be leading the Zandalari setup in person. Should stick some of the haughty Prelates on balancing things at the front while I’m following through on the high-priority stuff.”

A third person who’s willing, but can’t offer her services squarely, is Ash. On that note, she defers to her superior, recognizing her authority.
“Lieutenant, I’d like to put forth that I should be the one to command the Crusade’s contribution to this project.”

But what she hadn’t taken into account is how flabbergasted Melia would be.
“W-what? What merits that recommendation? Clearly, you’d be more of an asset down below with me, repelling the Scourge. I mean, come to think of it, your paladin attributes would be a game-changer.”

“Would it?”, Ash asks with a notable disinclination. “I am far from the solitary crusader under this combat principle, nor am I a master. I absolutely have faith in my trade, but I wouldn’t be one to turn the tide to this degree.
However, with you governing the Argent squads at the base, the component which will arguably be the largest beneficiary of my tenacity and resilience is the smaller strike force in the necropolis.”

Melia crosses her arms above her chest and optically wanders her second’s countenance.
“They’re heading into the belly of the beast here, Ash, the heart of a Scourge stronghold. It’ll be full to bursting with deadly monsters.”

The paladin, unpersuaded by the dampener, just nods.
“This is to be expected. I'm not so full of myself as to reject this layout, but I could make the case that the journey in Northrend is perilous throughout.”

Her highlight drives fragmentation in the priest’s standpoint, but she isn’t ready to roll over.
“That’s a decent point, but…this is another level. Smells wrong that I’d send a Sergeant into a key extraction like this.”

“And I’d contend it’s the adverse – the secondary lieutenants will make a difference in the bigger battle sequences. I don’t hold the least bit of command dominion down there. And if you keep yourself to your word, can you say that there’s anyone in the Crusade you’d rely on more than me? Is there a superior candidate in our lineup? Then lay them on me.”

Melia scrunches her brow up, somewhat by virtue of her displeasure with Ash’s relatively irreverent approach, but also that she can’t in earnest envision a disputing defense. Instead, she huffs.
“And what if you make a mess out of it or get captured, unmade by the san’layn? What am I gonna do concerning you and your body if you fall, huh? They'll pressure me to relay your fate to your family. What do you reckon I should tell them? That you went out being foolhardy?”

These words are…extreme and even Melia feels a smidgen ashamed. It’s a slanted statement, forged to emotionally rope her in and cut bait. But the priestess can’t help herself – if there’s a fate which would annihilate her existent spirit, it’s losing Ash.
But the elf herself isn’t simply rendered shocked, but dreamy, melancholic. Her eyes trail off, by habit peering to the south, to home. She mulls her reply over.
“You...won’t have to. No one remains to mourn me.”

Melia, awash due to the unforeseen dreary counter and ambience, forsakes her cunning leverage. “Oh…Ash, I…I’m so sorry. I wasn’t—this was— I didn’t wanna bash you or…”

She loses track of her essence and is made a mumbling mess up till Ash intervenes to dispel it. “It’s fine, I’m not demanding an apology. All I ask is that you take the plan under advisement.”

With a heavy intake of breath, Melia gets her act together and reconfigures her form. In the long run, is there a greater substitute in her pockets? Someone who shines brighter? Not at first light. “…dammit. I’m still of the impression that this is unreasonably risky for one of your rank and specialty, and if I wasn’t burdened with command, I’d flat out decline…but the day being what it is, fine. You can head up the charge.”

Ash smiles contently and bows her head. “I am grateful for your confidence.”

Melia furrows her brow and her nose, clutching the paladin’s arm. “Don’t kid yourself, Ash. If you tap out in there…”

And here, Ash has the opportunity to be a sure-footed beacon, by levelling her fingers on the human’s. “I haven’t failed you to date, Lieutenant. I don’t plan on letting this be my first.”

In a mildly helpless vein, Melia ejects air from her nose. “Blowbacks rarely come reliably.”

“Is that it, then?”, inquiries Trienza, making both moderately flinch. “Our team is established? If so, I suggest we begin discussing internal tactics. Once we lay our feet on the floors of the Citadel, I-”

But their headway is suddenly thwarted, by none other than Cor’zel. “Not so fast, Commander. I shall be attending this mission too, at the rear.”

With this astounding and tenuous declaration, Akilvah regards her superior incredulously. “What’s that, old man? I don’t think you’ll be going anywhere. Last I checked, ya can hardly lift a sword. You’d merely weigh us down. We won’t be tussling with scrolls.”

The Chronicler swivels and lines his finger up at her. “Watch your tongue, Battleclaw. I can overlook the infrequent insubordinate observation, but not a recurrent liability to refute every judgment I deal. Let me underscore that I was appointed to the role of direction in this delegation and unless you’re fond of serving at the rock bottom of our stations, you will quit this route you’re pushing for and abide by my instructions.”

His size and height are no match for her, but Akilvah knows even she answers to the edicts of Zul. She entwines her arms and grumbles something related to an old cuss of a man. Cor’zel has by now banished her from his limelight, fixed upon achieving his abstract objective.

“For the remainder of you, to dissolve the cerebral fog and elucidate puzzled states, permit me to extend this.” He withdraws an object from his person and brandishes a furled scroll for them. “I am of the assumption that this is what the Scourge covets.”

What he unshields isn’t essentially of any practical use to those who aren’t fluent in Zandali, but all the same, he flaunts a snippet of the text which supposedly covers a pivotal clue. “This is a conserved and timeworn index of the Drakkari’s most potent articles and arsenal. The object listed here is the Siren of Akali.”
Trienza strides into his proximity and sheathes her sword, but her face clings to its unfazed guise. “And this is…?”

“A sacred and primeval relic, which if implemented with the fitting rituals and shamanistic incantations, can grant entry to the spiritual circuitry, directly into the pure lifeblood of Zul’Drak. If this in turn is tainted, it could alter the veins of the loa’s essence in the Scourge’s favor and consequently all of this nation with it. Animate a fresh army for the Lich King’s enjoyment. And only I can identify its appearance.”

Coming to terms with his dire account, they distinguish no choice but to concede. Melia and Trienza afford one another a drab look and then dip their heads in consensus. “It’s your life”, Trienza replies dismissively. “But mind your performance in there. The druid here and your soldiers may grovel to your command, but I won’t, and my patience wears thin with incompetence and tampering measures. Over-encumber us in any fashion and I won’t think twice to knock you out flat and carry you over my shoulder. Is that understood?”

Cor’zel grimaces with disapproval. “…perfectly”, he mutters and puts away his scroll.

Akilvah, on the other hand, grins smugly. “Ya need anyone to chip in, call me.”
Creeping imbalance

The trio of weapons-for-hire had sold the infrastructure of the Storm Peaks short. This land, though high in the sky, cold to the degree of freezing their souls and practically challenging their grit, is more than its handle would imply. As Nadelgosa took them above the sheer drops one at a time and headed to the upper ledge most adjacent, they soon learned that there are whole valleys, passages and systems of caves which riddle the land’s constitution.

Currently, they’re slinking through a sort of mid-tier, a segment which rests in the midpoint of the lesser peaks and the ones that transcend the uppermost cloud layers in the sky. Standing at the feet of the snow-dusted grey mountaintops is akin to being an ant below a giant whose height outdistances even your own perception. They wander on the ice and snow-laden roads that are not quite roads either, only sporadically punctuated by pine trees and minor hills. Compared to the rolling Grizzly Hills or the flat Borean Tundra, out here, they genuinely are filled with the impression of being alone in the wilderness, severed from the warmth and safety of civilization.

Except, even that sensation has its gates. Dangers lurk in this valley in the shape of giant bears, herds of hairy and horned creatures, and predatory birds. But there is more. Every so often, the heavens get crowded by scaly flying behemoths which have a likeness to dragons, but their mode of flight resemble wyverns more than Nadelgosa and her blues. Plus, at least twice, they’ve had to go into the dark and mask themselves from hardy and hulking people; two-legged and liberally equipped individuals who dwarf even Thariss. Nadel termed them ‘vrykul’ – the progenitors to humans, generally emphasized as ‘frost vrykul’ in this region. Those who inhabit the Storm Peaks go under the clan name of Hyldnir and serve unmapped and unspoken masters. They’re warriors and hunters, honoring strength and brutality. She wasn’t big on the outcome of a confrontation and voted they duck out throughout the voyage.

In due course, they roll up on their destination, a site that is embedded in the landscape and which can at the furthest be defined as a makeshift fortress. It’s installed in the middle of a slight crag and in place of scrupulously forged and framed bricks or stone walls, there’s just plain jagged ice rises, like natural platforms, with a coating of powdered snow. Hemming these organic barriers in are monstrously enormous ice spikes, spontaneously pierced into the ground like fangs of a colossal monster, to provide a secondary stratum of shelter. A number of the spikes are swathed in terrifically large and barbed chains, which not merely may have been enlisted to drag the spikes, but also hold a few of them upright, to stay true to their guarding objectives. As an aside, it doesn’t evade the approaching squad’s notice that the front sector of the fortress is muddied by the manifestations of bones; beasts and humanoid shapes and sizes in equal measure. Imposed as a repellent, by any chance?

Riding on their three mounts, Rivaryn has paid extra attention to their behaviors. Ilca has intermittently been unhappy to progress into a few areas of this sprawling lowland, made plain by her dismayed hissing and subdued growls, and Razz is perpetually on edge, his reptilian eyes darting towards any shadow they come across. Even if he’s a natural predator, it’s as though he’s gotten the grasp of that, out here in the land of giants, he is just as prone to be prey. Raxeen’s brown and white-spotted saber – which she recently nicknamed Aliix – has mostly pressed on with shallow restraints.

Several hundred meters off, as Nadel is by the seat in front of the draenei, she extends her hand over her own shoulder to pat one of Rax’s.
“Here is good. Let’s come to a standstill.”
The paladin nods once, pulls at the reins and nudges one hoof into the side of Aliix to get the message across. She then expends an abrupt call to her comrades.

“Hey!”

The elven duo responds by swiveling their heads to them and then following suit.

“This is it?”, wonders Riv.

“Yes”, Nadel confirms. “I generally err on the side of overcaution, to not trespass on their quarters ahead of acquiring their approval.”

Hopping off Ilca, Thariss grabs the reins in a relaxed grip and to temper the saber’s suspense, she strokes along the fur of the neck, ears and upper back.

“Is something up that we should know?”, she wonders.

The blue drake doesn’t assume any grand gestures, but she floats one hand horizontally at a hillock in the vicinity, where a big and coarse boulder is implanted right in its center.

“What’s that? A rock?” She tips her head sideways as she sizes it up. “Huh. Looks like it…crashed? There’s like tears and chinks in the ground.”

“It did. That is what they hurled at me when I initially came flying into their borders.”

The warrior’s ears now perk unsettlingly.

“…what? They threw it at you? Like, with their hands?”

“Correct.”

“But it’s fucking…house-sized! Or cottage, but…”

“Did I not sum them up as ‘giants’?”

“Yeah, but not this big! You’re shaping ‘em up to be Ancients now!”

Nadel applies two fingers to her chin and fondles it mindfully.

“Hmm…that is a decent analogy. Not too off course, dimensional-wise. Well, apart from containing flesh and not barks, leaves and termites.”

Thariss groans and buries her face in one gauntlet, doubtful whether the tone of Nadel’s comments connote that she’s jesting or legit quantifying their affiliations.

“I’m kinda losing confidence in this plan now, FYI.”

“What for? This feat is perfectly on par with the day your team vanquished a gronn with me. How is this dissimilar?”

The kaldorei holds up a finger for emphasis.

“That was one, blue. One! Not a whole freaking village!”

Propelled by Thariss’ vehement lashing, Riv approaches her, rests a hand on her beloved’s arm and massages it softly.

“Would you be in favor of turning back around then?”

Thariss was a little short of an imminent rant or a swelling of pettish behavior, but the touch of the sin’dorei and her sweet voice moderates this drastic overload and she finds some way to decompress it instead. She folds her arms and huffs.

“…no. I’ll tough it out. It’s just…I get moody, given all this cold hell. I’d readily take on a dick lord solo if it wasn’t too shabby weather.”
Rax’s head flinches back by a sliver.  
“Were you…intent on saying ‘pit lord’?”

The kaldorei shrugs nonchalantly.  
“Same difference.”

“Please, that’s enough meandering, yes?”, suggests Nadel. “I ask you to take a step back and obey my dictates. It’s imperative that we do not deride the giants. They have the capacity to be gregarious, when it is reciprocated.”

“What? I can show manners. I’m not an oaf, y’know.”

“…that is an emphatically contestable claim.”

Thariss opens her mouth to discharge a reprisal, but loses it as Riv sighs from her nose and puts pressure on her arm. The hunter nods at the drake.  
“We’ll follow your lead, Nadel, but if you get stuck in a pinch, toss us some type of signal. I’ve rigged and stashed a couple of smoke bombs, which are handy on short notice.”

The drake stares at her fairly nonplussed.  
“Smoke…bombs?”

“Mm. Small and portable, like metal orbs that fit in your hand. When triggered, they exude extensive clouds of smoke. Very effective if you’re in need of an impromptu getaway.”

“Oh, I understand now. That does seem…valuable. Do keep it charged, but not sit with it in your hands. Norgannon willing, we won’t be compelled to use such a device.”

“Right, got it.”

And then finally, Nadel edges closer to the entrance of the fortress, the maw of the monster, with the trio standing by. Rax isn’t overjoyed by condemning Nadel into an independent course and burdening her with the spotlight, but they’re sorely low on alternatives.

“Giants of Dun Niffelem, I hail you in the name of the Blue Dragonflight!”, she calls out, magnifying her volume via an arcane charm which sends it bouncing onto the frosty surfaces. “I am Nadelgosa of Azurewing Repose to the distant south and come with courteous and respectful intentions. We conferred but days ago on the subject of my missing kin, and yet I conceive there are complications left to touch upon, petitions to pass along.”

And so, they sit tight and let themselves be keyed up by the vacant instant reaction and the baying of the wind that whacks against their skins. As opposed to the bile and thunder she was sadly afforded on her first visit, at this event, there is naught but one figure which tramples the snow and wanders outside.

Nadel wasn’t cracking wise when she made clear of the physique of their hosts – what occupies their field of view is indeed a giant, a multiple meters tall and wide two-legged entity. It wears sheets of bulky clothes fashioned from fur and leather, with a horned helmet on its head. The wrists, hands, feet and waist are all braced with armor, what comes off as pieces of repurposed metal – shields, railings, fences and chains. Scattered spurs of ice decorate it all too. Its somewhat grey-pink skin is barely visible underneath those coverings of garbs, which also bakes in the protracted beard drooping from its mouth, descending along the chest.

As it responds verbally from a couple of hundred meters range, its sluggish, booming sound resonates across the valley.  
“Little dragonkin, you return. The snow had not presaged this occurrence. You failed to catch your
Nadel’s elven ears slump harrowingly.
“You…have it right. I came to terms with the fact that, alone, it would be a doomed hunt. But I wasn’t going to back down. They are my people, one of them identified as my grandfather. I’m only doing for him what he would for us. In this second session, however, I do not go by my own efforts.” She gestures at her affiliates.
“These are my friends, examples of the younger races to the south. Allow me to present the hearty and vigorous warrior Thariss of the kaldorei, the keen and intelligent hunter Rivaryn of the sin’dorei and lastly the devoted and noble draenei paladin Raxeen. Her race travelled to Azeroth seeking refuge from the Burning Legion.”

Thariss nods her head quite snappy, while Riv and Rax bow theirs, showing reverence to a being of such height. The giant dips his head in exchange.
“Well met, travelers and dragon-friends. I am Heimir. We are the Sons of Hodir.”

“Hodir?”, Thariss reiterates, partially infringing on the chat. “Is that your dad?”

With sheer chagrin, Nadel impels her fingers onto her forehead.
“Ugh, Thariss…”

But Heimir doesn’t manifest as particularly bothered.
“That is a matter of perspective, but he is commonly regarded as our creator, yes. He is of the Titans, a Watcher of the darkness.”

Thariss moderately gapes and looks a tinge dazed.
“Wow. Yeah, that’s pretty awesome.”

Softening some of Nadel’s abashment, Heimir reopens talks with her.
“We do in fact hold news for you, Nadelgosa of the Blues – we are now standing with conviction that we’ve discovered what befell your family.”

This is much to the surprise – and captivation – of Nadel, who stares at him optimistically.
“You…you have? Truly? Are you altogether assured of this?”

Heimir nods, his beard rattling with the motion.
“But…what has given you this perception?”

Further blindsiding them, he gradually rotates.
“Accompany me inside and I shall warrant the evidence to speak for itself.”

Needless to say, they hadn’t seen this wind blowing in on them, but declining the invitation of a frost giant comes across as both shortsighted and a wasted opportunity, and thus, they fall in.
As they transition inside, they bear witness to an even more arresting sight, that the fortress is tiered, housing scores of icy plateaus that extend probably a few hundred meters up.

Internally, plenty of the bearded and warmly clad giants amble around, plying their trades, playing with their dire wolf companions or sharpening their manifold combat techniques. The thumping and clanking in here are a few decibels rowdier, in light of the immensity and the stronghold’s own magnitude, with such surplus of space.

Another clear factor is the sensation of walking up close to Heimir. His comparatively ginormous feet make the ground beneath them quiver and rumble. Once more, it sets the flavor of crossing the terrain as a mere insect or a rodent.

Heimir escorts them into a hollow in their base, down a narrow corridor, to where a solid block of
ice has been brought into being with a shape that is marginally off. The more they cut the space to
it, though, the more vivid it grows that this isn’t a simple slab of frost – there’s an item implanted
in its center, as if put under lock and key. They all obtain an eyeful from where they are and by
merit of the outer material being translucent, they scope out the elongated contours and that it thins
out towards one side, looking girthier on the opposite. An appendage of some description.

Nadel is venturing up to its line to behold it within arm’s reach, but she never hits that point. A
hand grips her shoulder, tenderly but acutely, and forestalls her advance.
“Is something amiss?”, she asks and drags her sight a fraction higher, catching Rax’s sprouting
scowl.

Though she clasps the drake, Rax’s critical gaze is attached to the object.
“Do not step too close.”

“Erm, but…”

Rax’s white eyes drift meaningfully to Nadel’s.
“Please.”

With her vaguely alarmed tone of voice, Nadel obliges.
“As you wish.”

“This…fiend harassed one of my brothers”, Heimir communicates, “but even if it fell over itself to
crush and choke him out, he loosened its hold and proceeded to lop it off at the stem. The residue
of it merely went up like mists on the fields. But in spite of its disconnected state, the tendril kept
on writhing, its darkness leaking from the skin like pus. He had to put it in a form of cage, to keep
it in check.”

Thariss scratches her chin bemusedly while attempting to make sense of the chunk ahead of her.
“How’d you guys like, freeze it? Are you mages?”

Heimir shifts to look at her as if it was a buffoon’s query.
“He shouted at it, of course.”

Even further baffled, Thariss stares up at the being next to them; an undertaking she’s unused to.
“(…oh. Shouted at it. Right. Elune’s ass…”

Then, Rax utters words off the cuff in draenei.
“Vhij nex’en.” The lot of them peeks at her, anticipating answers. “The Shadow undying. It is what
our people know the Void as and your…Old Gods.”

The big frosty giant then appears fascinated by her verdict.
“Remarkably astute of you, Raxeen of the draenei, for you hit the horn of the rhino. This was
unmistakably wrought by the malevolent nature of the elder ones. This, or something quite like it,
is due to have assaulted your kind, Nadelgosa of the Blues. This pollution’s unfolding is a
testament to what is uncontestably astr. The prison is splintered. It…is earning its sovereignty.”

Nadel’s eyes dilate as his revelation takes the wind out of her sails.
“What? No…no, that’s…inconceivable.”

The others have their minds clouded and they angle left and right between the two.
“Can someone explain what’s at fault here?”, bids Riv. “Whose prison?”

Nadel is all but paralyzed and Heimir is too fraught to verbalize the name.
“It has been referred to with infinite styles and labels. ‘The Lucid Dream’, ‘The Beast with a
Thousand Maws’, ‘The Fiend of a Thousand Faces’…”


Both Riv and Thariss are sent into a paler state, their mouth opening wordlessly, but Rax is more levelheaded, squinting suspiciously.
“The classification is…off-putting, but what does it involve? What are these beings?”

“An Old God, one of the primordial fiends and tyrants of this realm. A cancer in Azeroth’s innate physiology.” The drake diverts Heimir. “But I was convinced that abomination was still trapped in the heart of its prison concocted and hardwired by the Titans.”

The giant inclines his head slowly.
“As were we, but this outbreak spells bad omens, that it is weakening, if it’s not perished already. My condolences, little one, for your family can no longer be mended. We Sons of Hodir retain insight on the legends of the elder shadows and dissolving their taint is out of the question. It is a heartbreaking loss, but final. You had it right; they are a pestilence and without cure.”

Nadel lingers with terror and disbelief up to her elbows, that she hardly even considers discrediting him. Therefore, it hangs on Rax to tell him he’s wide of the mark.
“Your assessment, while genuine, is a misjudgment. It may be daunting, ambiguous and a many-sided affliction, but it is no such thing as unfeasible. It can be evaporated.”

Heimir gazes at the small outlandish creature.
“Can it now?”

Rax nods sharply, squeezes her hands and concentrates. On the spot, her crystal armor erupts with an incandescence, a golden enchantment.
“With the power of the Light’s majesty, anything can be overcome.”

Heimir is mildly flummoxed by the demonstration and Nadel, recalling Rax’s training and strong points, swirls to her.
“Do you…really infer that the Light stands a chance?”

“I do. I have witnessed firsthand the great Prophet Velen extinguishing the Shadow’s impurity. I might be a far cry from our leading voice, but if this mist was afoot not long in the past, there is hope. The Naaru are watching as ever. They shall guide me.”

Nadel’s spirit brightens and she permits herself a pinch of a smile as she grasps Rax’s hand.
“Thank you.
We must launch our search at once. There is no time to waste.”

For all the frightening factors and being aghast at the unearthing, Riv breathes in and rebalances herself.
“I’m with you and I can try to guide the way. Tracking dragons wasn’t in my area of study, but you blues leave shards of the arcane where you traverse. I should be fit to lean on my nose for that.”

Thariss plants her hands stably at her hips.
“Well, this is all kinda whack, but yeah, I’m game. A good ol’ dragon chase sounds like a treat.”

Being the outsider, the massive giant alternates his sight from person to person, taken by such surprise.
“You four do truthfully mean to challenge the rampant dragons? They are lost by now, overpowered by the elder one’s infection. If you go, they will resist.”
Rax raises her stature and stresses her height.
“Then we shall tackle that dilemma head on. Come what may, we will revive those who were
ruptured.”

“Meh, not like we haven’t been flooded in worse scrapes”, argues Thariss. “What’s a few dragons
when I’ve faced the fury of Riv’s lil’ sister? They can come get it.”

Her fiancée snorts, somewhat unhappy. But Heimir is nigh on astounded by the brazen statements.
“Such…bravery”, he expresses with dim awe. “To not merely defy the wilds of the Peaks and the
haze of a dragon’s rage, but the vicious pitilessness of an Old God.” Encumbered by reluctance, he
strokes a hand across his beard. “Hmm. I may not know where their wings took them, but going
north is a half decent beginning. I am familiar with the terrain and threats of this land. You should
have my support. Yes, I believe I’ll tag along.”

Nadel hadn’t foreseen this, and blinks up at the giant.
“You will? You’d seriously assist a group of…flecks like us?”

“…’scuse me?”, asks Thariss with slight offense. “Speak for yourself, blue.”

“But of course! It’s only fair – we wrestle with a common foe in the monster of death. Besides,
warring with dragons for such tiny creatures is unsound.” He waddles off and snatches his own
weapon, the scale of it in line with a tree, which he situates on his shoulder.
“With my axe, we shall even the score.”
Snow. It’s one of the few conditions of Northrend that nature apparently finds the capacity to bring forth, on top of plain, cold and breezy air. But Ashindra has to grant that, though she does miss her home and the flares of civilization as well as a residence to rebuff the elements, this weather does have its utilities. The denser it falls, the more robust of a barrier they’ll assemble amid themselves and their enemies. She can bear the brunt of winter’s bite for a spell, if it means their opposition won’t perceive their encroachment.

Today, she is out on the expanses of enemy territory yet again, but there’s no patrolling here. In favor of monotone recurrent tasks, she’s responsible for a mission of some magnitude. With her weapons holstered and the Crusade tabard wriggling in sync with the pummeling gusts, she treads onto the height of a slope, where she hits upon a squad – her squad. It’s not the least bit a huge one, approximately ten of them, but they’re solid fighters and soldiers. Ash has ensured that she remembers their names and what they can serve up to the table.

Getting within reach, she switches on her leader mode by speaking to the one defending the rear, which is a Forsaken warrior – grey-green decrepit skin with an abundance of stitches and short brown hair that she does her best to preserve to a tiny degree - her shield fixed to her arm and sword resting in its scabbard with her other hand on its hilt.
“Marlyn, shoulder on form today?”

The undead stammers her response in a timid voice.
“I-it’s fine, yes. I’ve been t-tapping into some of the techniques you taught me, Sergeant.”

Ash has questioned this undead before, and now knows that she was young when she died. 19 years old, and only a recruit in the Lordaeron army upon the event where the Scourge spilled across her homeland. She’s still getting the hang of living as a warrior and a Forsaken, but her handiwork is something else. She’s not fighting for revenge either – she’s fighting so no other young woman has to endure her torment.

The blood elf smiles and pats her forearm.
“Glad to hear it. You’ll be called upon to fortify my flank out there.”

Marlyn nods zestily.
“Y-yes, Sergeant! I’ll try my hardest.”

Gniklas, one of the small quantities of gnomish crusaders, is also quite opportunely one of the greatest sharpshooters she’s encountered, outside of the Farstriders back home. His light skin connects with that of humans, but the light blue in his swirly hair and the brilliant curved moustache with a pointed goatee is reasonably unique to his kind. He’s sitting and filling up a fresh clip of bullets for his rifle, a gun that his mother engineered for him a couple of years ago, with integrated night vision and scope.

“Gniklas, all stocked up on ammo?”, she queries, while passing him by.

He flashes a wide grin under his moustache and looks up at her.
“All locked and loaded, ma’am!”
“Expecting you to keep your eyes on the prize, Private.”

“Call my shots and it’ll be easy as grandmom’s pie, Sarge!”

The third person of note she runs into is Vihara, a devout, tall and marginally self-willed kaldorei priestess, with long moss-green hair in a ponytail, lilac complexion and lapis blue facial tattoos representing the crane. She has upheld that she was portended into the Crusade by a dream, which was allotted to her from Elune herself, urging her to deny the Scourge more victims. No one, not even her fellow night elves, have placed their trust in this statement, but they don’t rebut her either. If this is why she’s so hardworking, who’re they to judge?

She’s praying as Ash goes alongside her, dressed in her bolstered leather armor.

“Is everything okay, Vihara?”

The kaldorei opens her eyes serenely and glances down at the squatter elf.

“It is”, she claims in a placid expression. “I prayed to the goddess to bless our advance; she will guide our weapons, Sergeant.”

Ash bends her body respectfully.

“Then I’m grateful to you both.”

On the road up to the anterior of the lines, she touches and handles a few more arms and shoulders of the attached members, until she discovers the front man himself, the orc making his resurgence on the battleground.

“Braktog, how are you? In good shape?”

He’s resumed bearing his plate gear and he’s posted at the verge of the hill’s peak. He raises his right arm and smacks its biceps.

“Stake your life on it, Sarge. Fighting fit and in business to hit the Scourge where it hurts. Got a bone to pick with ‘em after that last fuck-up. You?”

Ash snorts with an undertone of entertainment and bemusement.

“Me? I wasn’t the one getting knocked down flat.” She points her thumb at the grisly mark on the right side of his face, scrambling down to his neck. “Nor the one with the prominent scar.”

He just chuckles it off.

“Ah, it’s gonna be all fine, Sarge. It’ll turn into an attractive brand in the long run.”

“Mm, I presume it’s irresistible to orc men and women.”

“Sure as shit. And outside of that, I scoffed a big meal of that stew the Zandalari cooked up for us earlier. All packed with energy right ‘bout now. So, let’s tear these scumbags a new one, huh?”

Ash can’t cease the light laugh that leaves her lips and she grips his shoulder.

“I’m pleased you’re on your feet.”

Conjointly, they then crest the hill and kneel down, staring at their objective, which does possess a wretched exterior. They’re perched in the outskirts of another former Drakkari dwelling. By the fact that the Drakkari nation was – or is – so dramatically old, they’ve had plenty of space and time to effectively engrave their civilization into the earth. In turn, their antique, vast and striking facilities, which are nevertheless holding firm from the elements as evidence of the troll’s masterful masonry, now lie derelict, neglected by the undead trespassers. This fact is replicated here as well.

For when the Scourge overruns a town or settlement, such as they’ve secured here, its denizens are
their main, and in reality, sole targets. The constructions, altars, marketplaces, shrines and homes are relinquished to erode in solitude. This isn’t the first eerie scene of this spirit that Ash has beheld on her exhaustive excursion right into the heart of Northrend, and lamentably, it won’t be the final.

In the premises of this town hides an instrument which fits the mold of their mission in Zul’Drak. Trienza stalked the landscape to root out vestiges of necromantic forces, a wavelength which she and her knights reputedly can decrypt with their bodies. She pinned down the reeking of one item in this distinct area, which contains a piece of the key which will activate the teleportation generator in the August Corona Citadel, for as long as they require it.

A beneficial element which they can already scope out from their current posts is that this town’s protective properties leave a whole lot to be desired. Terrible for the Drakkari who previously made this their home, but a leverage for the crusaders. By sheer impulse, Braktog unsheathes his axe and deposits it in the snow right in front of him. His battle-hardened and seasoned eyes mark the grand total of their adversaries that are within view from up here.

“How long we gonna stall? Some in the squad are getting antsy and I won’t pretend I’m not one of ‘em.”

“Carry some patience for the time being”, she cautions. “What we’re here for is to await a signal. Akilvah, the Zandalari commander, professed that she drew up a battle plan and I believe it would be unsuitable to bungle it.”

Braktog’s skepticism is bare, but he won’t take a crack at overriding her. “You’re the boss. Kinda wonder if these king trolls or whatever are simply talking a big game, though.”

Ash displays a faint smile. “You didn’t watch them absolutely flatten a battalion of Scourge.”

“Yeah, ya hit the nail – I haven’t. Gonna be in the grey zone ‘til I get to check out some proper action.”

“It’s to come, my friend.”

Narrowing his eyes as he monitors the village, Braktog catches a glimpse of remains, abiding rotten bodies and skeletons of the trolls who never descended into undeath. He exhales through his nostrils. “Poor bastards. Never knew what struck ‘em, did they? Not saying I fancied these Drakkari or anything, but…c’mon. Did they earn this sorry end?”

His rather spontaneous comment resonates with Ash, who becomes idle, a remote visage mounted on her. The defiling of Tranquilien, the frantic flight, the interminable hiss of undeath licking them from behind. “No…”

Braktog, not catching onto how his remark affected her, glances at his leader, only to be conflicted of it. “Uh…you okay, Sarge?”

Ash’s main reaction amounts to a fleeting shudder. “I am.”
She then untwists them both by recovering the subject.
“The Crusade is here in Northrend now and impeding the Lich King’s vile domination is our
destination. We’ll finish this for all the generations that sink into their last rests and all future
generations who haven’t underwent what we’ve regarded.”

Braktog muses on the poignant mantra.
“You said it.”

He does prep a second entry to the discourse, but puts it aside, for there is a dot up overhead that
attracts the unanimous attention of the squad. Gniklas levels his scope at it.
“It’s the Zandalari!”, he announces.

They now begin to catch hold of what the signal contains, as Akilvah and her druids swoop down
from the skies, clutching some form of flaming items, like burning vials. Hovering above, they
release the bottles and upon impact, these canisters detonate, unleashing thick fiery vapors. The
damage they cause is in all fairness quite negligible, for the Drakkari installations are made of
stone and the Scourge are too divided to be pelted, but largely, they serve the value of breeding
disorder.

With the beacon sprung, Ash pulls out Vem’tavir and her shield, Brightwall.
“Now!”, she orders her team and side by side, they scale the rise to surge down at the dazzled
hostile undead.

They aren’t battling in isolation, for on another slope a kilometer to the west, Trienza and her two
aides, plus a detachment of Zandalari fighters, approach like an outpouring wave.
As they barrel into their foes, Ash and Marlyn are first in line, to a point. As a matter of fact,
Gniklas is the real instigator, though he blasts them from his vantage point on the hill with his rifle.
Seconds ahead of the onset of the battle, Ash also senses an empowering flutter in her chest, as
Vihara infuses her with Elune’s shielding gifts to mitigate some of the harm that will come her
way.

The prelude to a battle is what Ash would invariably define as the toughest section of any she’s
ever plunged into. It’s where all the hesitation builds its foundation and where it attempts to betray
you with an impression to flee. Gazing into the eyes of the ones you’re meant to kill, to eliminate
and tear asunder, while they lust for the adverse conclusion is…alarming, to say the least. She’d
even go to the extent of saying it’s unnatural. To maim and cut open and shed blood of intelligent
creatures, those aren’t enterprises that the Light teaches them. It isn’t the worthy vector of any
being, living or undead. Depriving someone of life is the finale, the last page of their story and who
is she to determine when this climax is due, rather than natural progression or the Light?
The fear rises and anxiety stings her throat, galvanizing tremors that run down the length of her
body, across her chest and to the well-honed muscles of her legs. With the Scourge, it is palpably
eclipsed for the worse, her Light powers’ notwithstanding. It’s another organic piece of
misinformation, which stresses to her that it won’t go through, that these monsters will merely
brush her aside and leave her a mutilated carcass on the soil, despite registering that it contradicts
reality.

And then she bashes into them, her portable bulwark running ahead of her with its radiant
augmentation, which staggers two ghouls in one go, and her fear is surpassed by adrenaline.
Straight out the gate with a dawning blow, all squeamishness and craven intuitions slough off and
she soars through the gateway of a combat mode. She’s back to being the paladin Ashindra,
Crusade-Sergeant Revenor.

With this awakening, she grants edicts to her troops.
“Braktog, circle around them! Gniklas, disjoint their numbers in the back! Vihara, shield the rogues and deliver them some leeway!”

The small Argent squad does inflict their fair share of blisters against the Scourge numbers, which would normally motivate the undead to, in essence, congregate their forces and gang up on Ash’s meager demonstration, rending them trivial. But with the addition of Trienza’s squad and the Zandalari reinforcements, these programmed Scourge troopers don’t possess an answer to get their bearings and tune their composition to what they’re being dealt.

Ash did watch in some fashion when Trienza lent them relief in their first sortie in western Zul’Drak, but since the place was so crowded, her line of sight was in large part obstructed. Not here, though. On this devastated relic of a town, she glimpses the death knight in all her lethal glory, and frankly, she is an intimidating image to follow. What her style boils down to is four hugely crucial aspects – frozen resilience, swiftness, efficiency and ruthlessness. She is a blizzard all on her own. If Ash is a bright battering ram, Trienza is an ice spear. In this battle, just like versus Lord Veysir’s hordes, Trienza shoots off some form of interior aura, which discharges a potent, slashing, frosty wind that can encase her enemies in a matter of seconds. The narrower the margin, the nastier it proliferates. But though she’s bound to be the foremost volatile component on this arena, she wouldn’t be caught dead saying she’s untouchable. In fact, as a consequence of her insistence on staying at the fore, her flanks are quite dodgy.

And this is the precise basis for keeping two aides with her in combat, to shore up her flaws and limit any leaks she may open. These two women boast substantial warfare knowhow by themselves.

Lah’kur is ostensibly the third that lives a little extra in the scenes of death. She has a mild grin on her lips as she spins her dual runeaxes around and buries them in unison right into the chest of a ghoul, prior to kicking it back and severing the heads of a skeleton and an undead Drakkari. Like Trienza, she keeps access to a variety of necromantic sorcery, but it is discordant with the Commander’s. Hers is full-on oriented towards manipulation, absorption and annihilation of blood, whether animated or rotten. As the long-since coagulated fluids of a ghoul pours out, she can tap into the integral nature of the substance and boil the creature from within. With glee, she observes as one walking dead Drakkari erupts with blood, which spurts out and hits other enemies, searing their hides with the stewing agent. It makes her crack up and her cackling echoes over the battlefield.

Sydela, in contradiction to her superior’s two-handed application and the wielding of dual weapons like her partner, carries but one single-handed tool in her rune-moonglaive and does not couple it with a shield like Sentinels have a taste for. Instead, Ash would conflate her with a borderline battlemage. Her discipline lies in the theater of gore, decay and diseases, and she plays into the element of undeath more than her companions. Once she’s tossed her glaive, which circles through the air in an exceedingly deadly arch as it hacks and slices open her foes, she channels her necromantic output directly into their bodies, either infecting them with grotesque illnesses or leans into the plagues that the Scourge themselves were rigged up from, to undo them. This does of course have no effect on skeletons and the like, but she houses ample spells in her arsenal. Plagues may have a lack effect on them, but explosions do not, and for Sydela, a corpse is merely an unlit dynamite.

Another representation of her knack for unholy deployment is when an abomination rushes her. Lah’kur would sap other Scourge to fuel her strength and Trienza would do nothing but weather its blows, to shatter it with sheer chilling sharpness. But as one growls and rumbles into the kaldorei, she lifts her left hand and fires off a spell, which does pierce its skin, but plies no damage. Seconds later, the abomination gradually curves around and then assaults its former comrades, obeying Sydela’s commands.
Differentiating from Lah’kur’s blithely attitude while engulfed in ruination, Sydela harnesses her Commander’s demeanor on the whole affair and bears a cold, detached expression. These three in and of themselves are exquisitely threatening, relentless to the point of leaving nothing to waste. At the end of the day, Ash may ask herself who it is they ought to blanch at.

This regiment of the Scourge managed to swarm a town of civilians and noncombatants, along with a band of guards naturally, but under the pressure of refined and toughened strike teams, they crumble. Alone, Trienza and Ash’s teams could arguably have mangled their way across these paltry shambling husks, but tied in with Akilvah’s aerial drops, the hostile undead are befuddled, their lines driven into disorganization.

Ash’s team pours in from the southeast, coinciding with Trienza’s contingent trouncing the southwestern flank, and collectively, they make quick work of the exterior barricade and filter into the center plaza.

With the perimeter shattered, the three factions dash into the town itself, but face an immediate obstacle – the air support splinters, as a row of gargoyles are finally inbound to strengthen their ground allies. To steer clear of being caught in the trap of these flying horrors, Ash commands her team elsewhere.

“Into the nearest building! We need a roof to protect us from the skies. Hustle!”

The structure they jam into is tricky to characterize, since Ash carries minimal education in the architectural design of trolls, much less Drakkari. Judging by the discarded tools on benches, metal slabs and a compartment which could operate as a forge, she’d surmise this was formerly a smithy. Ash hasn’t had a ton of experience clashing on city streets, due to her missions predominantly routing her towards wilderness areas, garrisons or citadels, which categorizes this as a fresh venture, though not one she had planned for.

“Vihara, mend whatever protruding injuries you can locate. Marlyn, Braktog – seal the door with some of the rubble in here. Gniklas, provide backup. Everyone else, lie in position and wait for my signal. Grab your water skins if you require any.”

This effort mustn’t become inflated, however, if they station themselves cleverly. Ash kneels next to a wall below an open window and rests her heavy shield against it. The remainders of the crew are distributed along the room, still high on adrenaline. Ash delicately ascends to the border of the window and inspects the active happenings, catching sight of regrouping undead, deserted casualties and limbs.

“What’s the strategy, Sarge?”, wonders Gniklas. “Want me to pick off a few?”

“Not so quickly. In short, we’re expected to get through to the heart of town. Commander Shadespire reasons that the chief of this regiment is lying low in an interior facility.” She shifts to a tauren in the party.

“Later, get Gniklas up on a ledge near a roof. He’ll have enhanced line of sight from there. Vihara, shelter them with barriers once they get out the door.”

“On your command, Sergeant”, the kaldorei tells her.

“You reckon we should split up?”, asks Braktog.

Ash shakes her head abruptly.

“No, that is compromising. We’re already separated into three units. No need to cut our size down to fragments. The way I make of it–“

An unprompted scenario thwarts her clarification, triggered by a collision of appendages, objects and armaments onto their barricades. A Scourge mob has sniffed them out and is now endeavoring to barge in and corner them in this building. Ash frowns and reclaims her shield.
“Damn. More company, it seems. Marlyn, guard the door.”

“Y-yes, Sergeant!”

Braktog jumps to his feet and braces himself with the axe in his fingers, but in the corner of his eyes, he beholds Ash putting her foot on the bottom of the window hole.

“Whoa, Sarge, where you off to?”

“I’ll be back. Keep them occupied.”

And without further expounding, she seizes the rim of the window, aligns her heading and hauls herself outside, inducing bewilderment and disbelief in the squad that she would jump ship so trivially. But they aren’t equipped with adequate freedom or range to ponder this gambit, for a call to action soon shakes out when the provisional wall they constructed by the door disintegrates below the thrusting of the Scourge and the undead flood into the building. The first one that slides inside, however, doesn’t acquire a ton of steps before its chest is cracked apart by a magnificent axe chop from the one orc in the group.

“You heard her”, shouts Braktog thereafter, ”grind ‘em to dust!”

Marlyn illustrates her interior intrepidity and defensive formidable when she gets on her feet and hammers her shield onto the attacks to keep them at bay, gating their flow into the structure. Gniklas is first to act on this venture, tuning his scope on short notice, navigates the barrel at a suitable target and then lets it rip, eliminating the skull of a raging skeleton.

“Headshot!”, he exclaims triumphantly, putting a slanted grin on Braktog’s mug.

Additional portions of the squadron then follow suit and unleashes their individual assaults, by and large from range, to issue Braktog and Marlyn with desirable foot room to maneuver. The Scourge does not relent and though their tactics are resoundingly subpar – or else the whole lot wouldn’t be attempting to stream into the very tight entryway – their raw numbers put the team in a serious pinch. Well, that is up to the stage where their leader’s ploy pays off.

From behind the undead line, a cascade of blazing energy emerges, and a barrage of Light is disseminated underneath the feet of the Scourge, inwardly setting them ablaze. Simultaneously, Ash rematerializes on the field of battle, ensnaring them from the rear and stakes her sword into the back of a ghoul, twists the tip ninety degrees and then conducts a horizontal slash that cleaves it and two of its comrades. The Sergeant has prevailed with her unanticipated maneuver and smushed the Scourge between her and the team.

One might deem this a puzzling conceit, that a single fighter can cultivate such tremendous harm to them, but that would merely be undervaluing the dominance of paladins in necromantic environs. In regular battles crossing the living, they are no more than warriors with holy arts, like a soldier with a special breed of magic. Opposite forces of what they perceive as evil, whether undead or demons – all the more if they are exposed like these poor sods – they are spectacular, truly stealing the show. The resistance that the mindless Scourge of this model can dispense in exchange is meager and with sufficient quantity of allies, paladins become nigh irreducible.

Marlyn retracts slightly from the battle upon noticing the consecration, to not get captured with its corrosive faculties on her body, but everyone else counterbalances this loss by pushing extra harshly, until their contenders are vanquished. With this conquest, Ash is still electrified by the thrill and combat-lust, and is consequently in the zone to plow on. But she is then somewhat stunned by the delighted roar from her band of troops, permitting themselves a pithy celebration. She decompresses in turn, walks over the corpses and inside to tap a few shoulders.
“Good work, everyone, but stay sharp. We’re not at the tail end yet. Gniklas, assess our situation with your rifle from the roof.”

The gnome salutes smoothly.
“You got it, Sarge!”

Getting boosted up to the top of the house, the sharpshooter lies prone and scans the landscape with the scope on his gun, appraising their state. Subsequently, he hones his focus and blasts the skulls of a couple of archers.
“Airspace seems unhampered right about now and I’ve achieved a straight road to the next block for you.”

“Excellent work. Someone go retrieve him, because we will demand his precision up ahead, and let’s carry on.”

They jointly exit this structure and proceed to go from residence to residence, duck into them for cover in case of ambushing Scourge marksmen. In the backdrop, they pick up on clashing metal, flushing spells and the moaning of the dead or dying. Their side is supposedly surmounting their foes, but Ash doesn’t have a flat overview to actually validate this.

Not soon enough, they smoke out the dominant shrine in the core of the settlement, its walls endowed with statues and plaques which Ash has no idea how to elucidate other than that they encompass depictions of animals, one potentially resembling a bird or something equivalent up in the glaciers.
Beyond the vivid imagery, what designates it as a paramount frontier is the fact that it houses a whole cadre of superiorly armed skeletal guards, at the ready to stave off their pitiful living opposition.

But the Crusade doesn’t back down, nor do they scare at such an abject demonstration. Ash leads the charge, amplified by Marlyn, and the two form a bulwark to repel arrows that derive from pillars settled on the shrine’s walls. Gniklas and a mage supply these fiends with the Crusade’s reply – bullets and arcane bolts.

Twigging her moment with the ranged demise, Ash peers sideways at the Forsaken.
“Take point. I intend to give them something to think about.”

The young forsaken dips her head.
“A-as you wish, Sergeant.”

Whilst Marlyn pushes ahead and matches up with the first few elite skeletons, relying on her shield to ward her, Ash rests on one knee, Brightwall mounted in front of her on the stone tiles, but she lays her other fist against her chest, barring her eyes to the outside world and employs her faith.
“Oh righteous and true Light, bestow upon me your fury and fidelity, that I may subdue these destitute souls, sullied by the Scourge’s brutality.”

Soliciting its services, an orb of luster erupts in her hand, which weaves into the figure of a buckler consisting of nothing but absolute Light. She fixates on her foes from afar, folds her arm and then tosses the Light’s avenging power at the skeletons in a spinning hurl. The spell slams straight into one and causes decimating damage, prior to ricocheting onwards to at least three more, fracturing them all to a marginal amount. Though her fellow shieldbearer is forced to step aside when it is flung and dedicate her talents at the flank to stray from this technique, Braktog charges in and practically howls, utterly flooring a misfortunate skeletal knight. Ash keeps after them and springs into the rumble, Vem’tavir singing her faithful assault.

This company doesn’t perish at the same rate as their previous enemies, but they do falter and once
Ash puts her mind into slicing a hole in their framework, her road is soon unfurled. But as one of the knights loses its leg and crawls forward, its blue flaming eyes heaves to Ash’s and she is drawn to it. In their meeting, Ash overhears its moan and what manifests like a faint plea for help. Poor bastards indeed. These things are owed a better life, a better grave, than to be conscripted into the ranks of a sick necromancer king’s schemes. It stretches a hand out and Ash overflows with pity, on the brink of considering to offer hers. But this thought fades.

The appendage of the undead is cut clean through by a sword illuminated on its broad end by runes. It is then pivoted and thrust square into the skeleton’s chest, harvesting its expiring life essence. Ash is shaken from her marginal trance breaking, but more so given the cold-blooded method of dooming the existence of this undead that seemed to be teetering on the edge of autonomy. The answer of who’s accountable for this breach stares her in the face, for Trienza was the sole entity she should’ve expected. The Commander isn’t reluctant by her decision and gazes firmly into Ash’s eyes.

“Do not hesitate. Show no mercy for them – they would ask for none.”

Ash is stumped, left hanging in regard to a reply. She elects none at all and in place of one, she takes a gander at the other elf’s tail, predictably discerning the aide duo coordinating with the crusaders.

“What’s our status?”

“That we will end this here and now.”

“What of Akilvah?”

Trienda sets her eerie peripheral vision past her shoulder and Ash pursues it, discovering the druid back in ground action a few blocks away. That verifies their conquest of the gargoyles, if nothing else.

Braktog, who remains locked in a duel with a few of the knights, side by side with Marlyn, kicks one in the gut.

“Sarge, get rolling! We’ll hold ‘em back and you two can nab that key.”

Ash wavers, but Trienza perches a gauntleted hand on her shoulder.

“He’s right, it is all or nothing.”

Originating from the eastern boundary, Vihara calls out to the duo.

“Sergeant! Go with the goddess’ blessing!”

She instills a damage-dampening boost, which manifests by way of their senses numbing.

“You are equipped to slay the beast. Go!”

Thanks to standing statistically outnumbered, Ash sighs and swings to the doorway.

“Alright, here goes nothing.”

To Trienda’s minor amusement, Ash takes charge and ingress the shrine ahead of the Commander. The entryway is shut, but Ash effortlessly boots it open. The taskmaster of this Scourge corps is none other than an undead nerubian necromancer, an exorbitantly tall and lanky four-legged and four-armed beast in fine robes. In the Crusade’s logs, this one is entitled ‘nerubian vizier’, Ash recalls.

Upon their entrance, it is committed to a dark ritual of some persuasion, but turns around itself and hisses at the elves, speaking in clicking Common.

“Gah! Surrender and accept the fate of all living wretches – submit to the Lich King!”
“I should think not”, says Trienza and just in advance of readying an onslaught on them, she expels a howling wind on its chest, as a preemptive burst, which she follows up with a charge.

The match is quite disappointingly short. Ash primarily provides auxiliary duties, letting her Light-infused shield unhinge the nerubian. Even if Trienza zipped in before the paladin, Ash bounds into the fore to brush off a couple of spells from the pair. By keeping it distracted, she confers Trienza with an opportunity to slide into its side and run it through with her blade. As it tumbles to the floor, she doesn’t prolong the agony either, but rends its torso.

Falling limply to the ground and emanating a number death throes, the vizier is rapidly made history. Trienza clutches its arm and callously tosses it with the chest up, digging her hands into its robes. She fishes out a cube fused with unholy force which fits into her palm.

“We’ve acquired what we came for. Let’s hope the others fulfill theirs.”

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Hours later, as they arrive back in camp, Ash is greeted by Melia, once she’s assigned her group to reward themselves with a hot meal. The human touches her arm and presses her fingers over it with an unsubtle undercurrent of affection.

“Hey. Relieved you’re okay.”

Ash nods faintly, but doesn’t reciprocate the physicality.

“You too.”

“I’m told you guys had it real rough and tumble out there. Mind if I look you over?”

Incongruous with her objections of last time, Ash swiftly gives in today.

“Yeah, sure.”

During the inspection of Ash’s body, double checking for wounds despite that Vihara allegedly filled her role admirably, Melia’s gaze is fastened to the elf’s features; fairly absent ones at that.

“Ash, you okay? You look a pinch…well, harrowed.”

The paladin exhalces in a dejected manner, her shoulders limping, practically exhausted. She then glances in Trienza’s heading, perceiving how the Commander converses with Wilthorn in the center, as he presumably presents his report.

“I feel…conflicted.”

“Huh? In relation to…?”

“Commander Shadespire.” Melia blinks when she’s told and then regards the death knight from their distance. “The longer period spent in her radius, the more I get the inkling that death…robbed her of something. Something internal; something fundamental.”

Again, she wonders, what would Rivaryn make of this?

Chapter End Notes

*Uh, I know blood is technically the 2h spec and frost is dual wield, but I see that more as combat mechanics. This suits their styles better*
Weave a net

In the distant and unacclaimed north, strapped for much sign of life, movement and drives that might tempt outsiders to plunge into its white waysides, a condensed procession of travelers mounts its obtuse obstacles and mercurial nature.

As soon as they struck out from Dun Niffelem, Raxeen, Nadelgosa, Thariss, Heimir and their pets nestled their hopes and faiths onto the former ranger in their midst. Rivaryn possesses tenuous tracking acumen in this form of environment, but as she’s the one person here with any knowledge in such a field whatsoever, the onus sunk on her shoulders to persevere all the same.

To accomplish this enterprise, Riv has scoured the terrain for deviating clues of apparent environmental disturbances; scuffmarks, torn vegetation, roasted rocks, melted snow and so on. However, these are but morsels of truth, that can act as compasses for her wits, as prevailingly, she leaves it to her magical perception to distinguish the leftovers.

It isn’t a sure-fire thing, but blue dragons have a supreme link to the arcane, to the effect where they sometimes literally leak miniscule samples of magic. In light of their own affinity for the arcane and now-redundant yearning for magical resources, all quel’ and sin’dorei can detect the raw signature of it. But purely those with intensified instincts and a knack for the chase, can hunt tiny seeds of this measurement.

Riv takes in the flavor of these arcane traces, for the odds are long that it could be something disparate from their quarry. But, to be clear, Razz is perched alongside her, his nose representing a snappier smell capacity. He compensates for any missteps she might commit.

The further members of the collective prolong a mute pace whenever Riv establishes her desire for it, keeping their eyes peeled for assailants or remote threats; though the risk of the latter ever creeping up on them is remarkably slim.

At one piece of the chain upon the peaks, they run across a highly anomalous scene for the non-giants. In the dense maelstrom of the falling snow, they spot a field rife with contours of people. Except…they aren’t moving. They are all in a standstill, locked in some shape of stasis. Upon closer inspection, it dawns on the team that these actors are all entombed in ice, perfect molds of it too. And it’s not merely a couple either – this is a domain of combat, with what strikes them as dwarves and their miscellaneous pets, in a scrape with frost giants like Heimir.

The four shorter friends are all wide-eyed and boggled by this illegible exhibition.

“What…in Elune’s ass went off here?”, Thariss blurts out. “Was this a skirmish? And are those…dwarves?”

Heimir is holding the countenance of a grim and faraway solemnity, though none of them can ascertain why.

“I know no such name”, he admits in his thrumming and low-pitched voice. “What you see before you are Frostborn, a local race that resides to the west of the Peaks. Historically, we have been dissociated from one another…save a short era, where we feuded.

In the long-lost past, a Titan Watcher and our ally, Thorim, betrayed and set upon us, deploying scores of adversaries onto the Sons of Hodir. This accounted for the Hyldnir that plague us to this day, the proto-dragons and the Frostborn.”

“Hmm. So, earlier, Thorim was your buddy?”, wonders the kaldorei. “What happened? Why did he double-cross you?”

The giant’s head sways from side to side in dejection.
“With full honesty…my brothers and I have not the faintest notion. It all soured unceremoniously for our people and we were besieged from every which way by detractors we had never preempted, afflictions we never asked for. This battleground in front of us was dubbed ‘Thunderfall’, for in a fit of rage, the Lord of Thunder threw down his hammer, Krolmir, which froze Frostborn and giant in equal measure inside an unbreakable prison. Their spirits were condemned. Why he would flaunt such disloyalty and disgrace is intolerable…but not a concern for you to be perturbed by. This battlefield was unjust and an entanglement we shall unravel alone.”

In the thick of their conversation, they pivot to Riv, who’s standing with her arms crossed, like she’s paused for the closing of their back-and-forth.
“Didn’t wanna interrupt your tale, but I’ve actually dug something up. Come.”
She diverts them to the outskirts of the timed-out battlefield and brandishes a curious detail.
“Check it over there”, she tells them and points to the northwest.

There, in the snow, is a slight crack that shimmers, shifts and crackles in a white and violet glow, an astral phenomenon. Nadel is astonished.
“This is….a sorcerous rift in space and time.”

“I reckon it was wrought by blue dragons”, pitches Riv. “They amassed here or…consumed some manner of power fount.”

“A fount?”, asks the giant. “I….am unclear what that might be. It’s not unheard of that ghostly presences haunt these stretches, but no amount of wizardly goings-on.”

Nadel folds her arms and scratches her neck with one hand.
“Well, I wouldn’t call it impossible that perhaps they…gorged on the spirits, if they consisted of the type of vigor that grandfather necessitated for some unknown cause.”

“Ugh. Fingers crossed that they’re not supercharged now or whatever”, voices Thariss.

On account of the pitfalls which it would entail, the team determines that it’s more desirable to skirt the long way around the dormant region, making a point to not awaken horrors that skulk or disguise themselves.
Once they’ve passed, they continue treading north by northeast, in between the crevices of the peaks, in the confines of sterile patches of effectively vegetation-less lands. Animals in this domain, principally predators, have by and large copped out of meddling with them, which they ascribe to Heimir’s gargantuan participation. It wouldn’t be farfetched to follow that basis, but not an airtight conjecture either.

“Be on alert”, he warns. “Though the wild beasts of this realm give the Sons of Hodir a wide berth, the Hyldnir could tarry in the shadows, blindsiding us in a devastating offensive.”

“Wait”, urges Thariss, “so they have it in for you guys too? Is there anyone in this frosty land who doesn’t?”

“Well, there are modestly few intelligent creatures that occupy sectors in these mountains. The Storm Peaks were deliberately measured for the prison of the dark one, sequestered from the mass of habitable zones and homes. The sparing collection who are quartered here were all, in some respect, entreated to abide as stewards of the Peaks. That is, which ought to speak for itself, why it is such a pity that we have fallen out with one another. If only Thorim had not been so unfaithful…” His shoulders hang woefully. “…the possibilities would be boundless.”

The dialogue between the others keeps on rolling, but following a string of it, while they’ve made entry into an incongruous zone of the heights, Riv hoists her hand pressingly.
“Quiet down”, she decrees.

She’s a dash farther than them on the trail and thus they can’t get a comparative perspective. Crossing over to her, with the blood elf gesturing downwards with one hand to dampen some of their racket, they bear witness to the find that Riv glimpsed from long range.

In the center of what edges onto a slim valley after a fashion, surpassing a few mounds, reclined both on the ground and a few grand stones, is an array of blue dragons.

There’s a collection of five, all of them with magnificent azure-glazed scales which reflect the light of the heavens, as well as the bright snow which rings them. Three of these colossi are drakes in and approaching Nadel’s proportions and aesthetics in her natural build. One is a medium-sized dragon, while the final is a massive and mildly frayed dragon, yet still astonishingly statuesque.

Nadel is on the snow, her blue eyes enlarged as she counts them. Rax crouches next to her.

“You recognize them?”

“Yes. Dagrona, Berazus, Havregos, Almeregosa…and Senegos.” She delays to breathe in with an affected flicker. “My dear beloved grandfather…”

Unlike brood and blood, Senegos’ separation is not down to his immensity, but an ample supply of visible quirks and outcroppings. His horns and the arced spikes jutting out from his lower jaw are spectacular glossy crystals, looking the part of raw sapphires. Equal to his granddaughters, he is decked out with shining sky blue crystals onto portions of his form, mainly the limbs, but there are spare nuggets on his legs to boot. His sweeping wings are not brittle, though with age they’ve univocally been battered, with glaring wisps of holes in a few quarters; a visible clarification that non-Aspect dragons do in fact wither with time. A series of his sizable fangs – rivalling longswords – are observable on the outside, and crooked tendrils slump down from his head, as does faint threads of hair.

From afar, they cannot judge any severe damage to them, but Nadel averts to Rax.

“Can you distinguish proof of the Void’s blemish?”, she prods.

The draenei, her demeanor sober, seals her white eyes, only to unpack them anew a sparse number of seconds later.

“I cannot. There is not one bit.” She veers to the drake. “But this does not exclude the prospect. Indeed, I would go so far as to make a case for that an absence of Vhij nex’en’s marker is not much evidence of anything. Contrary to demonic reserves or the man’elar menace, Vhij nex’en outstrips them in disingenuous measures and pretense. It can and will stay out of sight, cloaked in the guise of mundanity, to seduce both you and your victims into conceiving it as ever so real.”

Nadel, maintaining a high-strung outlook, appears restless and anxious to fly straight up to them, but Rax claps a hand onto her shoulder.

“Hold it together. We will release them before long.”

Nadel bites her lip, eyes captured by the vision of her family.

“I just…seek to establish that they are as sincerely infested as you suggest.”

“I swear there can be no misinterpretation therein”, emphasizes Heimir. “The dragons descended upon Dun Niffelem without remorse, without forewarning.”

The drake ruefully lowers her gaze.

“Yes, but…it is imaginable that they could respond constructively to me, isn’t it?”

Or she’s living in the sphere of overblown hope.

“Rushing them now”, Rax tells her, “devoid of a direction for our course, shall do nothing but put
you in terrible jeopardy. Conserve your nerves as long as we investigate our alternatives.”

Though she’s averse to dragging this on when her treasured brood is right there, Nadel reluctantly suppresses it.

“Very well, I’ll lend you credence to prevail with your strategies. But…all I urge is that our postponement is not out of line.”

“Hey, I’m on your side”, remarks Thariss. “Sitting on our asses out here isn’t my favorite pastime or anything. But yeah, I wager we’ve gotta cook up a game plan before we hurl our heads into the snow. This is plainly not a straightforward affair.”

Kneeling and tucking the warmer clothes across her body, Rax sizes up their opposition, in a manner of speaking. She tries to dictate where to shove their priorities.

“Nadelgosa, who is on the top of these dragons? Who is the elite in raw power?”

Nadel carefully brushes some of her hair behind an ear.

“Well, that would demonstrably be my grandfather, on all accounts. Not in solid physical strength, but he’s phenomenally adept with magic.”

“So, if we can unchain his intellect, his faculties would be an efficient asset in our repertoire?”

“Claws down, yes. Hmm…on reflection, his properties could instantly turn the wind for us.”

“We’ve gotta iron out some manner of ruse then”, suggests Thariss. “Like entrancing your other buddies and singling out your grandpa so he’ll be a cinch to put outta play.”

“A bait could do the job”, surmises Riv. “Someone who can draw away the others in a frenzied pursuit. The point of contention there is…you know, who would we dispatch? It’s a given that this would be a high-stakes feat.”

A condensed cycle of silence tails this layout, until Nadel breathes out her fears and takes in a pinch of spunk.

“I shall do it”, she reveals. “I’ll be the bait. If anyone ought to, it’s me.”

Totally on brand for her behavior with the drake, Rax protests.

“What? Nadia, it would be a surfeit of risk to position you on tackling the entire cluster. You may be essential in the altercation with your grandfather.”

Nadel faces her, preciously observant of the multifaceted pressure amid them, but furthermore that it cannot be condoned to obscure their progress. She has to reason with Rax to grok this reality.

“And who else is suitable? Rivaryn? You? I do not prize self-aggrandizing gestures, but I’m the fastest in our party, and the sole member with magic in my library.”

Rax’s eyebrows fall with discontent. She deconstructs Nadel’s posed aspects, but they exhume no discrepancies. But she can’t capitulate if someone she’s besotted with pursues self-impairment.

“What of our mounts? All three are nimble beings and their reflexes are equal to few.”

Thariss scratches her cheek.

“Uh…what, at the cost of ‘em maybe getting chomped up?”

“It is square with the peril Nadelgosa would enter.”

“It isn’t”, Nadel dissents. “I occupy another inherent ability which they do not – flight. In desperate times, I can speed ahead and avail myself of cunning skyward acrobatics. Your land-rooted companions cannot.”
Rax remains disillusioned with the posited tactic. “But…if this backfires, in contrast with our standoff against the gronn on Draenor, I may not be there to safeguard you.”

Her words, cadence and posture blow the whistle on the attribute of Rax’s feelings, that this runs deeper than uninvolved calculations and triumphant actions. Nadel skids over to her, poses her hand on Rax’s, gazes upwards at the lengthier woman and addresses her with an influx of tenderness. “Raxeen…I must do this. This is my kin, my family…my blood. Perhaps their grasp of this world is foggy, and they’re impelled by delirious horrors, but no one here is better accustomed to their techniques and forms than I.”

“Nadia…”

“Please, Rax…believe in me. Trust me like I trust you to deliver my grandfather from this cerebral prison. Accomplish your duty and I’ll conquer mine.”

With nothing further to levy and her companions hanging in for the final call, Rax throws in the towel. “Fine. I will not intercept you, but…please, exercise copious caution.”

The drake bares a faded smile. “I would never be lax in this context. My family and I hang equally in the balance.”

“Oh, we all on the same page now?”, inquiries Thariss. “Good. I’m glad, topnotch stuff really, but uh…the catch I’m stuck on is, how the hell are we planning to take the fight to him? It’s not as if a bad boy that big will stay put on the ground with us non-flyers. And how are we gonna ensnare him off of blue girl? A whistle?”

The others falter here, not having a coherent answer. “I could exert a booming shout”, offers Heimir. “It should echo for miles from our immediate location.”

“Uh, that…isn’t super helpful, though, is it? Won’t old man blue just melt your face in two secs flat?”

“I’m on the same line”, says Riv, “but I may actually keep a couple of resources for both these predicaments. First, if we can lure him in, the smoke bombs I put together can be resorted to as distractions or to cover up our secondary formula, which is somewhat trickier. For the second, I’ve got a schematic for a shock charge detonation. It should get the results we’re going for.”

Nadel looks marginally disheartened. “Shock…detonation? That sounds awful. I do not favor anything that hurts my family…”

But the sin’dorei swings her head in the negative. “No, no, that isn’t its purpose. If mounted on a living creature, it should emit the energy conducted from within, which I can modulate to be an electric shock. It would put him in a transitional stun…probably…but not cause permanent scarring. I carry the reagents for the device in my bag, which I can rig up it up with, but there is some application for you to assist me with a bit of juice from the arcane, Nadel. Once he’s groundside, Heimir’s massive strength could come in handy to net him. Additionally, I might be able to contribute with a rope of some variety, while Raxeen produces her praying solution.”
“Alrighty, by the sounds of things, we’re working with a plot”, infers Thariss.

But Riv clears her throat. “Well, not completely. Suffice it to say, the shock detonation’s wheelhouse is not its ranged functionality. It’s more intimately related to a mine and thereby it has to have physical connection. A.k.a, hurling it at him won’t fly.”

“Eh, we can compensate for that. I oughta be fit to slap it onto big blue’s back.” She pinches her left ear pensively. “Hmm…getting up in the sky, well, that’s a separate story altogether. Not a smooth stunt to get down pat. Unless…”

She inspects the behemoth of a giant and a couple of seconds pass. “Hey, big beard, you got a respectable throwing arm on that huge ass body of yours?”

He’s notably thrown off by her inquiry. “I…well, I have hurled a spear or two in my lifetime, with…fair accuracy”, he owns up to. “There are those who’re stronger suited for it than me, however.”

Riv, cottoning onto what ludicrousness is in the pipeline, stares at her fiancée with keen misgivings. “…Thariss? You wouldn’t…”

The warrior just sports a cheeky smirk and sticks her hand on her hip. She then poses her subsequent statement at Heimir. “If you’ve got the guts and a surefooted head, I wouldn’t mind if you lobbed me squarely at the dragon. We’d need Riv to mislead him a nudge, but it should go home free. Then we tie him down, Rax does her cleansing whatsit and bing bang boom – one dragon all scrapped of Void goo. Works a treat. Can’t foresee any drawbacks.”

The rest of the team is…less than enthralled. “…this is a terrible idea”, comments Nadel. “Riskier than any alternative thus far.”

Heimir taps at his beard, counting the options. “Mm. I am in two minds of my chances…”

Thariss frowns and spreads her arms. “Okay, downer gang, who’s got a better recipe for success? C’mon, show ‘em off. Cuz if you don’t, then I dunno what else you wanna do.”

Being challenged with the hard facts, the quartet are rendered quite rattled. “I…suppose we have to grant that no one’s holding anything better”, says Riv.

“As demoralizing as that is…”, admits Nadel.

The warrior nods both pointedly and proudly. “Nice of you ladies to finally accept my mastery. Babe, forge that shock thingamajig and let’s bail out some dragons.”
It is a dull, wind-bitten and darkened morning, earlier even than the rooster would crow in the territories of the humans and the first new day shift among the Farstriders of Eversong. The celestial canopy is a dark grey, compounded with mild threads of blue, like an analogy to the ocean below, constantly floating and seesawing, but accommodating no surplus light.

In Zul’Drak, that is as a rule not a visual which the living trend towards, in large part due to the undead nuisance’s tendency to weaponize it against them, since the Scourge need no rest. But incidentally, the undead are not natural nocturnal hunters or creatures either, carrying no potencies or gifts which would empower them to ascertain attacks any better than the living would.

As a result of drawn-out discourses on the nature and merits of various forms of approaches, the triple-factioned division who have transfixed on the incineration of Prince Acranius, extrapolated that this instance is where they’d get the most mileage, while also rationing some hours of rest. However, they don’t lie idle without exception. The Ebon Knights, being the ones besides the Forsaken who hold no body-taxing restrictions, have been scouting the margins of ground zero for hours in advance, rooted like gargoyles in the mist.

The figurehead of the local Knight detachment, Strike-Commander Trienza, has been skimming the fringes of the Scourge’s turf, keeping behind trees to spy at their actions and appraising their defenses.

The August Corona Citadel is ineluctably a foreboding locality, as bloated in proportions as it is fortified. Even if they had trebuchets and cannons – which they do not – she detects that it wouldn’t make any serious ruptures. This whole facility is swathed in intangible necromantic-fueled shields and a hull that would stipulate heavy artillery, debatably outside of any single nation’s arms stocks. Once inside the necropolis’ skin, this predicament will minimize, since the only interior defenses are what troops they’re sporting – like an insect with a robust carapace, but a soft and tender inside that can comfortably be gouged into and ripped to shreds.

But with her reconnaissance effectively overcommitted to a certain degree, Trienza figures that it’s high time for her to retreat to the staging ground and align with the others. Upon her run, she has dabbled in exceedingly little violence, merely slicing apart a sentry or two that was in her way and delayed her work to an extent. She does need to thin their ranks, but not reap their awareness.

The bulk of their united might is currently sequestered in amid a few distinct locations, mainly behind and under ruins, crowds of trees or big chunks of debris. Trienza’s fortune in combing the terrain is not only given her expertise in it as a former ranger, but also as the Scourge’s innate sense of smell for flesh and blood of the living doesn’t achieve the same with the walking dead. To them, she’s simply another lost soul, a carrier of the Lich King’s will.

She breaks in front of a hole in the center of a building with just two walls, checks out the immediate surroundings and then vaults inside, slipping down a frosty dirt slope to the moldy cellar. Here, she encounters a few high-profile figures from their setup – Akilvah, Cor’zel, Melia, Ashindra and lastly Lah’kur and Sydela. Cherile and Wilthorn are both divided between the remaining groups outside of this ruin. These ones – excluding Melia – are all suiting up for the infiltration assignment that’s further down the road for them, to be the injecting spearhead.

As Trienza’s ensorcelled sight sweeps over the group, she can make out an extensive grid of emotions, of trepidation, focus, irritation, and even a hint of enthusiasm. Akilvah is the one leader who’s invigorated. Not inordinately delighted by any means, for she isn’t one who craves and relishes combat, but she’s ostensibly glad to be smacking some skulls and
fulfilling their goals. Going toe-to-toe with the Scourge is a circumstance she’s hyped for.

There’s a world apart in amid her and Melia, who’s practically pulsating with concern, foremost aimed at her dear paladin second, who’s imminently rushing into perhaps the most lethal situation she’s ever frequented, aside from the Scourge invasion years ago. Ash herself is relatively zen regarding the whole affair. Trienza gathers that the two are debating something inaudibly to the rest, but Ash beams of no clues that would imply that she regrets or falters in her endeavor. The Commander can respect that.

Cor’zel, technically the instigator and mastermind of this operation if one wishes to dig into the nitty-gritty, is standing by himself, at present eyeballing the contents of a scroll. Though she assented to this arrangement, Trienza is leery of him. He’s not the worst of totalitarian taskmasters she’s ever bumped into – ones in the Scourge takes home that award – but there is something… unsettling with him. Like he knows more than he gives off. He has also clung to a measure of solitude, with his own tent, eating alone and going off to the sidelines whenever their hosts require a stop for rest or revamping their trek.

Doubtlessly, this could be a straight up misunderstanding in the core of the two commanders and Trienza doesn’t want to unduly judge anyone who does not emphatically cherish the company of others. But simultaneously, she’s supposed to act in the interest of the Ebon Knights and her professional analysis of him is that she would not lay any of her people’s lives – or unlives – in his grasp.

With her sword strapped to her back, Trienza rolls up on them with an unyielding poise. “Is everyone equipped for what is to come in just a few minutes?”, her abnormally oscillating voice ejects.

Akilvah tosses her staff nonchalantly in her hand. “Ready whenever and wherever. That flying megahouse is larger than I wagered, but that just means it’ll fall harder. And with a bigger boom”, she says, adding a smirk to the last.

Melia takes a deep breath and glances at Ash, converging with the emerald eyes which does not share in her unease. “Well, as one active on the battlefield below, I’m not thrilled, but yeah, I’ll make do.”

“I’m on board with Akilvah’s observation”, states Ash. “The structure is definitely humongous. I recall bearing witness to such edifices in the past, but none that rose like this. With that in mind, it’ll be a real treat to bring one low, to watch their power crumble, like the Scourge has shattered so many people and civilizations in their short time on this world.”

Trienza doesn’t touch upon it, but there’s a trace of bitterness to Ash’s words too. And glee. Ash has the taste of a vengeance dish for Quel’Thalas, and perhaps she’s permitted to. Aren’t they all? But then Cor’zel finally includes himself in the discussion. “We are draining valuable time in this pit. Now is not the moment to fret or dawdle. The Prince is sitting in his Citadel and he’s staging some sort of enterprise which will cause monumental calamity on this realm, should we be too languid in our engagement.”

Trienza folds her arms, unfazed by his accusations and verbal whipping. “Is there’s something you’ve got insight on with the Prince’s current prospects that we do not? Makes me wonder why you’re so anxious.”

The Chronicler glares at her with a discernible edge, though it’s not clear if this is defensive in nature or merely him incensed by the fact that she contravenes his authority. He then snorts bristlingly and appears to swing on whether he’s amenable to enumerate this information or if he’s going to hold it all in and back from them.
“I’m simply…troubled. And puzzled.”

“By what?”

“By the Prince’s choice to linger in orbit. It’s…peculiar. Has he already executed his business or are there more shadows around this?”

The others all glance at one another, exchanging glimpses of alarm and reflection.

“Well then”, utters Melia, “could there be something we haven’t cracked yet?”

Cor’zel shrugs briefly.

“Regrettably, I cannot substantiate this to a distinguishable degree, not at this point. The ambiguity is too dense.”

Once more, Trienza privately wonders if he can’t explain it, or he won’t. He’s not all-knowing, blatantly, but is he the type to keep others in the dark, with the assumption that he knows best?

“I believe it would be sound to expedite the process of our mission”, the Chronicler presses on, “in the event that this Scourge pawn indeed means to overreach in his machinations.”

They catch a summary laughter from Akilvah, with a touch of mockery.

“I find it funny that you barrel claims like that at anyone, old man. You’re not really the humble sort.”

Cor’zel stares daggers at her.

“Not one more word of that ilk out of your mouth, Battleclaw, or I shall declaw you.”

Trienta disregards them and instead ambles along to Lah’kur and Sydela. The two have been noticeably muted, but they also aren’t generally boisterous. Well, Sydela at minimum. The Commander nods at them upon approach and they bow their heads in kind, with Sydela’s being a fair amount deeper.

“Have you settled yourselves for the attack?”, she asks in a more lenient tone.

“Sure have, boss”, the Amani replies. “My axes are practically licking their chops and Syd’jal here has also shown a crack of emotion or two.”

Sydela flicks her hand at Lah’kur’s shoulder, with an indication of humor, which makes the troll laugh.

“In all honesty”, says the night elf evenly, “yes, we’re prepared as always, Commander. Come hell or high water, we’ll see this through and shall be behind you to whatever end.”

“Hopefully no end at all”, adds Lah’kur. “Hey boss, ya run into any hiccups out there? You were on the last scouting run, yeah?”

“I was”, Trienza verifies, “and no, I didn’t spot anything that sticks out to me as…impervious.”

But the kaldorei tilts her head inquisitively.

“Nothing whatsoever or nothing extraordinary? When you embarked earlier, you did remark on that you carried some suspicions you wished to doublecheck.”

Trienta floats a long, hard look at her aide. Has she been in touch with them for such a profuse time that they nail down her every suspicion?

She then furrows her brow tentatively and confides in them, as she happens to do on a regular basis.

“Yes, and I do yet hold these assumptions. On my lap alongside the margins of our base, four… constructions caught my eye – pillars mounted in the corners of the center teleportation device, extending above it. What perplexed me was that I’ve never noticed or even seen this type of
creation stationed by a platform of this composition. It’s an embellishment that isn’t necessary, at least not for the functionality of the transporter.”

“So, what the hell’s it doing there?”, asks Lah’kur.

“Precisely. I predict that the Scourge’s present exterior is a cover. Like Cor’zel, I refuse to buy into that they’d bring such scarce forces to an imperative undertaking of this size. That is, apart from the risk that the parameters of the artifact they’ve unearthed is too volatile to hurl resources at, but I feel that’s a stretch. The Chronicler could be aware of additional details, though.”

“You figure the old-fart scholar would cloak dirt like that, boss?”

“I’m not of the viewpoint that anything is impossible, but I estimate that he has something more forthright in mind. I wouldn’t put it past the Scourge to bear some reinforcements, holed up in pockets of the field we’ve not extracted properly. The pillars could be transmitters for those troops. No evidence exists for this premise, above instinct, but this is an instinct that opens tremors in the back of my mind.”

Lah’kur and Sydela, with grave expressions, incline their heads.

“Very well”, utters the night elf. “If that’s your analysis, we’ll depend on it, Commander.” They typically do.

Then, Akilvah encroaches on their exchange.

“You three done gossiping? We’re set to pull out.”

“So we are”, Trienza affirms. “It’s now or never and we’ll get no finer gap.”

In tandem, Lah’kur side-eyes the Battleclaw.

“Should you actually be there with us? This ain’t a mission ya can bash your head into. Requires finesse and an ounce of pure skill. Ever heard of those terms?”

Akilvah slits her blue eyes fleetingly and then shuffles towards Lah’kur, somewhat looming thanks to her height, but this time, the Knight doesn’t balk at her superior elevation. The Zandalari’s smile crooks slightly.

“I was observing you and our squad down below when we got tanglin’ with the Scourge in that Drakkari dump.” She bares her teeth for the undead troll. “You know what’s still lost on me? If there was any recognizable difference at all between you and our enemies. To me, it was pretty much alike – dead wandering flesh.”

Lah’kur grimaces and wrinkles her nose as well, her fists clenching, but she doesn’t bite back as searingly.

“Then ya oughta question if you’re fit for the battlefield with an eyesight that lousy.”

Trientza intercedes more deftly in this occasion, and drills herself into the middle.

“Pack it up, you two. If you seek gore and derision, save it for the Scourge. You won’t cripple our efforts that way.”

An unintelligible murmur slips out of Lah’kur and Akilvah grunts, but they both retreat to their independent locations. In a sense, it’s amusing for a few of the attending squads to watch a proportionally tiny woman shove off two gigantic trolls with ease. Then again, she has earned the respect in war.

Akilvah folds her arms and stares at the elf.

“Hey, Commander, I’d like another rundown on this ‘key’ deal. What’re we meant to do with ‘em to get the portal open?”
Trienza arches one of her eyebrows doubtfully.  
“Did you not listen the first time?”

“I did, but this Scourge drivel gets on my nerves. Worse than the scholars’ crap back home.”

The sin’dorei shakes her head impassively.
“Then perk your ears up this time, as it’s rather simple.” Trienza goes to fetch her own key, the cube they withdrew from the nerubian.
“There are three of these. They are not of import to activate the teleporter from above, as the Citadel can execute this on its own, but the keys are conceived of for the ground troops. When it’s been triggered, the transportation stream cannot be obstructed without tear and strain to the necropolis’ underside, since it effectively has a magical portal opened in its bottom. After dispatching preliminary guards, there will be a tight gap to bolt ahead and hit the ground-linked transporter platform, to surpass its plausible effort to elude us. This is the gist behind the diversions, for the infiltration detachment must be allowed to single-mindedly strike the transponder with the keys, otherwise we’ll either have to restart elsewhere or embrace oblivion.”

Akilvah nods briskly and points at her.  
“You got one, I have the other, as we’re likely the ideal runners. Who’s number three?”

“That would be Braktog”, contributes Ash and nods her head at the orc, who bumps his own chest.  
“He’s not as hasty as you, but sufficient and tough to break.”

Braktog smirks and drives his elbow into her.  
“Tsk. Kinda selling me short, aren’t you? My body is like the walls of Orgrimmar – nothing’s gonna knock me over”, he claims and flexes slightly, but with tacit sarcasm.

The Sergeant smiles and rolls her eyes.
“We shouldn’t bring up your previous missteps then?”

His mien withdraws a slice and he scratches his neck ditheringly.
“Hey…what is this, some kinda list of my worst moments? I’ve done you well otherwise.”

“I do recall, yes.”

Akilvah glances at the elf.
“Why don’t you carry it?”

“Well, I’m of the mindset that I’ll do more good facilitating the distraction tactic, until the beam is erected. And I’m not fleet of foot, for that matter.”

The Strike-Commander inclines her head in acceptance.
“I foresee nothing ill with this pattern, on the condition that everyone abides by their obligations. This assault will suffer if anyone dallies in their enactment. But we’ve killed enough time here. We’re losing vital minutes of darkness by chattering. Let’s get this under way.”

And so, they pack up their gear, grab their weapons, breathe in and rise from their grave-like refuge. It is from the rubble of the ruin that they’ll launch their section anyhow, but cues must be allocated to the two ancillary units. The beacon is spelled out for them as well, for two druids shift into their flight forms and take off, crowing and squawking.

With the druids’ ascent, the faction trio all mentally kick into gear, brandishing their weapons and
picking their targets from the ditches and tree trunks. All hands should be set on splitting the rival undead apart and if they aren’t willing, the whole pack might fall together. Zandalari, Ebon Knights and the living plus undead of the Crusade right here and now, must view no differences among them. Consensus, come what may.

The air in the vicinity soon intensifies with practically palpable electrifying threads, as Trienza sidles out from the ruins, pulls out Viri’valheen with one hand and her horn with the other. She puts the latter to her mouth, drags in what air she can consume and then fills it all into the horn. Through darkness and frosty mist, it echoes, like a deep wail. The frozen gazes of the Scourge are impulsively twisted towards her and she affixes the horn to her belt and inclines into a dash squarely at the first wave of them, to act as bait.

With the benefit of their placements, one slice of the united factions led by Cherile thrusts into the Scourge’s outer line from the back, amplified by the undead being hit off-guard. The moment the Scourge tunes their defensive rows to manage this new threat, they’re clobbered into a second round, when Wilthorn’s third harasses them from the eastern woods. A full-on rumble ignites under the belly of the necropolis above, with sparks of Light flashes, surges of arcane streams and necromantic storms that strive to deflect them.

The Citadel has not responded to the ruckus and it’s unclear if it will in time, which is precisely why Trienza, Braktog and Akilvah are swift on their feet. The goal they hunt is an intricate and macabre podium in the center, overtly built not merely from stone and saronite, but the bones and carcasses of those who were bulldozed beneath the Scourge’s momentum.

Trienza hacks a path towards this platform, to a pedestal cropping out from the side of a ramp which leads to the highest point, where she’ll have to install her key. Coinciding with her act to rend two ghouls with her runesword, she feasts her eyes on the pillars, which are embedded with a few meters’ interval to the platform itself, like a square penning in the circle. Coming up adjacent to it, she finds herself no wiser in terms of its purpose. The substance it is made from is related to the platform, but down the sides, there are antiquated and malignant runes, ones she can’t translate. Evokes thoughts of her runeblade, but this alludes to a more extreme power. In spite of getting her worked up, she can’t be led astray by it. Sunwell willing, they’ll make the necropolis come crashing down in a hurtling blaze to the cold embrace of the snow before this ever grows into a mess.

Unsurprisingly, Trienza is the one representative to drop at her key console first. She fishes the item out from a bag tied to her belt and pops it onto the impeccably shaped socket. A string of lights animates upon receiving the cube, like the response of a machine acquiring an energy source. The blue-white glimmer pulses all the way up to the platform and one side is standing by for the other two.

But while Akilvah and Braktog are both impeded by Scourge defenders doing their best to fight the trespassing on their master’s doorstep, a thunder discharges from the necropolis. Lah’kur and Sydela, who are trading blows with nerubians and skeletal warriors, level their eyes upward at the sky-born castle and then at Trienza. “Commander!”, howls Sydela.

Trienza’s frown gradually hardens and she squeezes the hilt of her blade. What’s the Prince up to now? Did they fail in going at it from this angle or is this something entirely unseen? A green-blue glow soon manifests from a small protrusion on a corner of the Citadel’s base which rapidly draws power from an interior reservoir. Trienza’s eyes fly open in shock. “Get down!”, she roars over the battlefield.
But her judgment is misguided. In lieu of an overcharge or a massive blast, all it produces is a beam that’s delivered straight into one of the pillars, engaging its runes and depositing a faint shockwave into the earth. This vent of energy is then cast into the second pillar, then the third and the fourth, until all four are switched on and throb into the ground to make their footing unsteady. While some fear an impending earthquake, they’re mistaken once more, for it ceases as soon as a few seconds have elapsed and though the runes still sear, they apparently weren’t weapons.

With the ripples stabilizing, multiple people sweep the landscape to secure that their fellows are alive and well, which confers them with a sense of relief; but only temporarily. Though the ground wasn’t hallowed open by quakes, pockets in the soil still emerges, as a skeletal hand springs up, digging a route to the surface. Then another. And another, until the field is saturated with skeletal backup. Trienza was spot on, although she could not anticipate the scope of the support, for it isn’t simply a hundred regular skeletons – predominantly, they bear witness to an erupting legion of fallen Drakkari trolls, but then dire trolls enroll with them, animals and hulking beasts. Suddenly, the field wholesale swells with fresh undead that crawl and lust for the living’s warm veins to devour and whilst the numbers hadn’t been balanced previously, now it’s verging on 10-to-1, in favor of the Scourge.

From his slot on the battlefield, tagging behind Akilvah, Cor’zel peers at it with sheer stupefaction. An epiphany smacks him in the head, for he fathoms why the Prince would bide here. “How could I have been so blind? This destination is not simply any old aggregation of ruins - it’s a mass graveyard!”

Akilvah catches it and grits her teeth. “What?! Dammit, old man! You’re supposed to be the fucking expert on this!”

As the territory propagates with increasing remnants of life left, right and center, Trienza yells at Akilvah and Braktog. “Pick up the pace, you two, asap! We’ll be swimming in these soon!”

Akilvah was, on Cor’zel’s orders, escorting him, but now transforms into her heavy reptile body and rushes ahead, propelling the undead away from her with head bashes and mauling of her claws. The Chronicler shouts for her, but she lets his words go unacknowledged, highlighting the cube socket. A duo of abominations gets in her way and whip their chains around, but at the final second, she alternates into the lither reptile shape, to slide in between their legs and then continues racing. Akilvah ultimately lands in proximity of the cube plug-in slot and she lunges into her troll body to dunk the key inside, lighting up the second out of three founts.

The one left is Braktog, and Trienza funnels her vision at the orc, who’s having a hard time of it attempting to whirl his axe to rebuff opponents, but they’re relentless. Ash is meant to serve as his aegis, but she’s lagging behind, eyes rotating to her superior, who’s getting swarmed by the arising threat. “Melia!”, she calls and dithers whether to run and lighten her load or not; ironic, what with the prior dismissal of her own tempting of fate.

Melia is side by side with Lieutenant Foghorn, establishing a barrier that knocks off a couple of necromantic spells, and retaliates with a scalding holy flame and then instills the tauren with a damage-mitigating boon. The priestess shifts and crosses visual paths with Ash. Though there is an inert yearning to wave her over, Melia resists this intuition.
“Get going!”, she exclaims instead. “We don’t have time to dawdle! Bust that necropolis up, or none of us will exit this place intact!”

Ash doesn’t like it, but she dips her head in recognition. Clasping Brightwall, she digs her heels in and lends the shield to Braktog’s benefit. The orc is eased as two of his assailants shriek in terror and agony when they burn in the Light’s radiance. “Stick behind me until you see a gap”, she tells him, “then make a beeline for it.” Braktog raises his axe up to his chest in reflex and nods. “Team, form up on me!”

It’s not a trivial stroll that they are required to make, as the Scourge has by the look of things got a handle on what they’re now scrambling for and endeavor to stem it at all costs. But Ash cooperates with Marlyn to hammer into the disruptive Scourge and even encumber themselves in foes, as to create a recess for Braktog to skip through. When they at long last score one, Ash grimaces and bellows at the orc.

“Go now!”

It’s the moment of truth. Braktog jumps right in, pummeling a troll skeleton in his lane and then steers clear of two more. Three undead give chase, but he discards their threat to hightail it to the slot at reckless speed; nothing else matters. None of them nab him, for joint barrages from Gniklas and Vihara stop them in their tracks. Braktog fidgets with the cube and then with no finesse and all haste he smashes the key into its seat. Straight away, he has to curve about and parry a blow from a recent arriving undead customer.

A couple of absolutely frantic seconds tick by as the squads wait and dearly hope that nothing has gone awry, that the keys they’ve accumulated served their value. They get their feedback on this as the platform flickers to life and a short-lived pillar of brightness docks with the underside of the Citadel, before fading into imperceptibility, leaving only a shimmering middle circle on the transporter, showcasing its active state.

Every single being in the neighborhood comprehends the essence of it and they now have to act in a split second. Tarrying is deadly serious to either camp.

Ash tilts Brightwall to the side, but holds onto it and Vem’tavir as she rallies her squad. “Alright people, stay on my tail! The real challenge begins now!”

“Yes, Sergeant!”, they shout, while they as a unit bolt at the platform, picking up Braktog on the move.

Akilvah grins exhilaratedly at their progress and pivots her hand in the air for the Zandalari coming with her, to round up. “Old man, don’t slack now! We’re heading into the fray!”

Cor’zel grunts and scowls at her, but he clutches his bag, doing his level best to retain minimal distance from her.

Trienza, first to activate her key, is last to enter, ensuring that everyone else finds purchase. Lah’kur and Sydela finish their respective opponents and then without even being dictated, gather by their leader. Trienza glances sideways and then spots the man she’s looking for a hundred meters away. “Wilthorn!”, she blares, with the edge and volume of a drilling instructor who’s used it this way for centuries, that would make anyone snap to.

Her second-in-command chops off the leg of a dire troll skeleton and then heaves his sword into its
gut, crumbling its ribs. “Yes, Commander?”

“You’re in charge”, she decrees, squares her shoulders and bounds for the teleportation plateau, her aides a single step behind her. To the beast they charge.
Catastrophe and tribulations, that is centrally what Nadelgosa’s pilgrimage to the homeland of her people has been made up of – from blowbacks to unlawful imprisonment and personal familial tragedy. If there’s anything that the current trends have given her a crash course in, it’s that the blues may well be due another change. Perhaps – if they all live this down – the Azurewing ought to disjoint themselves from the blue dragonflight altogether.

Being as comparatively young as she is, she’s never been afforded the privilege to live in the timeline of their crowning days, when dragons were plentiful and not weighted down by the deaths of the Sundering. She has oriented herself in a confined reality, where the blues venture and nest in undersized packs and eschew the adjacency of ‘mortals’ – an absurd term when most dragons are no less mortal, albeit with extreme lifespans - as they cannot be bestowed with any faith.

It’s not like Nadel aches for the disregarded past – or at least not anymore – but the contextualization and scrutinization of it made her appreciate how her mind was blurred. Befriending and…becoming enamored with mortals that she resented unequally before, it has imprinted her with the knowledge that her future is not to progress in the ranks of her flight. The prosperity of family and the defense and devotion for her friends is her raison d’etre, more worthwhile than Coldarra and the petty politics of draconic superiority. That’s the tenor of why the course of the Nexus War is the least of her troubles and why she will play with fire to break out her kith and kin from whatever crucible that plagues them.

Lying on her own in the snow of the Storm Peaks, prowling and snaking out of sight, it is complicated for her to relativize the dragons resting on their slopes here as conceivable enemies. In their composed tranquility, it evokes pictures of home for Nadel, of the Azurewing Repose so distant in this chilled northern land, where the pitfalls are rare, if not lacking. A starvation in her heart tries to coax her to advance on and join them in their happy hibernation, but this is a scam of her brain, for she’s observant of the fact that they are not themselves. Or that is what their perpetrations speak of.

Her justification for being lodged like this on the ground and not pouncing on them just yet like the plot determined by Nadel and her mortal allies, is her curiosity. There are a few question marks that necessitates answers. The spacetime fissure that they defined on the route here had her wary and intrigued. Was Rivaryn’s theory rock solid or a stab in the dark that leads down the drain?

From her stakeout corner, she cannot regard anything that she’d recognize as strictly shady or worthy of zeroing in on. Even an express arcane-grading spell, which she casts, can pin down no corroborating results. There are rituals with broader reach and efficacy, but they also bring with them clauses of ostentatious spellwork, which would make them catch her in the act. All she can do is be credulous of her eyes. Like preceding deliberations elucidated, she also fails to get a hunch of the reputed odor of the Void. If it has polluted her grandfather and relatives, she can’t substantiate any of it.

After minutes of zero development, feeling helpless and inept, Nadel admits to herself that she’s trounced. She won’t do anything conducive to their goal if she just sits here.

She can handily concede that she’s damn fidgety here, for there is a cornucopia of ways where this can spin out of control, and she’ll wind up being the death of her comrades. It’s all well and good to espouse that she can read her fellows like clockwork ahead of the event itself, but when it’s in action, make or break, she’s not the manifestation of mettle that she passes herself off as. But there’s no space for second-guessing or overhauls, not when the dragons can stir and sack their
schedule in a matter of seconds. If she’s raring to get her clan back, then she’s gotta defy fate and self-doubt.

She attunes herself to her proper drake body and straightens up, inspects the welfare of her wings and then beats them to ascend into the airspace of the Peaks. Whilst she hovers to the opposite dragons, she consistently watches them to guarantee that they don’t spontaneously arise and get the jump back on her. She smells that someone is up to something here.

As she makes for a mound roughly a kilometer away or so, none of them have even recoiled, emboldening her to land without discretion this time, as she is expected to be a lure regardless. She lets loose a prompting roar, to invite their attention and then sings out in draconic.

“Grandfather!”

The five awakens uniformly and rear their heads from their beds. She heeds morning grousing and the clapping of jaws, attributed to an innate distrustful, potentially even panicked response to something unidentified sliding in on them out of nowhere.

Senegos, the elder dragon and the most sagely of them all, cracks open his big sky blue eyes and washes them across the snow. They’re likely a dash blurry, in light of his ancient body.

Moments later, he gets a bead on the relatively minute physique of the air-adept person and his vision squints, in order to magnify his ken of her and designate her. Nadel’s hopes augment as Senegos’ head retracts, as if knocked over by a twist.

“N…Nadelgosa? Is that…you?”

Nadel’s tail arches and her wings flutter jubilantly.

“Grandfather! Yes, yes it’s me!” Her mood soars and she experiences a near burst of emotions.

But everything isn’t that clear-cut, for Senegos’ eyes temporarily take on a glassy signature. He then rattles his head to get rid of it.

“I…but how is that…” Nadel’s heart shrinks marginally, for Senegos then stares at her with a penetrative touch, like he’s inspecting her an extra time.

His sight fleets left and right for multiple ticks, and Nadel gets the sense that he’s befuddled, like he can’t process if what he’s observing is authentic or a phantasm.

“Grandfather?”, she reiterates, hoping it’ll render some resolution to this irregular engagement.

However, the heftier she jostles, the more constraint tightens around his mind. He carries on rubbernecking her for a handful of seconds, his lower jaw gradually widening to unshut, like his mental state is vacant and trapped in a storm of diffusing ideas.

And then, in a turn of events that she couldn’t have ever visualized in her grossest and most untenable nightmares, her grandfather’s maw stiffens and contorts into a sneer.

From his mouth leaves a snarl, nigh on a growl. Nadelgosa is at such a stage of shock that she cringes and steps backwards.

“You…you trickster!”

“…what?”, she asks in a more fragile voice than she had intended.

“Your true colors are shown! You are not my sweet granddaughter! The gall, to take on her guise like this!”

As his gargantuan body gets raised at a delayed pace, a blanket of snow trickles down his scales, and his hoary wings stretches in a similar vein as two overlong boat sails. A roar scatters from his maw and then he beats his wings so rigidly that the snow is cast in all directions, as if it was
impacted by a boulder crashing into it. Nadel is horrified, paralyzed at first sight, for she doesn’t quite understand how to react. Her grandfather is one of the sweetest dragons she knows, never having faced her with hostility, not even whilst reprimanding her. This has caused her to be rightfully dismayed and aghast. Had she called this into question earlier, all of those disinclinations are not washed away with what she’s illustrated.

With a puny and startled yelp, she projects herself into the air and then swivels 180 degrees, to peel out apace. Had this not been their arrangement, she would’ve done so all the same. The five draconic figures are unanimous and give chase, with the mighty Senegos himself heading the pursuit and the rest fanning out to furnish them with latitude. There’s no demand to gather their thoughts or anything. This is their quarry and they will consume her.

Nadel zips in a panicked velocity over the trail she walked by to reach them and extends her wings to their fullest extent, praying that it’ll provision her with the air pressure that will keep her ahead. She glides above the snow-steeped fields and initially, getting in the clear is the solitary impulse on her mind, for her grandfather’s rage was such a staggering eye-opener that her brain functions on naught but visceral reactivity.

But during her getaway, in the niche of her gaze, without warning, she discovers the crouching presences of Rivaryn and her raptor Razz. That’s right, she’s not here unaccompanied. She’s gotta stick to the parameters of their maneuvering, or she and her allies are going to land in the worst imaginable conclusion. The irony of all tragic possibilities is to get picked off by her own family after lapsing in her execution.

With her wit kicking back into gear, she scans her environment and looks for a gainful trajectory, where she can make the most of the terrain, while the team waylays her grandfather, ideally barring injuries. Pointing her head upwards, she detects a rift a few hundred meters away, amidst a cavalcade of more trimmed pylons and peaks. This will nullify her relatives’ line of fire. She discharges an alarm-based cry, to alert her squad to the passage of the chase and then propels herself vertically and rockets at the pinnacles, granting her fight-or-flight intuition free rein. It’s all up to the others now.

It’s midday when the design to snare a dragon is to commence. Goes without saying that the weather is rotten, which is on form for the natural system of this continent.

Raxeen, Thariss and Heimir had all diverged from Rivaryn and Razz, to locate a distinct hidey-hole for which they could sit and fix themselves up for the showdown. The foothold they’ve elected for the clash is south of the blue detachment’s nesting ground. The road there is guided in amid two peaks that are mounted on a plateau, which itself is presumably hundreds of meters above sea level. The mortals made their temporary campsite at the foot of the eastern rock formation, which is where three of them are standing by with their mounts. It’s the most convenient to stay concealed from the dragons.

Meanwhile, Rivaryn has gone to the west, so that she’s now right next to the opening of the path to the north, which is still blocked by a few snowy slopes, where they were spying on the dragons previously, though she’s embedded behind it. Riv’s hive amounts to a compact pit that she and Razz excavated, and have burrowed themselves inside of. They are far from inconspicuous, but it’ll be half decent for this ambush. They’ve nudged a portion of the snow back on themselves, deliberately so that they’re boasting a measure of
camouflage and not merely freezing their asses off.

Razz, who customarily loathes to wander in this climate anyway, is snuggling into Riv with the bare minimum of freedom for the elf. He craves any brand of heat and his companion is the sole conduit. Riv does conciliate him by caressing his scales on the neck, nose and back regions, to which he pours forth a charming purring hum, or a sound to that effect.

“You shouldn’t get too carefree, darling”, she tells him. “We’re not gonna lie here forever, okay?” Razz grunts contently and smooshes his nose into her shoulder. She giggles faintly. “You silly dingus.”

Riv does hold sufficient range to collect her gun and clasp it in her fingers though, ones that are encased in gloves. She favors a further personal grip with her rifles, to enable her skin to touch and taste the metal, but up here in the north of hellish ice, her fingers are bound to get plastered to it, so gloves it is.

Riv and Razz alike jolt out of their comfort zone when they’re hailed by the desperate outcries of Nadel and the blue drake herself blazes out like a blue arrow overhead.

The elf marginally narrows her eyes and registers Nadel’s emotions as fear, grounded on the rapid waving of her wings, the heedless dangling of her jaw as she breathes unsteadily and the whipping of her tail, in a trepidatious vein. That’s what she would judge it in an animal, at any rate. What could this entail? Did the plan fall through? Or could Nadel herself have made a hash of it? Riv holds her breath that she didn’t inadvertently trigger some dire Void hex…

But then, equated to a wake-up call, Nadel loops horizontally and exhausts a countering screech, of warning. Did she regain her senses at the last second? Either way, she scurries and ascends out of Riv’s scope. Must be showtime then.

And that is the point where Riv and Razz are invited to behold the majesty and bulk of Senegos up close, as he sails above them. Though he and the five dragons are a couple of hundred meters distance from her and Razz, the sensation of the weight from the wings of the dragon is adequate to rustle the white sheet and coerce Riv to shield her eyes.

She can’t recall ever being situated at this manner of proximity to a grand dragon like this. If Heimir provided her with the sentiment of identifying with a rodent, now she’s well and truly no more than a fragile insect, a gnat. What she’s gone at even less is to actively confront a dragon in a brawl. Not that she personally has to face off with Senegos, nor is the objective to hurt him, but it nevertheless does instill her with an ounce of dread. Internally, she finds herself praying, to the Sunwell and to her ancestors. If anyone is spectating on her in an astral plane, then they better bless her shots.

Realizing she can’t stay static, Riv aligns her rifle and secures a magazine of nonlethal pellets into its slot, ones she sustains purely for practice ends. In conjunction with her heightened senses, Razz has mirrored her and his eyes have thinned while he stares at the jumbo beast of the sky, and though his intuition would yell at him to flee without a second thought, he tarries by Riv until such time that she defines an exit. He has confidence in his companion.

Against her better judgment, Riv takes aim and only a second thereafter, loosens not one but three shots that all clobber into the dragon. She targeted his neck and head, as he’s prone not to overlook such an affront.

And like she estimated, Senegos does indeed not resist the bait. Though the four other blues speed after Nadelgosa, up to the labyrinth of the upper peaks, their elder cuts his flight. Gradually, the enormous creature curves towards her and a wrathful draconic visage is navigated straight at the miniscule pocket that Razz and Riv are sitting in.
Riv hasn’t been through a ton of occasions where she’s experienced real primal terror, one where it crawls up and down every limb and one’s body cannot abort the quivering that overtakes it. The Scourge invasion was inarguably one. But as Senegos’ stewing gaze and growl hits her right on, it swells and engulfs her, hard. If they did not harbor a gambit to outfox him, she would get the hell out of dodge.

Riv is on her feet sharpish, slotting her rifle on her back. She retrieves the smoke bomb from her belt and lobs it in the center of the lane from the dragon to them, so that their decampment is obscured. She then hurriedly taps Razz’s flank with her second.

“No, boy. Up. Let’s go, let’s go!”

Razz doesn’t put it off and permits Riv to hop on him and then sprints like crazy over the snow, his commitment to preserve his own life being level with his urge to wrap up the mission. Once he’s nominated his route, they overhear Senegos thundering on their trail.

The smoke bomb appears to work like a charm, for as the blue dragon unfastens his maw to exhale a billow of arcane fire, he applies it to the smoke’s core and thereby undershoots them; although the power of the energy strikes the earth and collapses a crater where they were sheltering.

But Senegos is not a straggler – in fact, his tempo is so swift that they soon perceive and feel his body floating over them, arguably to affirm his execution, which he did not. Razz staggers, as a consequence of the potency behind the dragon’s immensity and wind coating him that hits the raptor, but Razz labors to jump back up while Senegos has no choice but to go in a roundabout.

In the meantime, Riv and Razz do not sit tight where they fell, but drag themselves right at the lowest elevation of the adjacent peak, where the third stage is to fire up.

Since Senegos stalks them after his circling is done, it puts him on an ideal itinerary for the trap they’ve armed for him. To secure this fact, Riv stretches her arms up and waves at them.

That is the announcement Heimir was awaiting. A small hill of snow that the trio piled up to blend in gets knocked over by the giant, unveiling him and the night elf standing on his palm. The giant tilts his head at her with an inquiring stare.

“Do you believe yourself ready, small one? After I’ve gotten my arm spinning, your one chance of survival is to land on that dragon.”

Thariss is kneeling, her hands planted on his palm like an athlete loaded for a race, her eyes painting a target on the rumbling and steaming Senegos, while her ears perks with focus. The bomb is affixed with rope to her back.

“Don’t worry ‘bout me, big man. Just lemme at ‘im.”

“As you wish. Then hang in there!”

He bends his body backwards to a faint degree, lines up his shot and then locks his fingers around Thariss, so that he can swing his arm in four vast cycles.

Thariss has skipped off of, collided with and barged into a range of situations, people and objects in her lifetime – which to the majority of mortals is an expansive one. But she’s never in that entire span of time filled the part of what boils down to a hand-thrown ball, which are mainly employed in various sports and entertainment activities. Leaping down from the back of a blue drake in Dragonblight was one thing, but the momentum and rate with which she’s pitched at in this scenario is almost unmanageable.

It goes without saying that she arrives at her prize, though it is not a landfall that is rife with grace. Configuring her bearing while spiraling in midair ain’t a walk in the park. In practice, Thariss is splattered onto the upper back scales of Senegos with her butt armor first, swirls a minimum of two full rotations, then barrels her side into him roughly ten meters following the initial bounce. Then,
at last, she’s in reach of an outcropping and naturally spreads out her arms to clutch it. She pulls it off and distinguishes that she’s grasping at one of the spinal spikes and plates, her legs flapping loosely behind her.

For starters, Thariss struggles to alter her position in any meaningful way. The strain of the heavy wind on her and the breakneck pace they’re travelling at is too steep to bear. The only action she can take is clinging to that protrusion.

But then, in the wake of an aerial salvo from Senegos’ breath on her allies – which they thankfully foil – his speed dies down a tad and she gains a bit of relief to undertake her ascent. Well, vertically.

The premise for her personal venture is to slap the bomb somewhere halfway down his spine, next to the wings. Whatever dent it puts on him at that point, if nothing else he could lose control of his wing and that’s as much as she can ask.

She climbs up his back, one thorn or layer at a time, marginally resembling how she’d go up a ladder, but with a considerably greater setback, since those aren’t by and large also pelting away at full blast.

But Thariss can’t catch a break, for eventually, Senegos catches onto that a teeny creature is doing her utmost to intrude upon his magnificent physique.

“Uh-oh”, she utters as granddad dragon spots her. He growls irately at her presence. “So…I take it that’s not your way of saying you like freeloaders?” In essence, she gets it to a T.

To her distress and detestation, Senegos launches into a body-wide rocking and swaying, in a fierce procedure to deprive himself of the brassy stowaway, who reckons she can get up to anything at her convenience.

Breaking in Ilca when she was a cub would drive Thariss insane with how testy and uncontrollable that saber was, and she’s been flung aside many a time during the process of that trial. It is therefore that she succeeds in mustering the strength and raw inexorability to preserve her grip on his back.

“You…you take me for any sorry ass wimp, do you?”, she asks with a laboring tone, teeth nearly gritted. “Got…news for ya, big blue…I ain’t going anywhere!”

Senegos rolls a whole turn and bats his wings in the reverse, but no amount of means that he busts out is up to par in the interests of expunging Thariss. He soon gives the kaldorei the idea that he might take drastic measures, like for instance lunging into a rock wall to mangle her, in line with how one may well peel off an incessant bug.

But quite auspiciously, Thariss hits her objective and sloppily unstraps the bomb and nails it into his scales. As it’s in its relevant position, she pushes the switch.

“That’s…enough outta you!”

The feedback, fortuitously, is bordering on instantaneous. As it has anchored itself automatically to its subject, the bomb gives off three consecutive beeps and then detonates. Although, anticlimactically, it doesn’t actually let off any shape of explosion – in one’s stead, it ejects two seconds’ worth of voltage that’s no more than a flash.

But that does stand as a sizable chunk to tear into Senegos. The dragon arches his neck and spine in torment, conjuring a dreadful roar that captures the spirit of his ailing.

And then, he drops. Thariss had forecasted that it would bring ruin to his wing and decidedly so. The right one persists with its fluttering, but its counterpart is flaccid.

Even if her business excelled, she’s not home free. The pickle for Thariss now is to stay put where she is while Senegos plunges hundreds of meters to the ground, on top of accomplishing the
prospect of not occupying a seat on the end which will hammer the earth first. She’s toast then either way.

Encouragingly, she does fare well, for he plows into the snow with his chest and glides for approximately a hundred meters, until his impetus can carry him no more. Thariss wriggles to and fro in the fall, but is now finally still. She exhales with exhaustion.

“Thank fuck…”

While Senegos’ reeling head requires some replenishment, tremors emerge beneath them as Heimir runs – or lumbers in a temperately brisk rate – towards the site. In his hand dwells Rax, not wielding her hammer, but her mind is vigorously praying to the Light, for the sake of its boon to be distributed to her in this decisive instance. Heimir then makes her sink to base level.

“Will that suffice?”

“Yes, thank you”, responds the draenei as she places her hooves in the snow. “Please, maintain his immobility.”

“I shall make an effort, but dragons are tricky beings to hook in!”

And his words prove practically prophetic, for whereas he was merely contending with recovery from a collision with the soil, now that Senegos senses a cumbersome and intrusive load on his frame, he opposes it. Heimir is not quite of the dimensions that the elder dragon bears, though he is massive in his own right. It’s therefore that he prospers at suppressing Senegos to some limited effect.

Meanwhile, Rax is on one knee, hands to her chest and head slumped. She murmurs in her native tongue, appealing to the Light, so that it may shower her with its benevolence. But Senegos’ hissing and rumbling jumpstarts his volatility, and ahead of Rax’s closing prayer, he already bucks. Heimir clenches his teeth and virtually lies down on top of the dragon.

“Horned one, I don’t wish to-…” He pauses involuntarily to grunt in faint exasperation and surprise as Senegos whacks him with one of the dragon’s hindlegs. “…rush you, but we’re running out of time!”

“I have taken note of this”, Rax replies patiently, “but I request that you do not disrupt my concentration. One incorrect phrase and I will be forced to repeat this series.”

“Don’t sweat it, Rax!”, calls Riv. “We’ll pitch in. You buckle down on that string of pleas.” In her hands, the sin’dorei has fished out some rope which she utilizes Razz for, to tie up Senegos’ legs. They then take one end each and pull. Not that a tiny elf and a raptor contribute much to impeding a dragon, though. While he hisses and snorts, to burst the giant off him, his legs flail and are not far off from kicking Riv once or twice.

“Thariss!”, she yells to her beloved, yet in her own regenerating period on the ground. She’s not out of commission, but the impact at that velocity did take its toll. “Please, you’ve gotta help us!”

In spite of the sore muscles and aching bones, Thariss grinds her teeth and heaves herself up. With partially hazed eyes, she scours her environs and opportunities.

“Shit…yeah. I’m…I’m coming, babe.”

With Riv, Razz, Heimir and a battered Thariss, the four work up a sweat and with every bone in their bodies, deplete themselves to confine him long enough that Rax accomplishes her responsibility.

As they definitively cap it off, a sheen of the Light heralds it and embraces Rax’s figure, and a deluge of slight allayment surges across them, from the patent compassion of the deed. For Riv, on account of the Sunwell’s newfound heart, it is even further splendorous.
Senegos, of course, is not overly elated, but that is owing to the contagion within him, rather than the dragon’s individual logic. He is flummoxed by its promises. Thus, he fights increasingly fang and claw, to hinder this oblivion from sweeping over him, in a misguided error. But the Light fortifies Rax’s friends, to contain it. More draenei words leave Rax’s lips and she stretches her hand out, to infuse the Holy Light’s gifts over him, purging the taint that has penetrated his soul. Half a minute may elapse, though for the defenders, it comes off like hours. Every effort and all fortitude have to be enlisted to bring this entity’s fire low.

But best it they do, for when this interval terminates, his body collapses and all exertion is washed away, in an uncontestable demonstration of defeat. And as he plummets to the ground, the despoiler is revealed – black tar-like goo secretes from underneath the dragon’s scales and slips down into the snow. A hiss spews from its intangible form, an angry manifestation of its contempt and disgust at the Light shooting from Rax’s grip.

It soon begins to solidify, but stays true to its amorphous structure – to them, it is like an indivisible cloud, a shade of viciousness that enacts a cryptically appreciable outline, but they wouldn’t ever propound that this is an actual person. Three fearsome dark purple orbs light up in its center, like eyes glaring at them with malice, as if it has a grudge against them for robbing it of its quite lucrative home inside the old dragon.

A looming hurdle surfaces, when black tentacle-esque things unload from its body and drill into the ground. A stench spreads from its body and circulates the air, something so tangy and intense that it triggers tears in their eyes.

“Kill it! Now!”, shouts Rax.

“But...how?”, asks Riv. “It’s not even a…person.”

“Anything! My Light will weaken it to whatever weapon you bring out! Shoot it!”

Resisting the smell that hungers for her essence and to wreck her sanity, Riv lifts her rifle, slaps in a mag with live rounds and blasts it once. The Void beast, surprisingly enough, sways and writhes, releasing a noise that can’t really be described like a scream, but something comparable to a guttural rumbling. Four more bullets are loosened and each one evidently gives it a world of hurt, and as it does, the stench exacerbates, as if it channels every last defensive it has. Simultaneously, the snow blackens and the shadows surge towards them.

“Rivaryn!”, calls Rax.

“I’m trying! The bullets just pass through it!” She digs her fingers into her bag to look for change of category. Maybe some arcane-infused ones would do the trick…

But then, to their relief, it climaxes swift and decisively – Thariss fetches her sword from her scabbard and lobs it at the monstrosity, making it spin through the air. Supposedly, Riv had wilted it to its knees and the sword is the last straw as it penetrates the creature, lodged in its misty mass. With a choking and fuming hiss, the three orbs dissolves and the body simply…implodes. The oil it was attempting to consume them with goes with it and Thariss’ weapon dives onto the dirt, as the snow in this particular spot has melted.

“Fuck me, gotta do everything myself…””, mutters the kaldorei.

“…shut up, I had it!”, protests Riv.

Another quiet ten seconds or so, and Senegos groans in a twinge. Inchmeal, he raises his head to
study his environs anew, this time with bewildered, tired eyes. By now, Heimir has stepped off him.

“W…what? What is happening here?”, he speaks with a croaky voice. “Where…?” Once the murk in his vision has settled, he distinguishes the snow he’s laid on, the mountains in the periphery and the icy wind. Furthermore, a couple of figures scurry underneath him.

“What? Mortals? I don’t…who are you? What…what have you done to me?”

Thariss and Riv share a brief look.

“…we?” offers Thariss. “Oh pal, this one’s all on you.”

Rax, who is somewhat winded after her stressful casting, dips her head in a tinge of recognition.

“Venerable Senegos, I am Raxeen. This is Rivaryn, Thariss, Heimir and Razz. Do not fret, for we are not your captors, but your saviors of a sort.”

“Saviors?”, asks Senegos. “I don’t…”

“You may not fully put your faith in us, but your mind was muddled by the impurity of the Void. It blinded and stifled your cognitive capabilities. We have restored your true self.”

“Well, you aren’t misbegotten in your prediction, young one – this is a tall tale. Though my mind does sting with a distinct heaviness.”

“We did not liberate you to posture – all of us are friends and allies of your granddaughter, Nadelgosa. We are here on her request.”

Senegos’ eyes expand, stunned.

“Little Nadia? Then…” Something appears to dawn on him, that what he saw was no illusion. “She is here? I can’t see her. My sight isn’t what it was in its prime.”

Thariss points her thumb over her shoulder.

“Yeah, we’re gonna need your support on this one. We’re in the Storm Peaks.”

“The Peaks? Ah, yes, yes. It’s coming back to me. I was…excavating for an artifact, when…hmm…”

“Sure, fine, but let’s chat about all that later, okay? Your granddaughter’s in trouble. Your other blue buddies are still locked in this Void…curse or whatever. She flew off to distract ‘em, but asked us to dispel it on you. Now we gotta head for ‘em and lighten her load.”

Senegos was unprepared for this and gasps.

“Nadia is in jeopardy? Why didn’t you say so to begin with?! We must make haste, right away!”

Thariss exhales and plants her forehead in her hand.

“Geez. Yeah, not like I was fucking getting to it…”

Riv smiles and pats her fiancée’s shoulder.

“Could you give us a lift, Lord Senegos? We can guide the way.”

“Yes, naturally.” But as he tries to stand, he moans in agony and slumps back down, the earth shuddering slightly. “But…but my body is terribly stiff.”

The draenei in the team shuts her eyes calmly and once more lifts her arms.

“Healing is not my specialty, but allow me to remedy the damage we caused to subdue you.”

Pending his full strength, Thariss breathes out and leans against Riv.
“Well...that was a mess and a fucking half.”

The sin’dorei smiles and endeavors to keep her steady.
“You said it, but hey, we’re here and we’re alive.”

“Yeah...didn’t miss that.”

Riv draws her hand to Thariss’ cheek and caresses it with gentle affection.
“That jump of yours was...remarkable. But don’t do it too often, okay? Had me concerned.”

Thariss chuckles, but more taxingly than normal. She then lowers her head until theirs make contact and smooches her beloved in a small token of victory, something Riv reciprocates and rests her hands on Thariss’ chestplate.
“Don’t have to tell me twice. When we’ve bailed lil’ blue out, let’s go look if they’re boasting a hot spring ’round here.”
“Crusaders! Get in formation! Gather in the center!”

The cadence of the Argent Crusade lieutenant rings along the battlefield in a frantic bid to outstrip the volume of the newly risen dead. To at all overshadow the raspy screeching, moaning and snarling of this ever-reproducing swarm is easier said than done, but for the sake of their survival, Melia does not mind busting her throat for a while.

Though they are all caught in their own independent hazards and bloody dust-ups with the Scourge, the bulk of the crusaders make every conceivable effort to regroup with their commander. But with a plethora of undead bodies blocking their vision, identifying where the short human is stood is more of a dilemma than one might imagine. To smooth their way somewhat, Melia lifts one of her hands towards the sky and projects a pillar of Light, like a beacon.

The arena underneath the belly of the levitating behemoth Citadel is laden with a dense and sinister mist, though one that is actually pierceable with the naked eye. With regard to the wintery climate of Northrend, the earth at their feet is frozen, solid and barren, but snow does not crust its exterior, for the miasma of the Scourge prolongs a state of blight.

What’s worse, every step of the way, those who tread on it run the huge risk of trampling on the bones of the fallen that now rise from their graves. The Drakkari had buried theirs deep enough that one could not have readily ascertained the truth from the get-go, but the Scourge brings it all to the fore.

The odor of the atmosphere is not only touched by death’s pustules, but something best characterized as warm sewage, which they speculate must be dumped from the Citadel. Melia’s heart is lost in a rotation of recursive anxious aftershocks, for their footing is quaking nonstop with each accumulative undead that is rebirthed into unbirth.

Not exactly the front row trooper herself, the Lieutenant has taken the liberty of soliciting Lieutenant Jolen Foghorn’s favor, as the two highest Crusade officers in the district. Adhering to the same school of thought as Ashindra, Foghorn – a medium-sized male tauren Sunwalker with light brown fur and white streaks, cast in unembellished plate gear – goes for a one-handed mace coupled with a shield. The latter is made of steel and depicts his clan's mark back home, a horn of a thunder lizard.

As a squad of undead advances on their spot, Foghorn steps in front of the small human and lets out a shout as he stomps the ground, and from his hoof unloads a field of the light of An’she. Despite carrying a resemblance to the Holy Light’s brilliance, An’she’s light is more like that of the sun itself; a lifegiving fire which can set ablaze that which its users find immoral. And as a result, the foes which intrude on his dominion scorch in the sunrays.

Melia can’t produce an outburst of this express standard, but she can reliably weave an avalanche of the Light’s glory to a measure of torment for the incoming undead. After confirming that no Forsaken are resting in their immediate radius, she puts her hands into a prayer and shuts her eyes. She recites invocations her mother taught her in her youth.

“And in their darkest hour, so did the Benevolent Light grant them joy and sustenance, a warm fire to hold their minds against the dark embrace. Their faith is forbearance and their hearts a shield.”

When she throws her eyelids up, her irises are shining in gold and she spreads her hands in contrasting bearings; and in sync, from her chest gushes a detonation of light that heals her closest allies and both blisters and blinds her attackers.
Feeling mildly reinvigorated, Foghorn bellows menacingly and smashes the ribcage of a skeleton with his mace, and then on the upswing demolishes the jaw of a ghoul who flies back.

And at that climax, an influx of crusaders pop into the sector with avid cries and fervid momentum, colliding with the posterior column of the Scourge, etching a road to their superiors. “Fall in and arrange a defensive”, Melia orders. “We have to take control of the platform and occupy it until Sergeant Revenor and our allies have fulfilled their operation. We don’t leave anyone behind.”

The Scourge does register what kind of cards the Crusade is playing and thus modify their own tactics to counterbalance them, pressing the advantage of their grander pool of fighters. The Crusade can adopt the altitude of the central platform as a minor edge in this clash, but it isn’t much to model a haven in the whirlpool of hurtling magic, arrows and other pelting objects.

Valiantly, Foghorn plonks himself down as a midpoint bastion for everyone to rally towards and get behind, whilst Melia’s word steers the mass of them into apt positions, so that they may stand their ground. Largely, they fit every heavy-builder at the fore, like a barrier. Then, Melia seconds this line by summoning an actual Light-derived barrier.

Melia is steady on groundside pending the progress of their squadrons, in order to buffer them all. She holds up the dome she just snapped into existence and then further knocks out a couple of mini shields to boost the stragglers. But in her flurry of selflessness, she’s remiss of her own square and magnitude in battle – go out of your way to save people and the enemy will soon acknowledge you as a more suitable target than the ones being hammered.

The human gets the hang of this when the Scourge’s necromancers and archers transfer their bombardments from the fleeing soldiers and onto the aegis she’s erected. With the burden of fire and metal that it weathered, the barrier momentarily begins to flicker and go out, as its constitution – like spells overall – is not endless.

To safeguard its animation, Melia gasps, darts inside of it and pumps it with amplified magic, so that it can be augmented and hang around for a few more minutes. However, each impact not only chafes at her, but saps her strength and stamina. In seconds, her mental state is beleaguered and being worn down, slumping to a hunched angle.

And then, it phases out. The core of it simply cannot be sustained, since it pains her senses beyond admissible degrees. She inhales sharply and staggers to her knees.

In the pandemonium of the struggle that transpires between the two armies, with every crusader squaring off with a Scourge apiece, Melia gets partially mislaid. Although this can only account for her own organization, for the Scourge categorically do not overlook her. Straight off, like sharks, they smell blood in the water. The earth rattles and reels beneath her, and in her fatigued condition, she can’t quite comprehend its root, until a thick, bulging shadow looms above her from whatever illumination the scenery provides. A lumbering abomination has come at her, with dripping goop and some slimy sludge that leaks from gaps and dents in its patched-up and slapped together surface.

Melia widens her eyes in undeniable fear and clenches her teeth, as she exerts herself to get on her feet. But her legs cramp due to the strain and she quickly reconsiders, to focus her time on a shield.

Luckily, the shield finds no qualifications for its use, since the psyched abomination that lifts its axe is forestalled by an attack pounding it from behind. Initially, it emits a boggled grunt that is swapped for a light agony as the carver slashes open a portion of its side. The abomination then endeavors to angle itself towards whatever brazen assailant this is. It’s at that moment where it meets its final thought, for the bane of its unlife subverts it and cuts off one of its legs – which
Melia registers as a runesword.

As the abomination haplessly topples over to the ridged dirt and stone below, Wilthorn in his black and dark blue Ebon Knight armor rises above it, plunges his runeblade into its back and then cleaves it. Melia is beyond elated to glimpse his form here.

“Wil! I was wondering where you and your Knights had waltzed off to.”

“No two ways about it, Haven – had your back all along.”

But as his helmet diverts to her, Melia’s own eyes are instilled with dread as she notices how a skeletal necromancer is situated roughly ten meters behind him and is channeling a spell.

“Look out!”

Wilthorn swivels to face the creature and then holds up his sword. Upon command, a greenish magical aura folds over him. The spell then strikes him, but he somehow absorbs most of its energy.

A counterattack occurs, but not from the Knight – once she’s nailed down that he’s okay, Melia discharges a flush of holy fire straight into the ribcage of the necromancer, and it perishes without delay.

Now with range to maneuver, Wilthorn extends his hand to her and she smiles as she enables herself to be pulled upright. Below his helmet’s shadows, she can make out the fact that he’s mirroring her expression.

“Thank you”, she tells him, earnestly.

“Hey, that’s my line”, he jokes, a fact that makes her glow internally, “but you’re welcome too. We’re all in this together.”

“Count on it.”

He then navigates himself around to the inbound troops.

“Ebon Knights, circle up! Join formation with the crusaders and reinforce their positions where applicable! We’re keeping this plateau and the Scourge can’t stop us!”

“Crusaders, make room for the Knights! Lean on each other and coordinate!”, orders Melia.

Though the death knights are in no way invulnerable, the innate abilities bequeathed to them by the Lich King has rendered them demanding opponents that can persist well past the inhibitions of the living. With that, the paladins, warriors and druids of the crusade that cradle their comrades in this zone are filled with a reprieving notion, that they aren’t the sole contenders carrying this weight.

And in the intervening spheres, the two commanders pull out all the stops to not exclusively send out directives, but participate in the war too, with invocations and metal. This duo operates as a team onto itself, with Wilthorn’s greatsword ringing a gruesome lullaby as he tangles with multiple patchworks of foes and Melia is there as a recurring base to underpin his efforts with optimizing spells and wound-restricting enchantments.

But their line isn’t as covered as they’d like to view it, for as minutes pass and hostile undead after undead is thinned, their ranks don’t show to be decreasing.

“This is getting unreasonable”, comments Melia secretly to Wilthorn. “How the hell are we planning to stave off this legion until those up top are done? These things just keep doubling and tripling.”
In her peripheral sight, Melia suddenly perceives how he lowers his sword, causing it to be pointed to the ground. “I got an idea.”

“Oh? Let’s hear it.”

“They’re not alone with an option for additional reinforcements…”

The priestess is somewhat anxious by this allusion and elevates an eyebrow in his direction. “…okay? Are you telling me we’ve got an ace up our sleeves?”

“Something along those lines…”

And so, a chill creeps into the boundaries of her clothes, bleeding directly from him. It’s not that Melia has at no point experienced or been affected by the suppressing techniques of the death knights, but she’ll openly admit that it has never originated from her peers.

In a maiden event of her service to the Argent Crusade, Melia is imparted with the chance and front-row seat to witness Wilthorn benefitting from the sorcery which the Lich King gifted them. Black-green lightning is discharged from his fingers in every vector, like a mini fountain of malcontent tempests that grasps for an opportune target to sting. As he deepens their faculties, they burrow into the dirt and plant their contents into a chosen form. Practically synonymous with the Scourge’s own tactics, arm after arm bursts from it, as subservient ghouls and skeletons come at his beck and call. In the end, it’s more than a few – a full squad of them, even if they’re apparently mindless.

Melia is undecided of how to receive this, what and if she ought to be contentious of it. It’s open and shut that she’d rather die than extol the Scourge, and the Ebon Knights differ from them on principal features, but…

When watching as he dictates their movements and highlights opposition to excise, she can’t ignore the spirit in her which interprets this as vile, malicious, wrong. Or that’s what the lessons she’s underwent say.

Nonetheless, she presses on and aids him in his task, for it’s do or die. The Ebon Knights chime in with their own dark necromantic-sourced spells of Northrend’s hail and undeath’s putrid saturation. But though they battle, toil and struggle through thick and thin, their reservoirs are not infinite. The minions of the north won’t power down their onslaught and they dwarf this regiment of compounded ideas.

A crisis does threaten them when a flank that Foghorn presides over is accosted by a considerable contingent of the undead – supposedly, the Scourge has assembled monumental efficiency into a lone host and shipped them at a single spot to obliterate it. Foghorn himself makes it a hard-earned proceeding, installing himself as a deflection to gate their headway. His shield is held high and his hooves cuts into the loam, to keep his seat. But even a bulky tauren and his fellow warriors can’t withstand the abandon of the Scourge’s curse for an eternity. Like death, they represent an inevitable tide.

However, none of them are swallowed by the sands of time, for a roar breaks out over the terrain and out of thin air, a rain of flashing light hammers the Scourge, burning them down. Foghorn is taken aback by the illustration and both himself and his cohorts recede a couple of meters – it’s that gap which is snapped right up by incoming soldiers of the Zandalar Empire. Warriors with their shields, prelates with greatswords and sabers infused with Rezan’s fury, mages, archers and earth-shattering shamans, in unison they pummel the hostile undead lines, many shouting “Zandalar forever!” or “For King Rastakhan!” in Zandali.
The foundation for the earlier deluge was of course their decision-maker, the Rezan priestess Cherile. She strides towards the bundle of Knights and Crusaders with her priest colleagues. “Excuse our belated arrival”, she says with her braided ponytail swaying in the wind currents. “Our own end was quite a bind to overcome and purge.”

Melia grins at her.
“Better later than never!”

The chief priestess then rotates to her subordinates.
“Priests of Rezan, spread out! Get to the fringes, strengthen the barriers and mend the wounded! The rest of you, post up and pick your targets!” She then averts towards a man in hefty armor.
“Ar’chek, set your prelates on smiting any Scourge that defy our rows.”

The troll plants his sword decorated with a twin golden claws emblem as a hilt on his shoulder and beats his tough chest.
“In the name of Rezan, they will suffer, priestess.”

The provisional wall is then brought up to the stage where it actually endures and Zandalari priests are positioned side by side with Darkspear, human, kaldorei, dwarf, Forsaken and sin’dorei ones. Ebon Knights and Crusade juggernauts are fortified by Zandalari druids, warriors and prelates, and the humongous trolls are not beings that drop without a serious fight. An equivalent scenario plays out with all of the ranged combatants as well.
The Scourge casters and champions go on catapulting into the defenses, but quite unforeseen for everyone caught up in this, it has the qualities of prosperity. Their lines could very well hold to completion.

Or so it would initially be rendered; few joys up in the north last. A bang is caught by the groups, hailing from the absolute tail ranks of the graveyard’s field, which as of yet is out of view from them. Incidentally, line of sight for isn’t wholly essential, for they twig another style of display – swirling puffs of smoke that rises to the heavens, but there’s a hint of stain to its texture.

Cherile squints at it and her brow is crimped. She lifts her nose up and her glowing eyes filter slight unease.
“That scent…”

Melia peeks at her.
“Scent? Hmm. Now that you mention it, there’s a bite to it…”

Cherile’s aversion dilates as she draws in greater samples of the particles in the wind.
“Yes…a venomous bite”, she states in a stark omen, which puts an inquiry on Melia’s tongue.

But the question never escapes her, for her senses are pulled towards the hisses that fly from the smoke’s interior, followed by what can only be outlined as ripping.
From its dimensions erupt a wave of new and beastly enemies – shadows and specters of animals. More precisely, giant snakes; cobras, vipers, mambas, and many more. None of them show signs of animation, but the gauzy physique of phantoms.
The spirits press a headlong attack on the defenders – vividly on those lacking magical wards – as well as the Light-sourced barricade, to whittle it down, no matter the rate of this act.

Faintly overtaken by the latest accompaniment of the Scourge’s armory, Melia turns to her.
“I was told the wider collection of loa had been killed!”
“A good deal have…but the Great Beyond opens doors to the past.”
In the midst of this nest of Sseratus’ fallen creatures wanders a drakkari skeleton in fallow gear, but encircled in an aura of treacherous control, the bottom of the pit. Cherile’s mood boils.
“The bastards – they’ve summoned a primeval High Priest of Sseratus!”

“What? I…how would they achieve something like that?!”

“If only I knew the answer to this…”

The deleterious repercussions of combating ghosts, in contradiction to ghouls, skeletons, nerubians and more, are their infiltration properties, even in a safeguard as steady as theirs. A couple of crusaders and Zandalari shout in pain or stagger to the ground as the astral projections inject themselves into the bodies of their victims.
“Healers, get going! Assist them, stat!”, mandates Melia.

“That won’t make much difference”, Cherile notifies them. “Sseratus’ signature lies in toxins – we must bring antidote spells or potions to these offenses.” And then, a flood of inbound material catches her eye.
“Speaking of toxic…”, she underlines.

The night is then clogged with a rush of gas that sweeps across the living guards, for it is principally they that are under its spotlight. A noxious fog undulates at them and is only denied entry for those that linger inside the bubble, which regrettably is not the entire bunch of their columns. This could escalate into a recipe for disaster.

Cherile’s vision darkens.
“That they would exploit the desecrated husks of the loa’s believers in this fashion…it’s unacceptable.”
This simply cannot be endorsed for any lengthier periods.
“Druids of Gonk, step up! Initiate a process of curing these poisons, without delay!” She then addresses Melia. “Lieutenant, I propose that we go on the offensive.”

“Offensive?”, asks Melia. “Isn’t that like, lunacy? With the fact that we’ve got an undead priest jamming poison all around us, I mean.”

“No, not if we act with good judgment. If you can organize our back lines and keep the Scourge occupied, I can catch a ride with a druid and flank the High Priest. I could bring one or two of the Ebon Knights. They’re unable to be poisoned anyhow, if memory serves.”

Melia worriedly knits her eyebrows.
“You…intend to strike the priest by yourself?”

Cherile shakes her head.
“My loa will shelter me. And…it is only he who can dispose of this hazard.”

Despite her misgivings, Melia reasons that there are few alternative resorts.
“Go ahead, then. Take whomever you need, but I recommend speaking to Commander Trienza’s second.” Melia curves to another section of the battlefield.
“Foghorn, over here! Let’s talk.”

The tauren reconfigures his seat with the other front-liners and links up with her.
“You wanted me, Haven? Do we have a plan?”

“Eh, if you can call it that. Though some might say we’re off our rockers…”
Melia then clues him in what they’re slated for and not surprisingly, Foghorn tentatively rolls his shoulders. “I see. Not saying I’m happy with this turnout, but…”

“Believe me, neither am I, but what else do we go with? Trust is vital here and that’s why we’re stuck in this slaughtering ground anyway.”

“Yeah, I follow you. Sticking to this site overlong will be precarious, but…if we’ve got a strategy, then we can straighten that out.”

The human feeds him a lighthearted smile. “Relieved you see it my way. So then, hope you don’t mind my request that you oversee the minute arrangements of the frontline, since I’ll be pressed to regulate the healers, or our bubble will burst.”

Foghorn taps his hammer onto the tip of his shield. “No need to worry, ma’am – we can smash this.”

In the span of this talk, Cherile points out three druids with auxiliary dedications to attend her and then rushes over to Wilthorn. As he’s wrapped up in a scuffle, she intervenes and sprays them with Rezan’s skills. “Knight-Lieutenant! May I have a word?”

Wilthorn buries the tip of his blade into the ground and regards her stolidly. “Priestess. Shouldn’t you be supporting our vanguard?”

“This was the earlier case, but now, we’re working with a method. Lieutenant Haven and I have designated an angle of attack on the High Priest, but it won’t gain fortune without the Ebon Knights’ help, as I require time to amass my strength. After all, the toxic gas here should be powerless on your bodies, no?”

The death knight evens his stance to peer out over the ocean of the battlefield that rampages meters apart from them and singles out the skeleton standing in the posterior, insured against assailants as he conjures virulent hexes and torment onto their trapped foes. “Alright, I’ll take you there. What route would you recommend?”

Cherile smiles and points upward. “The skies. We have druids, and they’re more than capable to bear us.”

“Hmm, good call. I’m in.” Wilthorn shares a fleeting look with Melia prior to grabbing a female orcish death knight by the shoulder. “Kazika, come along. We’ve got a specialized task, to settle this conclusively.”

“If the Scourge suffers, you’ve got me”, she responds. In concert, they purportedly withdraw from the contest, as the druids pluck the three by their shoulders, taking to the skies.

In the meantime, Melia sees to it that they make some commotion. “Hey mages. So, I’ve got a…bizarre instruction, but just roll with it. Begin aimlessly spraying the field with arcane mortars. Whether you hit or miss is neither here nor there – just let ‘em hear it.” Some of the arcane-adept in her division scratch their heads, but they obey and synergize their volleys. In their active squads here, the Crusade does not house darker magic users, but she reaches out to
“You guys reserve any...warlocks or shadow priests?”

A Zandalari woman in darker robes with some web symbols sewn into it glances at her.
“The nation of Zandalar does not consort with lowly demons. But we do have faithful of Shadra, like myself – the God of Spiders, the Mother of Venom.”

“Perfect! Could you...summon some of her uh, children or something? Like, bathing the Scourge in lots of slight nuisances. Raise some hell out there?”

“Huh? But this won’t do much more than scrapes to them.”

“That’s beside the point! Make them feel! That asshole out there is the voice of the serpent loa – you gonna let a snake steal your thunder or show him who’s boss?”

Though it’s blatant goading, the troll flashes her teeth viciously and then nods at some of her associates.

“With pleasure.”

They proceed to exhaust their energy on smaller, more abundant callings to the spider loa, and the opponents all hear a horde of skittering below them, as the conjured eight-legged beasts rip into the undead.

Melia then moves on to the druids with healing duty.

“Please fixate on anyone with poison or venom wounds, alright? You’re all we’ve got.”

And up front, Foghorn is there to cement their lines.

“Crusaders, Ebon Knights, Zandalari – stand as one! Close those gaps on the east! I don’t want to see any chinks in our armor! We can’t be sloppy, or the Scourge will push through. Just a little longer and this fight is won! Stand tall, depend on each other! It’s us and it’s them – everything else is superficial!”

They show guts and brass, but as people fall as casualties, and a minor toll of fatalities, they are crumbling.

Hence why it’s coming to a head now with the circumnavigating team. Cherile, Wilthorn and Kazika touch down roughly 500 meters to the west of the high priest – a troll skeleton that must be at least two and a half meters tall. His bones notwithstanding, he reeks deadly potency, of the worlds beyond.

The druids ascend once more, to provide aerial backup, but Cherile faces her escort.

“I will tread alongside you, but from here, I’ll commit myself to channeling the loa.”

Wilthorn looks unconcerned, as does the orc, the duo having only focus for their enemy formations.

“Go right ahead, priestess – we’ll carve a passage to him.”

Kazika and he alike beckon the forces of the dead to rise and then wades squarely into the pawns covering the high priest. As the elevated and conditioned former elite guards of the Lich King, the two Ebon Knights showcase an unprecedented efficiency at grinding out kills. His sword and Kazika’s axe tear, decapitate and maim to such a productive degree and with apathy, that one could feasibly feel a chill watching them. But this is automatic, an innate program into their dead skulls by their former master. Turn it off and they become death-wrecking machines. The fact that the security is less here does help, though.

However, the high priest himself shapes up to be an unachievable goal. He tracks their march before long and forges expanded defenses – more souls join the fray, but in this occasion, it’s what
they can best describe as a fusion of troll and snake, with spears and swords. Fallen servants of Sseratus pounce on the death knights and for once, gives them an honest challenge that they can’t handily dismiss without effort.

Surprisingly, the high priest sits on ample mental capacity to be granted vocals, though he speaks solely in a form of Zandali.

“Such arrogance! You think to invade Drakkari lands, the bastion of the north, the blood of winter and ice?!! You will regret your failures as Sseratus’ breath strangles you.”

Well, his personality is unscathed, though this would suggest his comprehension of the age he’s in was not transmitted. If he could only observe what his living descendants are up to…

Extended rituals are launched and when next he casts his arms up, specters of snakes jump up from the soil and latches onto their legs, chaining the death knights. Wilthorn gazes down and attempts to expunge them with his weapon, but they merely proliferate, growing in quantity to cocoon his legs. He can’t detect any bites, but his motoric abilities are diminishing.

“Dammit! Priestess Cherile, now would be a good time!”

The high priest overhears those words and stares at Cherile.

“What is this? A disciple of a foreign faith? Hah! You harbor illusions that your primitive cults are any match for the loa of Zul’Drak? Perish.”

His hands then flash with green and yellow tints which spawns a bolt of toxic elements and the lifeblood of the Drakkari. He enlists this to blast right into Cherile.

But this is at the precise moment where her preemptive actions and aims are met, and the bolt is deflected by some outside spring, which sends it soaring off, like a ball bouncing on a wall. As Cherile’s eyes gradually crack open, they shimmer in a melting pot of gold and blue.

“Fool. You dare provoke us, of all people? Allow me to demonstrate why Rezan is King.”

She stretches her hands to the heavens and enables her mind to wash with the internal and golden sun of the Zandalari and the loa royalty, the hardest of the troll nations’ spirit protectors. A full-body and colossal devilsaur in gold emerges from no wellspring, the translucent manifestation of Rezan, the King of Kings, the God of the hunt and the rage of the sun.

A deafening roar is cast from his fang-packed maw and he raises one of his hindlegs, only to stomp it to the ground. As he does, the very earth overloads in his vicinity. A shockwave of unfiltered light hurls from where he stood and disintegrates anyone and anything which Cherile had mentally marked as a bane to be put out of existence. Though no physical crater is formed, the vibe of it is conferred, for no Scourge beast that was in the blast makes it out; but to Wilthorn’s mild perplexity, the death knights did. Maybe Rezan isn’t so correlating with the Holy Light after all.

As the dust settles, scores of Zandalari – particularly prelates, who are lost in religious euphoria – and crusaders cheer in joy, relief and astonishment. However, Cherile cannot partake of this celebration, for she’s so devitalized by the attack that she practically collapses. It’s by nothing but Wilthorn’s reflexes that she doesn’t hit the dirt, as he catches her and pulls one of her arms onto his shoulders.

“Damn, you went all out on the carnage. Gotta say…that blew me away. Amazing.”

Cherile’s half-open eyes – now stripped of the gold – stares at the ground.

“Never…belittle the loa of kings…”

In seconds, the druids set down to pick them up and flies them towards the bubble with Melia and their allies. In spite of the sensational blow to the Scourge’s output, they are not done. Melia smiles at them upon approach. She is overworked, her brow seeping with sweat.

“Wil, Priestess Cherile, that…was off the charts! No one could’ve finished it better.”
“Yeah, but she’s out for the remainder of the fight”, notes the Ebon Knight leader, “and the Scourge ain’t drained, not in total.” He looks up towards the necropolis. “Commander…now would be a perfect moment to ace this.”

Melia glances up at the Citadel too, still unharmed, floating like a haunting moon. And then, as if by sheer providence, their reactions and pleas are answered, though not in the vein they had predicted. The underside of the Citadel lights up, as some form of mechanism is powered. “Uh…what’s happening?”, asks the Lieutenant. “Do we need to duck?”

“I don’t think that will—either the Commander accomplished her enterprise or…”
Or he has no wish to end this sentence.

Whatever the case, a white light flushes from the Citadel and blinds everyone at its base, concealing them from the truth.
It’s yet another freezing morning in the elevated fortress of Dun Niffelem, heralded with very slim drama and racket, something that amounts to the hissing of the displeased winds and sporadically drifting snowflakes. The giant residents of this icy construction do see this as their environment of choice, longing for neither company nor recognition - freedom to conduct their lives as they see fit, in privacy, generally is the sum of their wishes.

To this end, guests and temporary tenants are scarce, if not straight up nonexistent. Their dwellings aren’t adapted to welcome those unaccustomed to their way of life. The only option is to forge one’s own transient roost.

This is what the elder blue dragon Senegos and the sparing tally of other Azurewing natives were required to undertake, in order to reserve a portion of time for recuperation. But after the recent mix-up here between the frosty giants and the draconic menace, one might justifiably wonder – why would they even be granted permission to rest at all in the safety of the giants’ walls? Well, this was predominantly motivated by that the dragons embodied emotions in good faith, of pleading for forgiveness and an oath that they would make amends for any and all mistakes, for every misconduct.

They are not wholeheartedly left to their own devices, however, as Heimir volunteered to keep an eye on their forms and progress, as a trustworthy precaution.

Granted, it was not solely their good word which swayed the giants’ hearts, for Senegos also let on that the azure dragons may have gotten their claws on a new perspective of Thorim. Keen and anxious as they are to listen to every scrap pertaining to their lost and renegading ally, the giants accepted the offer for a bargaining later on. It sounded like a fair compromise and they would squander little by enabling the dragons to rest up.

Lying here in their undisturbed and untainted slumber does not persist in perpetuity, however, for there are divergent elements who seek an audience with them, on less strict grounds.

Biding in her drake form, Nadelgosa herself bellies up to her older relative, in the company of her non-draconic friends, those allies of theirs who saved the Azurewing members’ necks.

“Grandfather? Can we have a word with you?”

The mighty Senegos stirs from his unconscious condition, rearing his weary eyelids and then with effort, his head to an awakened placement.

“Hmm?”, he mumbles with a drowsy pitch and then discriminates his granddaughter sitting before him. “Ah, there you are, my dear. Good morning.”

His head descends as he offers to rub it affectionately onto hers, a gesture she reciprocates. The others can overhear a borderline ill-defined purring thrum from them, with an unabashedly elated note.

“I’m grateful we worked out a way to unfasten you from danger unscratched, Finfin.”

Following the shocking defeat of Senegos, the trio of mortals had hitched a ride with the aged colossus and chased his kin up to the cloud-ridden tops of the peaks. Luckily, they’d bestowed Nadel with much too modest faith, for she realized she never had to physically confront her hunters, only outsmart them in a method that would prolong her life. With their weaknesses and flaws on her mind, she pulled those strings, luring one or two astray and capitalized on the tenuous peripheral visions of the others.

Using her help, smarts, Senegos’ size, Rax’s Light techniques, Riv’s guns and Thariss’ impetuousness, they trapped and overwhelmed the full roster of the accompanying Azurewings and then cured their respective blemishes.
But in the present, what allures – and befuddles – her party is something infinitely more active, disregarding that it was uttered spontaneously, losing the intimacy of the meaning.

“Uh, say that again?”, asks Thariss. “What did you call her?”

The dragons divert to her and Nadel’s tail wiggles with some embarrassment at her relative.

“…grandfather, don’t use that near others.”

“Hmm? What are you referring to?”, he questions.

“…don’t act innocent. You know what you’re up to.”

His face might not form a humanoid visage, but he retains the ability to come off as quite smug.

“If you insist, sweetie.”

With a tremendously more generous and kind-hearted gaze than in the storm of their clash, Senegos looks at her companions.

“Mortals, I extend my apologies to you, but also my everlasting gratitude. One day soon, once we’ve regained our strength, we will have to remedy that debt somehow. I am not one to appreciate having unsolved obligations for long, friend or no.”

“Don’t dwell on it, my lord”, says Rivaryn. “This wasn’t a job we took in exchange for favors or gold. Nadelgosa’s family was at stake and we look after the people close to us.”

Senegos’ expression is awash in warmth.

“She’s found true friends, then. There is no finer treasure.”

On their perimeter, Heimir tosses a thumb at a hollow in the environs.

“My people brought some water and what meat we could spare, as a token of our acceptance”, he weighs in.

The dragon bows his head in gratitude.

“You have our thanks, friend. Though for now it’s only my throat that’s dry.”

With his vitals not fully recovered, Nadel thereby assists, pushing a canister across the room to her grandfather, who drinks deeply from it.

“Do you feel that your health is improving with the rest?”, she asks.

He rinses his maw with his tongue and clears his throat.

“I admit that I remain somewhat creaky, what with the tailspin that resulted in the attack, but I will heal. What’s more intense is how foggy my head continues to be. The void abomination which infiltrated my mind fractured interior systems more than I could’ve expected.” He halts and glimpses the heartbroken look on his granddaughter.

“Sweet Nadia, don’t be so glum. I’ll brave this without difficulty. I may be an old bird, but there’s vigor in these bones.”

“Old bird?”, Thariss reiterates. “Isn’t it ‘old cat’?”

“Uh, it’s old ember to us…”, remarks Riv.

Rax chuckles at them.

“Minute language disparities. Fascinating.” She sets her eyes on the dragon. “Lord Senegos, could you grant us particulars on your operations here? What sent you into this chaos to begin with?”

“Oh yes”, says Nadel, “I had half looked past this event. Did you discover the artifact you were hunting, grandfather?”
The senior dragon exhales with dissatisfaction.
“As sad as it is, no. It was genuinely a complete and utter catastrophe. Your friends here let me know that Deradgos is now safe from harm, but when my grandson was unethically incarcerated by Malygos, I took on a splinter of…extremity.”

“What model of artifact was it you sought?”, inquires the blood elf.

“An ancient relic, a type of…manifest, one could describe it. It was crafted and penned many eons back, prior to the time of any modern mortal civilizations. It contained distant and, to be frank…oblique compacts between races that lived millennia into the past and the dragonflights. It was a vow to protect this world, against perils and extinction. My optimism for its influence was founded on the sentimental worth of it, but despairingly, there were some noticeably aggressive complications. The manifest had been enclosed inside an arcane-fashioned vault of prehistoric make.
By virtue of its gargantuan age, I did not equip myself for what would be lurking inside – the depraved influence of Yogg-Saron, the old god of death and nightmares. Thinking on the history and far-reaching internment of the Old God, how could we have predicted that it would appropriate any kind of autonomy? To me, it was ludicrous.
I, and my fellows, all staggered without deviation into the set-up and even if we did our best to flee, the void’s darkness invaded our wits and comprehension. My memory is not as intact on the minutia, nor even broadly speaking, but there are…footprints of my actions. I suspect that one of those vestiges could have been a subconscious and urgent plea to myself, to pursue a workaround for my cerebral jail. I reason that this is why I inadvertently darted for the north, and leaned towards the field of battle from times past, that which was frozen in a locked continuum of eternity.”

“We scouted a rift in space and time, which Nadelgosa categorized it as”, cites Riv. “Was that one of yours?”

“More or less. I instigated its growth, but I did not conceive of it.”

“Then what was it? Did it have a purpose? Your granddaughter theorized that it was the…well, metaphysical crumbs of an object or entity that you and your family devoured or otherwise consumed.”

“Ah. No, it was nothing so greedy – simply put, I pervaded the area with an incantation, a piece of wizardry which had the intention of springing an effect from it. There were clues in what I found, that the concealed vitality of the terrain had a link to what my young tagalongs and I were suffering. In hindsight, I extrapolate that my own thoughts were attempting to expel the infestation. Now, the riveting part is that I can recollect threads of what I witnessed, which I assume will be gripping to Heimir and his people – we encountered flashes of memories, images of yore. I can’t be certain without a shadow of a doubt, but I surmise that it was proof of the regional Old God’s black mark upon Thorim’s deeds in the midst of that era.”

The giant flinches, astonished.
“What are you speaking of? The god of death…polluted Thorim?”

“My mind is yet in a state of disrepair, but I can clearly conjure the picture of this, yes. I can illustrate the collection later, but in that particular field, there are tarrying memories, shadows of what once was and Thorim was indeed immersed in this. I can vividly retrace the specter of the Old God’s grasp in the Watcher’s backdrop, a malignant presence in his proximity. I could not ascertain if Thorim himself was spoiled, but it could be an illusion. Either way, it should be investigated.”
Heimir scratches his beard thoughtfully and takes a slow, steady breath. “On this much, we are in line with you, dragon. It could have serious repercussions. If it contains even a sliver of truth, that is enormous to my kin. If Thorim was overtaken by the Old God too, it’s… I must bring this to our King and discuss it thoroughly. Excuse me.”

With the giant now absent, the trio of friends to Nadel finds themselves with an opportunity to bother Senegos for topics with decreased tension and rigidity. “Lord Senegos”, addresses Riv, “I wonder if it would be permissible for us to question you on matters surrounding your granddaughter?”

The old dragon shines up at this request. “Oh, yes, always! I adore speaking of my sweet grandchildren.”

Nadel, less enthused, has her eyes fluctuating from one to the other. “But…”

Thariss quickly subverts her. “So, let’s circle back – what was all that silliness with Finfin?”

The blue drake fires off a glare towards the kaldorei on the spot, having foreseen this. There is, of course, also a bashful pitch on her, noted with her response. “It is nothing!”, she asserts. “We don’t need to debate insignificant details of this nature.”

It’s a defense which makes a rumbling laughter spew from her grandfather. But Thariss won’t be shut down so lightly. “Hey, it ain’t ‘need’ I care for”, she pushes. “I’d simply enjoy a tale or two starring my favorite blue dragon.” The word she underlines is soaked in slyness.

Nadel snorts sharply. “That’s a lie if I’ve ever heard one. Humiliation is what you’re keen for, which is par for the course with a woman like you.”

“Hey, cool it. What kinda character assassination is this? I’m a sensitive, loving, caring sweetie!” All the while, she’s hard-pressed to subdue her sprouting smirk.

“You’re full of it, that’s what you are, and I won’t have this!”

Riv smiles and crosses her arms. “The two of you can squabble like this elsewhere. And at any rate, Thariss isn’t alone with her taste for this – I’m highly curious too.”

Nadel inhales drastically, her face relinquishing mild impulses of being betrayed. “Rivaryn! You can’t… you can’t ally yourself with her and her schemes!”

“Hey, watch it, Naddy”, urges Thariss. “She’s my girl, so it’s clear as day that she’ll side with me every time.”

The hunter peers at her fiancée skeptically. “… that’s not even remotely correct, dear. In this specific case, though, I can’t help it. Sorry, Nadia.”

With her position swiftly getting worse and outnumbered, Nadel swings to the one person who should champion her, and she looks to the draenei in the team, curiously standing in the middle. “You subscribe to my way of thinking, though, don’t you, Raxeen? You wouldn’t be so tacky as to jump in with these two traitors, yes? Since that would disappoint me greatly.”
The two women, one as a drake and the other as a draenei, gaze at each other long and hard. Rax runs her hand over her own curly hair and now seems to hesitate. “Well…”

In a bid to persuade – or maybe tinker with her ideas – Nadel shifts into her elven form and approaches the paladin, softly. She comes all too near and imposes a manner of expression that is one part tantalizing, one part pleading. “We are a team as well, aren’t we?” She grabs Rax’s hand. “You and I, we…work so well together.”

She doesn’t quite walk the whole line, up to a point where their fingers entwine, which could connote that she’s too unnerved to bring it before her grandfather thus far. Hence, her machinations don’t exactly reach the finish line and Rax smiles tenderly at her. “I know we are, but…hearing of your time as a hatchling sounds wonderfully cute, so…” Upset with her dissent, Nadel huffs irritably and pulls away, reverting to her drake body. “Nadelgosa, I wasn’t-“

“Hmph! You’ve made your choice!”

Senegos chuckles. “Don’t be so harshly oppositional, my sweet Nadia. They are accurate in that there was plenty which could be regarded as cute with my beloved hatchling granddaughter.”

“Which is your bottom line on account of that you experienced it all! Your view is colored by this.”

“Would that not be right to apply to your judgment as well, then?”

“I-…you-…hush.”

The old dragon smiles at her compatriots. “There were a great many things which were…challenging with her as well. She was a legitimate little rebel in her youth.”

“A rebel?”, asks Thariss. “Now that’s not exactly the Naddy we’ve become familiar with.”

“Pfff. I refute that claim”, insists Nadel. “I’m equally inconsistent with status quo now. I defied Malygos, did I not?”

“Yeah, not a shabby thrust, but that doesn’t mean you haven’t been mismatched with this too. Last year, you almost violated Rax’s memories, right?”

Nadel fumbles subtly at that criticism. “That is…a fitting sentiment.”

Senegos then tries to bring it back to easier waters. “Well, I retain lucid pictures of my adorable granddaughter, so full of life and spirit and excitement. This aside, her thoughts were also crawling with a lust for adventure, for gallivanting beyond the firm boundaries which we had laid out for her and the other whelps, in spite of her young age. She had comprehensive methods and tactics to contend with the hatchling guardians stationed in the vicinity – sometimes she outright tackled them. Other times, she defied them in less physical effects or reduced it to teasing.”

Thariss laughs heartily. “She slammed herself into ‘em? What, with her head?”
“Indeed. It seldom prompted any injuries, as they did not even close to correspond in weight or size. But in her clutch, she was a well-known primary hellion. Not that our dragonspawn or drakonid were too fussed by it; as a matter of fact, they had good fun playing with her.”

Nadel emits a low and moody growl, though she peers adrift from the others.

“Are you unhappy with my version of events, dear?”

Nadel’s tail churns testily, but doesn’t directly intervene.

“No, it isn’t…inaccurate.”

She would simply opt for that he didn’t detail her silliest phases, which he can fathom, regardless of how entertaining it is.

“I figured you were just being goofy, but this is straight up hilarious”, says Thariss.

Riv is more graceful, smiling at Nadel.

“You know, I feel like I can register portions of this development in you now, Nadia.”

On this camp, however, they are not united.

“And I profoundly reject that”, counters Nadel. “This was hundreds and hundreds of years ago – I have matured plenty!”

“You should not dismiss it, though”, argues Rax. “Occurrences like this adds to your character.”

“Yeah, we’re speaking the same language as far as that’s concerned”, claims the kaldorei. “But where did the ‘Finfin’ label come into play? Right now, can’t make out the relations.”

The drake exhales vigorously and stares off into the fortress.

“That pet name was a construct to come”, Senegos explains. “It is affiliated with a completely separate species.

Now and then, Nadelgosa would go that extra step and take a swipe at running away from the domain of the whelplands, in hopes of exploring the outside world, to gain insights of what it consisted of. Our dominion lies in the wreckage of the fallen Kaldorei Empire and your race’s former capital, miss Dusksong. This denotes a degree of vulnerability and insecurity, for it has never been made safe from end to end. There are multiplex seeds of risk for a young, defenseless hatchling to soar in the skies of our isle, which only compounds when her flight facility was unsteady at best.

Regrettably, Nadia would not and could not be moved to construe our logic. To her, we were for all intents and purposes tyrants, there to suppress her freedom.”

“…you’re laying it on too thick here”, grumbles Nadel.

“I suppose that carries some truth, but you were complaining, and loudly, sweet Nadia. In fact, she was commanding to have it all her way.

In time, in a bid to mollify her rambunctious nature, I set about accompanying her to the exterior lands, the neighboring hubs, corners and moderate communities of sentient creatures. To the south of our enclave, for instance, lied the abode of a clan of murlocs. Remarkably peaceful for their species, all things considered, foremost as they were blessed with seclusion. Out of our own kind, along with the wider population of the isles, the larger figure of us paid no mind to the amphibians, but Nadia became entranced with them. She pleaded with me to fly closer.”

“She enjoyed the sight of them?”, wonders Rax.

“Oh yes, she was a fiercely inquisitive whelpling, followed her nose to different smells, objects and wells. Encountering a new species was an uncanny discovery. For a period of time, we would observe them, and she would pose…well, innumerable questions. She wished to know every
miniature technicality and factors even I could not be certain of. She inquired on them, who they were, how they appeared, why they were built that way, how they spoke, what they were up to, if they could comprehend us, and so forth. I supplied whatever I was acquainted with.

In the moment where we traversed the subject of their anatomy – specifically their spines – I made it plain to her that they hosted a variety of fins. This caught her ear. She considered that word to be aberrant, so pithy and incomplex; though she used other terms. Then, she began to tot them up, acknowledging all of the fins. Eventually, on a whim, she said ‘fin fin’. It made me chuckle. I had a go at rectifying this small, albeit charming error, but I myself produced quite a flaw – owing to that she managed to make me laugh, she was too proud of this. So, she voiced it again, and then again, until she had the impulse to bounce around in a circle yelling it. With such a spectacle and gleaming how joyful she was, I couldn’t prevent further and more enthusiastic laughter.”

Thariss seems to echo this emotion, while Riv and Rax smiles.
“…please don’t”, mutters Nadel.

Senegos proceeds.
“When she could no longer contain her excitement, she asked to be granted approval to bound into their village, and even if I was perturbed with such a move, I sanctioned it, if she pursued it carefully - though I secretly wrapped her in a protective enchantment. She did, but the murlocs were, at the outset, cast with fear and suspicion regardless of her status as practically being a young child. She was after all an entity they’d altogether never engaged with face to face, and for them, she was comparatively big.

However, procedurally, with tolerance, perseverance and benevolence, she constructed a dialogue with them and begun to fraternize. Then, every occasion where I yielded to her pleas to bring her out, for a few years, she would request to be guided to this clan. From that day forward, I would morph her discrepancy into a nickname, and from a preciously young age, she would cherish it, for it made her feel special, a bond we shared. This is how Finfin was born.”

Nadel seems reluctant to expose the fact, but steadily, she’s getting coaxed to speak.
“Grandfather, the…significant value of the name has not diminished”, she states humbly. “It’s…purely the personal feature of it which makes me uncomfortable, when you make it public.”

“…that was centuries ago! Their clan shifted their lodgings long before now…”

“More’s the pity, eh?”

From her flank, Nadel notices how Rax is on her way up and even if she’s taller and larger – by dint of her standing as virtually a full-grown dragon – she can drop her head to leave Rax the potential to caress her. And the draenei does, together with rubbing her nose onto the drake’s scales.

“It is wonderfully endearing. You should not feel humiliation for these childhood adventures.”

Nadel sighs in defeat, but it saturated with a relaxed flavor.
“I know, I know… My grandfather just takes a shine to wielding it as a tool in disfavor of me”, she laments.

Senegos laughs softly.
“That isn’t wholly earnest or precise, sweetheart. My interest is down to a fondness for the memories, the bliss of the innocent past. If I do not recount them, then who will? They’ll
evaporate, like dust in the wind.”

“And hey, look on the bright side”, says Thariss, “’least we now got a callsign for ya.”

In exchange, Nadel glares daggers at the night elf.
“…do not for a moment entertain that idea. I can still swallow you whole.”
Ashindra had not presaged this environment, this...depth. She’s heard accounts of course, the tales of the Argent Dawn’s feats within the levitating fortress of Naxxramas. But what they had never conveyed – or not in enough detail anyhow – was the vibe that it would instill her with. Oh, and the reeking – by the Sunwell, the damn stench. She’s inhaled the odors of undeath and death, of blood and guts, of tombs and ruins, but not anything that would pierce her to this length. Not a segment which would release shivers in her very soul.

As soon as she stepped foot on the stone floors of the August Corona Citadel, it overwhelmed her mind. Though she was on a solid, ice cold, liquid-bereft base, it felt like she was wading down a river of putrefied gore, with its bubbling texture popping and splattering across her nose. She was sickened to the point where she next to imagined she was back in Quel’Thalas, in the invasion. She could even have been paralyzed by it, had her survival instincts not sprung into action and lit a flame under her to trample her enemies underfoot, with the Light’s frenzy. It was indeed alarming to her that it was her own sixth sense that hauled her back into the waking world, and not the Light itself. A testament to its hollow faith in her, or merely that even the Light is destitute in these halls?

Her impulses were not stirred on a whim, however, for the assault team does in actuality clash with opposition right off the hop; the Blood Prince was likely planning for their assault. A wave of Scourge troops – skeletons, ghouls and nerubians – were stationed near the circular center teleportation contraption, which held ramps upwards to separate platforms that would no doubt send people to higher levels of the complex.

The three organizations naturally fracture their strengths, to each get a portion of the area to fell and secure. Ash leaps headfirst into the front attackers, with Marlyn just two steps behind.

“Take it easy in here!”, she dictates. “No frivolous heroics. This might end in damnation and at the same time the downfall of our valiant soldiers underneath the necropolis. Remember, we’re doing this for both.”

Braktog doesn’t yearn to repeat his old mistake from the vrykul crypt and keeps to the shield-bearers’ flank with two other melee-range allies, while Gniklas and the ranged defensive pops any fools that poke their heads up. Everyone is revitalized by Vihara as the solo healer. Ash had in the preliminary stage proposed they fill in with a secondary healer, but the kaldorei had been impassioned that she could manage independently; better to keep their numbers offensive-driven.

The crusaders thrust their line of foes away from their positions with sheer fortitude and resolve, in addition to their diverse and unique skillsets that knock the undead for a loop.

On their own wayside, the Zandalari detachment headed by Akilvah rival their determinations, with the Battleclaw maintaining the equivalent slot of Ash, a commander that makes a practice of commanding from up front.

To the crusaders’ relative right, Trienza is the third to echo this philosophy, though the death knights are but a trio of warriors that nonetheless fulfill the obligations of a whole squad. But of course, the Strike-Commander has cultivated this mindset since her days as a Ranger-Captain, never wavering, upholding her nation from its very border. And when she fell, so did Quel’Thalas.

In fact, it could be made a case for that Trienza and her aides are the ones who wreck the foremost shop in the Scourge’s ranks, like scythes of cataclysm. Vengeance is a sturdy tool.

From the looks of the frugal forces, however, Acranius is not so tactically naïve as to stick the whole bunch of them in one venue, and over the course of a handful of minutes, Trienza culminates it with a shouting statement.
“Clear!” This is reproduced by Akilvah and Ash.

“Regroup at the north exit”, commands the undead quel’dorei. Even if she doesn’t hold authority over the other two team leaders, they pinpoint no inspiration as to why they should put up a fight. There are three doorways circling the teleportation contraption – roughly north, west and south. The whole pack of them give off shadowed, ominous and stinking auras, not arousing desires to delve inside from the living.

Trienz a plants the tip of her runeblade onto the stone floor and addresses her allies.

“It is here we must determine where to set our next steps. Preferably hurry it along too; we’re on a tight schedule.”

Akilvah has shifted into her troll body and rests her staff on her shoulder.

“If you ask me, I say we pick one of these roads and tear the intestines apart, gutting this entire facility.”

Lah’kur half laughs at her.

“Thinking too much with your stone brain – ain’t gonna seize the day that way.”

Akilvah grimaces at her and constricts her grip.

On her block of the triangle, Ash coughs to draw the attention.

“There are a great many things on the agenda. A straight charge might not cut it.”

“I am of like mind”, comments Trienza. “Instead, we had better divide ourselves.”

“Split up?”, wonders Akilvah with an uncertain note. “Isn’t that dodgy? We won’t stand with equal overbearing vigor if we don’t travel as one.”

“I would contend this wasn’t what we’d charted anyhow. We’re a task force, intended to execute our goals with haste and surgical precision. Scale was not a consideration.”

Akilvah huffs.

“Guess I might’ve read it upside down then…”, she accepts.

Trienza inclines her head.

“If there are no more objections”, she utters and then motions with her hand at her kaldorei aide.

“Sydela, I task you with locating the… power chamber of this compound.”

From half a meter down, the one gnome in the group, Gniklas, weighs in.

“The engine room or the drive core, ma’am.”

The Commander stares coldly at the gnome.

“…fine, the drive core. Sydela, your directive is to track it down and discover a manner to disable it. This is essential.”

The kaldorei straightens her back and salutes.

“Yes, Commander. It will be done.”

“I am incapable of ruling where the rest of you tread, but my recommendation is that you, Sergeant Revenor, and your crusader squad, synchronize with Sydela.”

Ash glances at the undead night elf, whose icy gaze convene with hers and the sin’dorei slides a thumb on the hilt of her blade in contemplation. She then nods.

“It’s a worthy task. We’re with you, Sydela. Additionally, Private Gniklas may possess some insight.”

“Scourge tech ain’t my field”, the gnome remarks, “and I’m not as brilliant as my mom, but I can
Trienza diverts to her other aide.

“Lah’kur, I grant you the mission to trace the command mechanics for the instrument that is spawning the Drakkari dead and disengage it.”

The Amani bows her head sharply.

“You got it, boss.”

“I figure it would be wise for the Zandalari to accompany you. What say you, Battleclaw?”

Akilvah glares at Lah’kur and crosses her arms.

“Dunno about that.”

“Even if you take her for a nuisance, you must agree that it’s logical to give our people some elbow room down on the ground, yes?”

The Battleclaw stares at the Commander cautiously and shrugs.

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t like it much, but I’m in.”

Trienza peeks at her subordinate, who likewise appears embittered by this, but she does not struggle. She has yet to defy her Commander’s edicts, trusting her wisdom above all.

With her own approval set, Trienza nods and then sweeps the area with her eyes. This confers her with an off-putting truth she had not perceived earlier.

“Where is Cor’zel?”

Akilvah blinks and she, combined with practically everybody in the crew, mimics Trienza’s action and turns up the same result – absolutely nothing. He has vanished. The Zandalari combat chief scowls.

“What the-…he was here a minute ago. Dammit, old geezer… Better not be instigating trouble for us or I don’t give a damn what Zul’ll say.”

The Commander’s eyes roam the vicinity with a wary speck.

“His schemes are inscrutable, but this is insubstantial. We should devote ourselves to our individual tasks and handle him at a later hour.”

“Yeah, I’m with you on that.”

“Commander”, says Ash, “seeing as you’ve been delegating, what is it you’ll act on in this chaos, if you’re not hunting the scholar? Are you mixing up with one of us or…do you claim another errand?”

The Strike-Commander then wrenches her blade from the stone, pivots and steers herself towards the teleportation plateau, marching at it in a steady pace, with her sword held downwards. She ascends the ramp.

“I will stalk the Prince.”

“But…alone? Commander, not to diminish your abilities, but…that’s suicide.”

Trienza squeezes her blade harder.

“There is nothing on this continent he can level at me that will impede my charge.”

She dissolves in a stream of blue-white light, being displaced to further altitudes. Ash sticks with her dismay, which Lah’kur notices.

“Trust the boss, Sergeant. She can fend for herself.”
We should get rolling, so she won’t clock out ahead of us. She’s not one to sit on her hands.”

Sydela nods agreeingly and then examines Ash.
“I have a lead on where we must venture. Come along, if you would.”

The kaldorei transfers them to the northern passage, deeper inside the necropolis’ bowels. There is sparse illumination in these stone halls, and the walls are stacked with blended Scourge and nerubian iconography, metallic pipes and trickling black and green slime. It’s revolting to Ash. She curtly wonders if this sludge contains the blood of her people, but then hurriedly dismisses that thought, prior to it consuming her heart altogether.

The crusaders gain rapid headway into the core of the installation, but they divide their utility, where half is trained on stealth and the second is to put down stray Scourge. Though the undead are patently informed of their intrusion, they have not laid their hands on news where the living menace is on course for, off the back of their elimination of the complete resistance at the entrance. They lurk around, heading into nooks and side shafts to slip out of the grasps of heavier units for now. Single shade sentries and trimmed patrols are confronted on occasion, but they make short work of such roadblocks.

Then, a couple of minutes ahead, at last, they arrive at their objective, which Sydela had a gut-feeling for – a balcony sitting on top of a spacious chamber. In terms of accessory, it manifests no different from the channels they’ve zigzagged via to this instant, but it is two things which amass their curiosity – the guards and the technology.

The room is dotted with Scourge muscle, from abominations and varguls, to gargoyles and wights. Although, it is markedly lighter than they had prospected, mainly accredited to that so many were out on missions.

The second interest is a trio of magical spires with green crystals that all strike them as creating a network, discharging lightning and a sinister purple mist.

“This is the engine”, Sydela categorizes it.

They’re poised in a now vacant gateway and Braktog wrinkles his brow.
“This won’t be a walk on the prairie – they’ve got a small fortune of troops in here.”

“That’s not lost on me”, says Sydela, “but I believe we can undermine some of this by working smart, decimating them systematically and leveraging every clever trick.

One such trick that I can spy from here is to obstruct the flow of fuel. Some necropolises are sustained by necromancers, but this has a more sophisticated core, where necromancers only drive. The sludge you may note over there is partially biological, but also necromantic, and can be ignited.”

“What, with fire?”

“No, nothing that elementary, but with the power of the Light. Send a charged bolt inside the pool and it’ll combust.

The spires themselves are warded, but I bet we can disrupt some of those runes on the floor with arcane spells. You brought a mage, right?”

Braktog nods and points a thumb at a light-skinned, blonde human in grey, black and gold-lined clothes.
“Yeah, Wynne over there. She’s formerly from the Stormwind mage guild.”

“That’ll do.”

Sydela glances in Ash’s direction and pegs her as not being quite present.
“Sergeant, are you concerned with any section of our calculations?”

The sin’dorei’s eyes flutter and she catch a glimpse of the night elf, as well as her crew. “What? No, that’s…this all sounds shrewd and well-thought-out. I wouldn’t aspire to flip anything from a glimpse.”

“Then what’s bothering you?”

“Well…” Is she honestly going to dig into this? Apparently so, against her better judgment. “I…was wondering if Commander Trienza often heads off alone in assignments such as this.”

Sydela studies the shorter elf, though she doesn’t disallow the answer. “The Strike-Commander? Yes, it unfolds that way occasionally. She’s a mighty and formidable fighter. There’s little that can overpower her.”

“But she’s a commander – shouldn’t she command others to the compromising stuff?”

“Well, no. Hmm. Make that ‘yes’. She should, in normal circumstances, but she’s not that type of officer. She wouldn’t commission others to sacrifice themselves in a peril that she wouldn’t tackle herself.”

Ash’s gaze sinks physically and mentally. This is an attitude she recognizes from what Riv informed her of Trienza’s life and…her end. She hasn’t changed…

But in the present, the conditions cannot indulge her to fade. “Are you okay, Sergeant?”

Ash wriggles herself apart from her tensions. “Yes, I’m…I’m alright. If we are to do this, I imagine we’ll require more than a few misleading ploys – we need firepower too and ordnance at that, to solidly shake things up in here.”

Sydela scratches her chin and ruminates on it. “Mm, that tracks. But where else to go for that than where we are now?”

“Well, I spotted a tempting compartment prior to our entry in here. I’d mark it as some measure of an armory, as it contained explosive canisters I’ve beheld at other battlefields.”

The ebon knight scours their current setting reticently and the crusaders delay to get a read on what goes in the reanimated mind of the elf. Is she intending to override Ash? Whatever their illusions of her frame of mind, Syd rewinds to them and indicates at her. “That carries some merit, but the delicate bit will be where to plant them and how to rig them.”

“As it happens, I have a proposition for that too. First things first, though, there’s the precondition to see if we can acquire them at all. I didn’t perform a personnel check, given I hadn’t estimated what we’d be competing with.”

“We’ll get that time now, then.”

The squad backtracks from the terrace and traverses into the corridors they had cleansed ahead of time, with no more watchers or guards parked in untimely locations. Auspiciously, the armory is not defended as holistically as the drive core, largely due to that it’s been emptied of infantry armaments and what demolitions the Scourge assumed this encroachment would necessitate. With that, the crusaders and the ebon knight can register the sealed barrels all arranged in neat columns beside the western wall. There are other containers, with oozing green smoke, situated by the northeastern and eastern end, but in light of the foreseeably toxic substances within, best to
stand clear.

Furthermore, Gniklas defines a bonus resource for them.
“Sergeant, I believe I’ve located something we can nab. You see those metal cylinders in the western corner?”

Ash glances at her subordinate and then redirects at their target – they are indeed cylinders, possibly forged through iron, with mounted, small and round containers at their sides. There seems to be five of them.
“Yeah?”

“Gnomish flame turrets – stationary, but self-operative turrets installed with arcane detection crystals that are triggered by movement. They look deactivated for now, but I reckon I can get them running in no time. Qualifications for them are minimal – once switched to standby mode, simply put, we can plop ‘em down in safeguarding positions and let them do their work.”

“Very well. When we bring down the guards, I’ll order our team to carry them with us.”

The interior combatants are not insurmountable for the group, were they to take the plunge – two abominations, a number of varguls and one long-legged skeleton with a grand axe.
Sydela is on the brink of putting up a bid for their attack, when Ash launches into a series of orders.
“Gniklas, line up a shot on the shelves hanging near those varguls. That’ll collapse the extra tools right on top of them.
Marlyn, if you concentrate on the undead vrykuls, I should be able to fare with the skeleton. Braktog, you assail its tail. The rest of you, distribute yourselves equally over the two.” She then switches to the kaldorei.
“Sydela, can you contribute any specialized death knight gifts?”

The night elf’s expression is stoic, but her unspoken seconds after the question is made does tip Ash off that she’s taken by the authoritative tone. She then inclines her head shortly.
“I can offer to dominate the intelligence of one abomination. Compel it to assault its partner, keep their hands full.”

Ash ponders this conceit, admitting personally that she’s sort of opposed to it on a principled measurement, but…in this environment, can she afford letting codes of that value cancel the strive for survival?
No, in this, she’ll hold that the right thing to do is prolonging the crusaders’ safety.
“Run with that at the first opportunity you get to crack them.”

“Will do.”

And thus, they put into practice what Ash sketched out for them, with Gniklas getting their feet wet through trashing the shelf by applying only one bullet, which tips right over some of the guards, pinning them down below the weight of the weapons and equipment that descends. The crusaders then storm inside the room, preceded by Ash herself. Marlyn and Braktog are narrowly on her heels, equipped to split on her say-so.

However, even with a battle scenario in full swing, Ash’s musings are not on the development of their conquest. She’s predisposed to be distressed concerning Trienza’s well-being.
Without fail, thoughts of Trienza brings her to visions of Rivaryn. Preceding the Scourge annihilation, Ash was acquainted with the Trienza solely via Riv, having run across the Ranger-Captain while she went to visit her ex at the Farstrider outpost. What if anything were to befall Trienza here? It’s not that Ash is pessimistic of Trienza beating the odds or that she views herself as a hero that can spare the death knight the fire. But if Trienza were to enter death’s door in this
hellhole, before Riv even receives the possibility to reconnect with her one final time, what would be her response? Would Riv ever be capable of talking with Ash again? Could she honestly pardon such a misconduct?

With the dismembering of the Scourge’s conscripted soldiers and monsters, Ash gets her own message. She can’t linger on the inevitability of her own restlessness. If she does, she’ll aggravate not only herself, but endanger her troops.
“Assemble the explosives and haul them outside”, she charges her squad. “Gniklas, adjust the turrets as you see fit. Sydela, Braktog – could you accompany me for a moment?”
With their assent, Ash navigates them outside the room, a few meters distance from the others. She decreases the volume of her tone before commencing.
“I have to withdraw to the teleporter once more. Someone must aid Commander Trienza and I intend for myself to be that person.”

Braktog is ill-prepared for this and Sydela stares at her like she’s unconvinced.
“You do?”, questions the latter. “Doing that is a fool’s errand. This operation imposes on us that we cooperate, across the board. Trust the Commander.”

“I do. I do have faith in her, you can depend on that, but even for her, there are constraints. Like, can you swear with utter certainty that she can knock this out by herself?”

“No, nothing on Azeroth is that secure, but she’ll try her darndest, one way or the other. She is not a woman who submits, or commits to the idea of failure.”

“Precisely. I was acquainted with her for decades, as I used to date one of her former aides. And it’s that attitude which got her killed the first time around.”
Sydela and Braktog mirror each other, being speechless at not only Ash’s affirmation, but the integrity of what she establishes. She’s got it the right way around, doesn’t she?
“In my absence, Braktog, I assign you to preside over the squad. Coordinate with Sydela, get a bead on what the favorable approach for this attack will be.”

Braktog looks ill at ease.
“Head…the squad? Me? But that’s…I’m not even any kind of officer, and I’ve not been coached to call the shots. Not like the LT or you have.”

“Well, then this is your opening to persuade everyone, right? That you’ve got what it takes. I would confide this to you, without question. You’re a steady and heartfelt man. And you’re not going at this singlehandedly – just as I mentioned, you’ll be able to share this responsibility with our ebon knight friend here.”

On the equivalent end, Syd crosses her arms.
“I was never an officer either.”

“But Commander Trienza believes in you and so will I.”

She’s nailed her there.
“…fair enough.”

They reappear with the squad and Ash plants a hand on Braktog’s shoulder.
“Everyone, I have to depart and align with the Strike-Commander. Private Braktog here will run things in the meantime.”
The unit teeters dimly, but does not protest.
“I can provide final instructions, though, to recall. Marlyn, lay up front, set yourself to shield the team. I’m confident you can shoulder it, no question. You’ve proved to me exactly what you’re
competent with and this is your moment.”

The Forsaken can be viewed as proud and salutes her.
“Y-yes, Sergeant!”

“Gniklas, you’ve got a good eye and you’re clever in acclimatizing to the evolving speed – plug yourself into a vantage point and rain death.”

The gnome grins.
“Right on, Sarge!”

“And in this pandemonium, Vihara, you must labor to double-time it with the healing, in case of any emergency. I’m of the conviction you won’t fail with that.”

The kaldorei bows her head.
“Elune is at my side – we shall never go astray.”

Braktog inhales intensely and looks at her with precarious eyes.
“You sure of this, Sarge?”

Ash rests her hand on the hilt of her weapon.
“No choice, my friend. The Commander can’t conduct this solo, whether she likes it or not, and I won’t leave her behind.
But hey, don’t be jittery now. You’ll have the tougher challenge with all those forces in there. Only a true warrior could brave that hotspot and make it out alive.”

The orc watches her half-skeptical, half-amused and then chuckles.
“Damn you, Revenor. You know how to sell it.”
He bares his arm and the two of them bump wrist guards.
“Good hunting. And don’t get got, ya hear?”

Ash smiles at him and then at her team.
“None of us will. We’re exiting this compound intact and better for it. There’ll be commendations for the whole gang. You have my solemn vow.”

In a contrasting sector of the necropolis, crossing down a route to the eastern wing is Akilvah, her Zandalari suite and of course, their guide and contradictory tagalong, Lah’kur.
Whereas Sydela can stand with the crusaders without giving them flack, the Amani’s disaffection with Zandalari and her individualized loathing of their superior renders this a strenuous sequence.

It’s not that they’ve got problems with the Scourge. On the contrary, the belligerent undead become a handy outlet for their resentment of one another, to attain something to smash. Additionally, the Amani death knight and the Zandalari druid adopt a healthy radius amid them, for neither cares for proximity in this pit. They’d lean towards not affiliating whatsoever, but Trienza governs Lah’kur’s steps.

Along their path, akin to the crusaders’ advance, they’ve faced chiefly patrols and a couple of guards. Nothing substantial, nothing that would daunt the fearsome Zandalari. Soon enough, they reach a slot that cleaves into several avenues, a crossroad. Visually, the sizable trolls can’t distinguish any prominent indications for where they’re meant to filter through. Akilvah attempts to exert her heightened sense of smell to her benefit, but it’s to no avail – in this grave of a
facility, the entire deal stinks of death and decay.

To her faint disbelief, she then overhears the echoing pitch of the Amani coordinating them.
“To the right. That’s our goal”, she utters with footsure definition, not an ounce of ambivalence.

But her bullishness does not matter one squat. After all, why would they rely on a dead Amani for where to advance on their assault of this Scourge construction? Akilvah flouts her with a swing of her hand and then aims her eyes ahead.
“Whatever. Team, onwards. Let’s get going.” Naturally, it is said in Zandali, thanks to not having anyone participating that warrants Common.

Lah’kur isn’t letting her rift them that casually, though.
“Battleclaw, are you informed on where our ambition is located? You’re not. You oughta listen.”

The druid glances at her with moderate contempt.
“Keep dreaming. We Zandalari will find our path.”

Lah’kur crosses her arms and tilts her head with a mocking expression.
“Oh yeah? Fine, have it your way. If you’re thrilled to lumber into the traps of this junk, be my guest.”

The Battleclaw sneers at her.
“I can hold my own well. Better, actually, than Amani trash. You could probably stand to run along to your elven commander, like a good girl.”

The knight is on the cusp of lashing back at her, when one of the male Zandalari rangers with a bow snaps to them.
“Battleclaw – Scourge reinforcements, to the west!”

Akilvah huffs and veers to it.
“Right. Let’s deal with these filth and then resolve this dreck afterwards.”

“Ain’t much to resolve when I’m right”, Lah’kur counters.

“Show us what you can do with those axes as opposed to your ugly chops, Amani.”

She shifts into her heavy reptile form, with the hallmarks of a durable defender. She unleashes a challenging roar at the charging skeletons, drawing them to her.
The Scourge does not take advantage of any real tactics or try to scurry from one another to prove more weighty targets, and thus they hit her en bloc, with Akilvah magically fortifying her hide and the tusks outcropped from her maw.
She is not left out, by any means, and Lah’kur is the first to assist her, heating her own body up to juice her strength and cracks the bones of the skeletons that she can access. Arrows and magic fly from the added trolls and two warriors plus one Prelate that accompanied Akilvah at the front have swapped to hammers, to wreak further breaches.

Though Akilvah is oriented at her competition, to guarantee that her fighters don’t drop into any overstretched jeopardy, she does also toss glances at the Amani. Even if she would never say it aloud, it’s hard not to acknowledge that Lah’kur is a solid combatant. She relishes the variations and minefields of battle, which supports her declaration of once being a berserker.

At one instant, it jumps out at Akilvah that she’s been spying overlong, for one of the skeletons chop at her with its axe and flirts with the debacle of yielding her eye to it, but she loosely confounds it.
However, this is no good, for Lah’kur sussed it all out and grins.
“Hah, in a lil’ bind, are ya, druid? If you wish, we could trade. Wouldn’t want ya to sprain those little toesies.”
Akilvah, with an inability to converse in her animal forms, growls menacingly at the death knight, who just laughs.
“Caught ya in the act, huh? Better step up your game, Gonk lover.”

Akilvah banishes the shorter troll from her mind and zeroes in on their foes, to get to the other side of this meager contest. At minimum, she achieves the act of illustrating to Lah’kur why she’s the ultimate hunter.
Or this is what she had envisioned, but it does not sign off so serendipitously. Although she dukes it out with the skeletons and butchers a few, she does not catch the violent last word. She cripples one of the skeletons by swatting its leg, fracturing the bones in it and once it dives to the floor, she lifts her claws to slam it underneath.

But in the concluding second, a distinct sharp implement zings ahead of her own – the blade of Lah’kur’s axe. It surpasses hers and shatters the skeleton in a burst of energy and cartilage. This deed in and of itself is not irreparable or unforgivable, but this has now grown beyond simple gauging of atrocity levels. Akilvah is fed up with her to the brim.
The Battleclaw soars back into her real body and then stomps up to the death knight.

“What are you playing at, huh?! You think what you’re doing is fucking funny?!”
Lah’kur winces for starters, as she’s startled by the explosion, ut then she raises her back and casts a levelled glare as repayment and compresses the hilt in her fingers.
“Is that coming from you, lady ‘I-don’t-fucking-need-anyone-else’? If you can’t stand some minor jabs, maybe best head back home to your stacks of gold and entrust this to the authentic warriors, who’ve lived in the grime and muck of this world.”

Akilvah then treads awfully close to the Amani.
“I’ve had it with your pompous attitude and incessant lip.”

In turn, Lah’kur bares her teeth.
“Attitude? Me? You’re the one who persists with this boneheaded shrugging-off of everything I vote for! You reap what ya sow.”

Downwards, Lah’kur can then notice how the druid is bending her fingers, and in their fold comes an influx of emerald-hued magic.
“Then how about I sow your loa-damned face?”

It is a challenge of sorts; one part threat, one part test. Does she have the brutality under her belt, the psychological vigor to square off with a taller and larger troll, the ones who deem themselves the master of their race?
Lah’kur, fueled as ever by the indignance and natural anarchy in her soul, thrusts her tusks up and protracts her arms to either side.
“You wanna throw down, stoneskull? I’ll tear ya to shreds.”

But her complying with the provocation unravels the adverse context she’s in – it’s not solely Akilvah who spectates her with rancor, but the additional Zandalari at that. Lah’kur is confined here, shut in by a dozen of these apex trolls and there isn’t a host of recourses for her. Akilvah apparently discerns this reaction from her.
“Nevermind them. You wanna wrestle, you can have me all by yourself.”

It occurs to her when outpaced that she’s in the making of a plainly lax mistake. What would
Trienta throw at her if the Commander had this visual? Little positive, she can bet her life on that. “Alright, shut it down. We’re acting stupid here. We oughta be rumbling with the Scourge, not ourselves.”

“Just figured that one out, did ya? You were the one picking this fight.”

Was it? Lah’kur ain’t so convinced of that. Better not voice it, though. “I’ll let that slip, but I’m calling it here. If I had my way, I wouldn’t be with you and you’re on the same page, but I’m toeing the line. For the Commander.”

“You don’t? Then piss off. We’re not reliant on you.”

“Yes, yes you are.”

“Oh yeah? Why? With respect to Amani strats being a sure triumph every time? Gimme a break.”

As it stands, Lah’kur is lusting to grind that scaly head from her shoulders, but Lah’kur bears Trienza’s words in mind. “You’re better than this.” And she is, isn’t she? When has Trienza ever been mistaken? She saw the potential in Lah’kur, gave her a center. The least she can do is not fail that trust.

“We’re critical for each other”, argues the knight. “I can’t squash all these Scourge lackeys solo and do you have a clue where to proceed?”

The druid shrugs quite cavalierly. “Not really, but I’ll trace something.”

“Oh, so your brilliant gambit is to stroll in an aimless circle, stalling for your people at the lower level to end up in the Scourge’s body count, including your darling wife?”

The druid snarls at her, but she does not retort with bitter phrases, presumably due to that Lah’kur’s statement is holding good. Doesn’t expel it, but the Amani is delighted that she humbled her, at last. “And how is it that you can be so clued-in? You got a map?”

“Not at all. That would be too convenient. No, I can merely…sense it.”

“Sense it? What’s that getting at?”

The knight sighs and diverges her icy eyes to one of the tunnels. “I can feel a tremendous source of…power. Necromantic spellwork. Don’t know the ins and outs, but I can hazard a guess it’s related to what…what I am.”

Akilvah then swaps her expression, for a disparaging laughter. “Course, course. Corpses can sniff out corpse magic, yeah? Shoulda thought of that. Ironic, in a way.”

Lah’kur holsters her weapon, but even so, she leans at the druid and grits her teeth. “You assume I revel in what I am, to walk like some sick joke? I didn’t receive a freaking choice. Why ya reckon I bash the Scourge, stonehead?”

The Zandalari is not captivated by her self-loathing and gestures outward with her arms. “Alrighty then, Amani – direct us. We better hurry along or this mission won’t be much of a net benefit.”

Casting aside that this is what Lah’kur had indicated earlier, the Amani draws them to the
And a proper font it is. In the runup to their entry, Akilvah’s nose creases. “I can smell something…right filthy.”

The Prelate woman in her unit nods at a decelerated pace. “Yeah…I hear ya”, she echoes. “There is a darkness here, and…a deathly presence.”

Beating down the guards, they come out through an entryway into a circular room. In the rim of it, there lies stripped bones and cobwebs with icicles hanging from the strings. The midpoint of the complex holds a voluminous circle with a Scourge-constructed machine in its center. It encompasses large twin metal vats, connected by way of tubes into icy spears directed at a box in the middle. Foreboding blue-fire lanterns decorate the walls in a semi-circle and the walls themselves hold diagonally aimed spikes, some of them crusted with ragged carcasses.

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circle, there’s a manner of mental snap in their minds, as if they triggered something. “Dammit all”, utters Lah’kur. “A trap. Should’ve seen it coming – look up!”

In the canopy of the chamber, a deluge of gargoyles and nerubians pour down, cutting off their flow and to top it all off, endeavors to block the gate they adopted to get inside. The full squad has within seconds an array of ordeals on their plate, with there being sufficient Scourge troops to supply each Zandalari and Lah’kur with several foes. The ebon knight lobs herself without blinking into the fray, embedding her axe in one of the arachnoids, combusting their essence and strengthening herself with it. Akilvah’s team isn’t too shabby either, being accustomed to high stakes and relentless skirmishes from previous journeys and the hazards of their own homeland.

Akilvah tackles her adversaries with competence, to the point where she can also keep tabs on Lah’kur. Though there is expanded stretches from the two, the druid retrieves a number of relevant glimpses.

She’s good. And that’s not a straight half-hearted rating of the death knight. No, Akilvah would privately – not officially – confess that Lah’kur is flat out impressive. Even if she captures the frantic disorganization of the Amani berserkers, despite now being an ex-knight of the Scourge, she’s frighteningly methodical and surgical. No one escapes her wrath.

It pushes Akilvah to revamp herself, to take leaps forward. If Lah’kur can prosper, then the Battleclaw sure as shit can do no less. Come to think of it, she’ll steal the limelight at that. This is why she drives the strike further ahead, battering one of the infantry nerubians to the floor, tramples it and makes for the necromancers in the core. She’s going to knock them out of the game ahead of anyone else.

Unfortunately, they are not limited to mucking around. The six of them are clustered in the center of the platform, channeling some ritual that Akilvah cannot characterize, seeing as how necromancy is not her field of expertise.

Regardless of if she had her next move mapped out or not, the Scourge minions now present her with what she will have to level that focus on, with what they summon. A hideous malformation is synthesized before her eyes, compounded by body parts from beasts of Zul’Drak. It carries the frame of a wind serpent, the tusks of a mammoth and a solidified hide of a rhino as protection, like a grotesque chimera. It stands roughly three times in height and magnitude when measured up to Akilvah, its eye sockets burn in red and whenever the skeletal wings beat, a fetid wind festers in her nostrils, itching her interior properties.

In lieu of biding for backup, Akilvah howls her rivalry to it and then lunges at the horror, whatever one wishes to define it as. She’s clobbered targets of all stripes – how much of a scrape can this be?

As it turns out, a sincerely dire one. In spite of priding herself on rarely underselling her opponents, this is one of those times when her bravado gets the better of her. She inflicts the dawning blow, but the monstrosity hardly displays symptoms of injury or agony. Instead, it whacks at her with one of its wings, a pounding that is so heavy that it rattles her head. She withstands it and conserves her foothold, but this is not a wide-ranging affair. The next attack mangles her back, and Akilvah gets the impulse of a tank just falling on her. For a grand finale, the chimera twists around, lashes out with its tail, impacts her chest and hurls her to the left end of the room, with the impetus to make her fly not far off ten meters.

With demonstrably busted bones in her leg, internal bleeding and groggy sight, Akilvah can scarcely determine the ongoing factors of the battlefield, nor the motions of her foes. “Battleclaw!”, a couple of the Zandalari call out, but their range to her is too great to interfere. Akilvah is sequestered in this circumstance and she’s by no means equipped to rise above it.
As the chimera hovers at her to go for the kill, Akilvah lifts herself to her paws with some strain. She has no desire to permit Gonk and Bwonsamdi to battle over her soul, but if it is fated to be, she refuses for it to occur while she’s down.

Luckily, taking a gander at the Other Side does not take place today, not yet. The chimera approaches her so that it’s practically skirting her, but its fangs doesn’t get to take a bite. It’s hindered by scattering of sizzled blood, and then the slash of an axe. Emerging behind it, Akilvah can narrowly make out the death knight.

“What the hell, gold-brain? Ya trying to flirt with Bwonsamdi?! Get up!”

Did that…actually transpire right now? Was she spared from death’s mist by the Amani, by the fool of a death knight who continues to get a rise out of her? No, that can’t…

The chimera sheds the druid from its simple-minded consciousness and hisses at the knight.

Lah’kur is familiar with the fact that she’s no bulwark and intelligently withdraws, but lures the monster with her.

“What, looking for a tasty meal, huh? Come get some!”

Akilvah can’t comprehend it, that she was granted a second chance from the woman she would rather have watched be tossed into the corpse pile, but it’s now a cold hard fact. She reverses to her original shape and accumulates strength from nature’s will, to wrap herself in a transitory recovering haze, which should last her the rest of her fight.

With vitality back in her blood, she taps that same vein and evokes the power of the stars to surge a spear of magic at the creation, piercing its sturdy scales at the aft.

The chimera then grasps that it’s locked dead center of Akilvah and Lah’kur, but it abides in the structure of an intimidating behemoth, which in all likelihood has the ability to trample them.

“And now what?”, asks Akilvah.

Lah’kur spins her axes in anticipation, searching her head for outlines of where to go from here, to overcome it without putting nails in their own coffins.

“I’ve devised a scheme, but…might demand that you’re bait for a bit.”

“…you’re kidding.”

“Not in life-or-death deals, I don’t.”

“How will this serve us?”

“We knights have access to multiple spell specs, but unholy disciplines ain’t what I’ve got a flair for. It’s Syd’jal’s finesse, but if I come up close…reckon I could finish the job. I need a moment or two to fix this, though.”

Akilvah inhales widely and deflates her ego in the same breath.

“Against my better judgment, but…wager I can tick that box.”

“Be my guest. I’ll relieve you in a minute.”

Transforming into her sabertusk frame – the smaller reptile - Akilvah plays around with a bold move and rushes at the chimera, who swirls and angles its tail to collide with her.

It does the underestimating this time around, however, as she sidesteps it and then in favor of mauling it, Akilvah circumnavigates the beast, roars in provocation and passes it to the opposite side. With this audacious style, she purportedly mesmerized its basic mindset amply to convince it to chase her. The wings flap aggressively to hound the way tinier animal.

Akilvah enacts her wilier intellect to bait the undead mutant into where the other Zandalari are in
the thick of battle and due to the fiend crossing the room nigh on the floor, it drills directly into some of its nerubian allies, uncaringly thrusting them aside with its gigantic tusks. On account of that this stalls it a tinge as well, Akilvah acquires a second or two to breathe and catch up with herself. This is bonkers and she isn’t overly keen on fleeing, but if it can be pulled off…

Navigating the beast by skirting the disc, the druid soon comes full circle, but Lah’kur is nowhere to be seen. Where did that Amani jump off to now? This wasn’t some type of scam, was it? Her doubts are swiftly allayed, for Lah’kur is yet in the lair, just not on the floor – pending Akilvah’s return, she has been scaling the wall by clamping onto the spikes and towing herself upwards. It was reminiscent for her of climbing the branches of trees in her birthland.

At the moment it nears her, Lah’kur performs a gutsy, but risky vault from the spikes, which pays off when she bonks down on its back. To remain in position, she penetrates the hide with an axe. Charging the spell she primed for this occasion, while the chimera writhes and howls, she uplifts herself to its neck and sets her hand on the rear of its skull. Linking squarely into its life – or undeath – energy, she clogs it with a load of the reservoirs which Lah’kur has assembled in this brawl and overcharges its capacities. The beast can only roar in torment as the skull is fractured and it tumbles, with Lah’kur on its back, to the base of the room. The Amani jumps away and slides against the constructed stone, until she gets a foothold.

With its slaying, Lah’kur and Akilvah are driven to face the other and this achievement, what they made work in this thorny condition and it could not have fallen into place were they in a solitary capacity. For Akilvah especially, this is a personal sign, an uncovering of her inaccuracies in these past few weeks. She had spoken too soon regarding the Amani, and made some terrible indiscretions.

With a new atmosphere encircling them, the two women parse one another with new appreciation and they both nod silently at the other, with an unstated respect.

Side by side, they assist the Zandalari versus the remnant of the nerubians and the now exposed necromancers. Though Akilvah isn’t in prime health anymore, their one medical personnel – a shaman – fortifies the restoration she’s already layered on herself, to safeguard her wellbeing. With the death of all but one of the Scourge cultists, the trolls acquire the keys to decommission the sorcerous barricade and gain access to the apparatus that supposedly mandates the reanimation process on the ground.

The druid regards Lah’kur questioningly.
“Can you do anything to it?”

The Amani walks over and inspects the machine alongside the Zandalari mage. Neither are fluent in this variation of technology, but they each have means to fill the other’s gap. Half a minute later, Lah’kur grimaces.
“Hmm. Don’t think we can abort it.”

“What? Why not?”

The knight points at a trio of sharp, pointed holders.
“There’s an item missing.”

Not quite having a concept of it, Akilvah scratches her neck in puzzlement.
“Well, is that essential? Can’t we put our weapons to it and smash the scrap to bits?”

“Sure, that’d be fun and all, but what it won’t do is discontinue the spires underneath us. Their spells are running independently and have to be dispatched a command to cease operations.”

A single necromancer in the area retains a sliver of life, which Lah’kur kept alive for exactly this
type of emergency. She wrenches him by the robes and hoists him up.
“Tell us what we haven’t accounted for. Where’s the object we don’t have?”, she asks in Common.

The human she’s manhandled spits some blood and looks at her with a repulsive expression.
“I will tell you…nothing”, he says in a hoarse, labored pitch. “For the glory…of the Lich-“

But that’s as far as he goes. Lah’kur sets her hand to his throat and her abnormal eyes takes him in without remorse.
“Oh, you will talk.”

The Zandalari who can sense magic are able to detect a swell of it from Lah’kur at this juncture. The Amani, whose skillset is becoming known to the majority of the Zandalari expedition at this point, likely exploits her talents to boil his blood, but not so redundantly. She perpetuates a temperature within him that’s enough to feel and generate pure havoc in his innards, but merely skirting the limits of lifelessness, compelling him to shriek in his suffering from it.
“No! Please! End this! I beg you!”

“Tell me what I want to know and it will.”

“I can’t—…it wouldn’t-“

His sentence is cut off by a spike in the mind-shattering trauma that quakes in his chest.
“Speak, human. I can do this all day, unless you cough up an answer.”

Finally, a minute later, he buckles.
“It…it has a condition! A power source component which…which it can only function with.”

“Which is?”

“The…the Siren of Akali. This machine is a prototype and was to be tested here, experimented with, to…to determine its practicality.”

The Zandalari are within reach to listen and the Battleclaw’s frown is right on schedule.
“Cor’zel…that’s the relic he was so passionate to forage for.”

The knight unleashes the human from her grip, but grants no mercy – she overcharges his veins with her magic and cooks him from within. His corpse is left reddened and half-bloated, but this coagulates rapidly, as Lah’kur saps his essence to revitalize herself. Some of the Zandalari contort their faces in aversion, but not Akilvah.
“Mm. It seems we gotta track your scholar down.”

“And like as not, wrest it from his hands, the self-centered, half-senile bastard.”
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sophistication and ostentatious embellishment. A cerulean blue soft cloth carpet plastered to the refrigerated stone. Five meters long denim blue frilled curtains, which culminate in the golden depiction of the phoenix’s sun-feathered wings.
Scarlet red oval glass windows embedded with silver-sourced engravings which, if inspected closer, would reveal a miniature text in Thalassian, retelling the sorrow-filled tale of Anderan Sunstrider; Prince third in line from five thousand years into the past, who sought to sail the seas to the north in hopes of impressing his love, but ended up as suppressed ashes.
Summer-wing bushes planted in squat, bulbous marigold-colored porcelain containers, which normally shimmer in red under the sunlight and alters to a cool blue in moonlight, is here leafless, harrowed, frozen and barren. A husk.
A faint, drawn-out melody dancing upon the air, blown from the conventional conduits of the Is’halan Re’dalashon – ‘The wind’s emboldened vocals’, a prestigious musical instrument crafted and predominantly played in Quel’Thalas, by seasoned and intelligent users and experts. To touch its deepest and most eloquent stages of lyrical brilliance, one must be a talented and emphatically precise arcane wielder.

Trienza will candidly confess that it’s a highly uncharacteristic lullaby for her homeland that blankets the air, while she conducts the deeds of annihilation and carnage of Scourge stooges. She can’t quite place the origin of the song that’s being rolled out, but music was never her forte anyhow. Could be too tedious, overly pervasive, specifically in environments she avoided. Well, except for…her voice. The one exception, who…

The customized skeletons, wraiths and undead vrykuls are decimated before her, as her blade Viri’valheen integrates with the instrument’s chanting, to merge into an odd and slightly out of tune duet – one of loss and grief.

A shame to muddy such rich floor decorations and artistry, but Trienza can’t help it when the foes throw themselves against her and present her with but one mode of entry.

The melody of the Is’halan Re’dalashon is somewhat akin to a piano, but with wider reach, although it holds a likeness more to a pipe organ in size and design, albeit with further flourish. In its construction, it is suffused with arcane runes and icons, which when pushing the keys can be warped to amplify the song and the echo of it, via the wind. Its internal components do not simply play music – it manipulates wind particles, sift them through what’s practically a prism of sound. Some of the lower frequencies are audible purely to elven ears.

As she smashes Acranius’ protective line and barricades, Trienza churns this in her mind, the fact that he harbors a mastery for it. What does that bode? Is it an upside, or the echo of a drawback?

The chamber she pours into after ascending some stairs is not what she would liken to a lab or a war room, but rather an average set of private quarters back home in Quel’Thalas. To limit the search, she would proclaim this to be the room of one from the upper class – the class she once belonged to - in light of its proportions, the intricate configuration of the furniture, the curtains, the stained glass windows, the voluminous affixed balcony on the far end and the instrument itself.

What does he endeavor to accomplish with all this? Is he residing in the past? Not unthinkable per se, but rare for a Scourge minion. Or does he merely stipulate a specific state of accommodations? The musical instrument is as exuberant as she’s observed in noble apartments and houses in
Silvermoon – a standard ornately accessorized crimson chair, rows of keys and arcane circles to pull at, with wavy and flowing tubes at the back that extends meters up the wall, practically covering this entire section of the room, smeared in spiraling lines and ornamentation.

The odds are extremely long that he hasn’t overheard or detected her entrance, as the heavy boots tapping onto the cold stone and the rattling of her armor isn’t exactly concealed. But for now, he retains a seat on his chair, his fingers flicking away in a somber, woeful chant. Trienza is indifferent to its origin. She’s familiar with preciously few by name.

The man himself is clothed in a sprawling black cloak with blood red lines, fastened onto metal spaulders reminiscent of those on Silvermoon City guards, but more jagged. His legs and chest are adorned with wine-colored trousers and vest, with silver buttons on the latter and the mark of a quel’dorei noble house – the Tamherrin, if she’s not mistaken.

“Ah, Instructor Shadespire. How lovely to house you as my guest. Please, come on in.” His voice is instilled with a faint reverberation, but his tone is plain, tempered, delicate.

Trenza’s gaze narrows a touch.
“I am Strike-Commander of the Ebon Blade. Nothing else.”

“Think you’ve shed your old chains, do you? We all bear our delusions, I suppose.”
He finishes his tune in the midst of the refrain.
“Dath’Remar’s 25th sonata – do you know it?”

“Not note for note.”

“Truly? It was a favorite of the late King’s. But I surmise you were not a devotee of the concert hall.”

“It was not my choice activity, no.”

“You don’t play then?”, he wonders and motions at the equipment.

Her wintery gaze homes in on him with an unfeeling disregard.
“Why would I? I was not a mage.”

“Times have changed.”

“My arcane-deficiency lasts.”

“So does your shortage of humor, it would appear. Your brother had a superior comprehension for the finer things in life. And better taste.”

Then, Trenza acquires a couple of foreboding steps into the hall.
“Do not speak of him”, she states in a tightened voice.

“How so? Does Jedleyn’s mentioning cause you strain or disturbances, Captain?”

His jeering accentuation is potent, and Trenza’s fingers clasp her hilt with climbing strength, but her face stands impassive.
“You’re not fit to utter his name.”

“A touchy subject, perhaps? Your old life bringing nightmares? But naturally, who of us can say that we do not endure them? I knew Jedleyn, at a distance. Not solely through the Magisters, but he was once with one of my cousins. Although, I believe many men, women and others could say the same.”
Trienza’s rage manifests as she slices a stool apart which stands in her way and she kicks one of its parts immediately at him, but he casually bends his head to the side, letting it fly and fragment into one of the walls.

“As protective of him in death as you were in life, I see.”

At last, he pulls towards her direction, and the crimson-tinged stare is set upon her, tainted by the quality of what they are rumored to consume; though Trienza has a greater sense of that they subsist on both blood and the agony of their victims.

What she can also glimpse is his skin, as unnaturally pale as her own, with lengthy black locks descending from his dome in a neat framing of his face, towards his chest. A delicate black beard encompasses his mouth, supposedly fared as well; an aspect he must’ve died with.

“But you are my visitor and I would insist you at the very least dip your toes into a play on the Is’halan Re’dalashon.”

“Not interested. I’m not here for trifles.”

He huffs in contempt.

“It’s not confusing that you display such ignorance of art. You were a dirtmonger, after all. The wilderness revelers of the Farstriders. You do not contain the intellect to appreciate such exquisite designs.”

Trienza shakes her head.

“Wasting six to twelve hours, sometimes per session in two to four days, merely to catch songs of this trite nature, was not my favorite activity, no. My life had more value than that.”

“I would argue you did not make constructive use of your time anyhow, if you could not delight in the most excellent of all art forms, but this is no longer a concern. For have we not all transcended the confines of mortality? We’re granted all the time in the world now, yes?”

“Yours is running out, so I wouldn’t be thoughtless with it.”

Acranius untroubledly strolls to the left, each footfall landing with care. The crux of why Trienza hasn’t launched into a full-fledged assault so far is squarely that – this is not their first encounter and she’s aware of how treacherous and detailed he is. One wrong move and she can be toast.

“A threat? Instructor, you really must improve your civility as a guest. It won’t gain you much by shaping me into one of your adversaries.”

“You already are.”

The san’layn exhales from his noise with a humored undercurrent.

“I find it amusing that one of the Lich King’s pets would be rendered a stray in such a lackluster fashion. Last we convened in Icecrown, you had it all and now you are a vagabond; downtrodden nothingness.”

“That’s false and a misconception: I have attained the concept of freedom once more. And what I’m asking for is minimal – justice. For me, our knights and the peoples of Quel’Thalas and Lordaeron.

The one pet he has in here, is you. The Ebon Blade shattered Arthas’ hold and gained independence. This is not insurmountable for you and the san’layn either. If you put your minds to it, you too can command freedom.”

Acranius folds his arms across his chest and snorts.

“Why should we? Being what and where we are now, we can prevail an endless amount more than
in disobedience.”

“Consider it, Acranius. Once upon a time, we were of the same people, the same nation. That brute invaded us, stole what made us ourselves and violated the heart of our society.”

“And what does that tell you, Instructor? Quel’Thalas was frail and powerless. The quel’dorei were mere prey, exposed to those who would and could devour us whole. Under the Lich King’s capable, tenacious reign, we will be legitimately eternal. The vigor we can reap from the one King outarms any other in existence and in dimension.”

“But at what cost?”

“Cost? You allude to our inevitable submission. What worth does your autonomy serve, when you could become something more? An entity which eclipses contemporary animation. Ponder the Burning Legion, the Void, the death gods of the shadows and other ill omens – from what the world is as of today, splintered and unstable, it could not rival them. However, consolidated in the embrace of the Lich King, we will grow unstoppable, irreducible for all time.”

“You mean Arthas will. There will be nothing but him.”

“Another fallacy – there will simply be no partitioning, no polarization, no discord. We will all be in harmony.”

Having had enough of his tirades and zealous mindlessness, she lifts Viri’valheen and draws the tip in his track.

“That shall never transpire, not for as long as I persist. He forced this cursed fate on us, defiled innocents, damned those who strove for uncomplicated, happy lives. He can’t be forgiven. I’m going to guarantee he burns for his transgressions.”

“Typical blinded Sah’nir. You and your miserable honor prevents you from gleaning the bigger picture, what he can overcome for us all. You would rather that Azeroth languishes in its present insufficient state? Not let it taste the glory of an interminable existence? To be as one with us? You’re a destructive fool.”

“Don’t try to deceive me, ‘Prince’. Unity is a choice – what Arthas imposes is slavery.”

“Simply because of your inability to conceive of its brilliance. I can’t permit you to exit with such insipid fantasies.”

“You can’t stop me.”

“Oh, but that is where your rationale is flawed, Instructor.” He elevates one of his hands, one which has grown spiked yellowish nails. “My versatility is quite diverse. Here, allow me to lavish you with an example.”

A spark of green-black energy flickers in his hand, which sprouts and expands into a flame that he washes in front of him. A number of shades materializes around them, roughly a dozen or so, like black clouds with sinister scarlet and amber gazes, and shaped arms with claws that they spread at her.

Of course, Trienza does not fear these spirits, the wisps of the dead formed into wily scouts and vengeful eyes; their regrets in life exploited to serve the Scourge.

The Commander’s fingers harden on the hilt, while she rummages in her interior, grasping for an icy wind that rests dormant inside her mutilated soul, imbued by the Lich King. A cyclone of frosty winds discharges from her, envelops blade in its output, which the runeblade cheerfully soaks in.
The frost layers itself onto the floor, the roof and the furniture, like an inward snowstorm. In the same breath, it drills into the shades. With regard to that this is a melded magic of necromancy and the elements, these apparitions cannot withstand such force and even if they scramble against it, Trienza can calmly slice a few of them apart. Not satisfying executions per se, for they are not of flesh and blood. In favor of bloodied shells, they bestow nothing besides the evaporation of smoke into thin air.

Similarly, Acranius has dissipated as well, for when they’ve succumbed, he’s nowhere to be seen. Except, can it be that uncomplicated? It scarcely is. She conjures up the deeds of Lord Veysir to her memory, how he dispersed into the shadows.

Though death knights have a greater sense for tracking living essence than undead, as they were built with an inherent desire for it, the necromantic techniques she’s come by should be up to the task. Whilst she circles her current post, she maximizes her mental field to sweep for the little rat, in parallel with her vision clamping down on every surface in her vicinity.

Sadly, the fresh shades that spawn behind her, towards the doorway of the room where she breached it, would suggest that Acranius has picked up on her scheme. Trienza is as merciless with these fiends, carving them in half, rendering her sword the vessel of her agenda and her stance on the Prince’s gutless conduct. The shades keep popping up, as she makes her way nearer the opening, like a trail of breadcrumbs out into the broader main hallway she chipped her way through in order to get here.

Is he leading her on? This has to be some manner of trap that she’s consciously bumbling into, but what’s the alternative? Indulge him to run amok elsewhere, onto the troops? No, this is her duel, her kill.

With the center up ahead, the procession of ghosts is depleted and Trienza is once more left to her devices, though she puts no stock in that this will be a done deal.

“Impressive, Captain”, his utterance echoes across the chamber, “you are as indefatigable as your reputation relays. Hardly gave them a chance to lift a finger.”

Trienza holds her blade downwards, but at the ready.

“Your mockery does not affect me.”

“None intended. But if you found those of no appeal, warrant me to administer a real challenge.” Trienza senses an incoming rush of matter and in her orbit, a trio of smoke clouds swoop in, which transform into physical entities – additional san’layn, these ones wrapped in armor which emulates sin’dorei craftsmanship more closely.

“The Lich King is not alone in his station to uplift enhanced warriors among his ranks. Meet our Blood Knights, ones who embody the full implication of the word.”

All three of them – two men and one woman – enlist elongated greatswords, with runes inscribed on the flat end, but not those stylized with a demonic touch upon death knight runeblades. These are in Thalassian.

“Not paladins, I take it”, Trienza states sarcastically.

“Hmph. No, these fine specimen are significantly more battle-gifted, brimming with the power of our own machinations. Let’s see how you measure up, Ebon Knight.”

The trio begins to drift in a rotation of her position, their blades held in one hand, like predators cornering a planned quarry, their red eyes gleaming with anticipation.

Regrettably for their aspirations, they have misjudged their roles in this sequence, for it is seldom that the death knights are victimized in any form of melee. These contorted visions of her former race may not fathom this thus far, but they’ll be illuminated.
On the moment of the kickoff strike, based in the man straight in front of her, Trienza pulls at death’s ice to bind itself across her body, fortifying her hide. With another attack incoming from the woman on her left, she shrugs it off, enabling the blade to go unnoticed as it clashes with her arm, and instead parries the man, so that his sword bounces upwards and off her. She then drives her foot into his chest, trampling him away. With the third attacker’s advance, she ducks underneath his weapon, slams her gauntlet into his armored belly and as he budes, she tries to slash him.

There’s no final impact, as the female blood knight forwards her own charge to prevent her fellow’s demise, but Trienza senses the offense and whips around to derail the greatsword with her runeblade.
The two women duel for five seconds or so, edge against edge, with Trienza clearly pressing her on the back foot, given how the death knight’s might and efficacy overshadows the san’layn.

The ancillary blood knights soon disturb their stream, unwilling to let Trienza’s imminent victory stand. A bolt of tainted scarlet is fired from the first’s region, but Trienza nullifies it with a glacial blast of her own. The third of them attempts to pelt her from the rear, but the winds of the north which clings to the Commander alerts her to the sword’s pace and she turns on her heel at a moment’s notice to knock it aside.

With them flanking her from opposite ends, their advantage in this scuffle would emerge, but Trienza plays to her creation’s strength and channels another death knight gift. Dark electric pulses snake over her left hand when she fires a string of black lightning which latches onto the female san’layn’s waist and Trienza drags her in. The blood knight is helpless to intercept it, but the Commander does not wrench this lady into herself, for she instead enables the momentum of the flight to bypass her, as she steps aside and the female knight crashes torso-first directly into her stomped compatriot.

During their scrambling on the ground, Trienza highlights the third in the trio a few meters ahead, who had unloaded the previous spell, and she sieges his location with her own maelstrom. He puts his mind to a courageous, albeit futile defensive, because the Commander has determined the absolute tactic with which to terminate his existence rapidly.

His feet instantly ebb upon the terrorizing ferocity of her sword’s cuts and jabs, but what he does not obtain in his purview is the prediction that she will apply her resources on the environment. She sprays the floor beneath him with ice when he pursues a dodging maneuver, and as his feet touches the ground, he slips and hits the wall, putting him at a disadvantage. With his build partially vulnerable, she goes for the kill, rending his chest, his arm and then upon his staggering, she decapitates him. Viri’valheen’s melancholic singing produces a dirge to his death.

The exterior duo of blood knights has risen to their feet, but they come off as relatively undeterred and blasé at viewing their brother’s severed corpse on the stone. They storm at her, remaining cautious of the ground as to not commit a coincided mistake, but they fail to foresee that Trienza did not execute that method to cheat, but to conserve her stamina for this exact assault. She duels it out with both of them in concert, her blade flying left and right in flux, to keep them at bay. But in the end, it is virtually they who must practice the backsliding, in light of the incessant speed of her swings.

In this type of setup, Trienza’s upside is her substantial martial training, one that she used to bestow upon her students, and these two are not her match. She has combated trolls throughout their numerous forays onto Quel’Thalas and the elves own charges at Zul’Aman. She has tackled bandit clans, pirate raids, the Second War and not to forget, the invasion that decisively slew her. Though she did not live through the last of these, she’s vigilant of where to tap, to stoke the furthest
damage and anguish. She’s driven by the circumstances to draw them against one another.

If they were clever, they would have played off her unsteady position, outflanked her and discovered capacities to cripple her, but in place of any dominance, they’ve situated themselves ahead of her.
Since they won’t play this card, Trienza does. After a series of wild hammering to and fro between them, she deflects one of those from the man, evades the incision of the woman and boots her side.

In the tumult of her thwarting them, the Commander seizes the man’s arm, and once more lobs them at one another, though this time through sheer physical strength. With his six wide open, Viri’valheen is hoisted into an overhead arc and tears into his being, obliterating him from behind, leaving a trail of a frozen scar.
The woman is somewhat tangled up in his downfall and tries desperately to claim her weapon into a prudent angle, but fails. On the upswing, Trienza nearly lops off the arm and the magically infused tip wreaks havoc on her chest. With the female knight’s drop onto her companion, the Commander has now created a miniature pile of them.

As the final blood knight is disposed of, Trienza yet again stands alone on the floor, with no obstacles hindering her. Her affinity for war is proven by way of her lack of major injuries – really just one that she took while fortified by the ice.
But in the lull of the battle’s waning minutes, her body tenses up, as a sting is detected travelling down her spine, deriving from a point somewhere near the back of her neck.

“Bravo”, she hears Acranius’ voice with mild elation. Or is that malice? “I always suspected the King bred your kind with an unrivaled aggression and torment. It would seem I had the right of it.”

Getting the impression of something lingering on her heels, Trienza pivots and overlapping with it, swings her sword in a horizontal path, 180 degrees, but she impacts nothing else than errant dust. The shock and intensity is amplified, into what Trienza can only distinguish as actual…pain. She genuinely gets the sense that she’s hurting, which ought to be…unrealizable. She’s a death knight, they were not programmed with-

Sadly, it also distracts her from a secondary cut. The shadow stalking her has sailed ninety degrees and bursts her with another hit, and Trienza unwittingly clenches her hand. Agony pulses up her leg and her weapon-arm, like in a capacity of her being stabbed by an unseen blade. She gasps, her ears shoot upwards and she arches her back tenuously, her eyes widened in unbridled astonishment.

How…how can this be? True pain. She has not felt it in her whole undead existence, since Arthas molded her into what she is today. She has suffered damage and wounds, sure, but walked it off. It was no more than an inconvenience. She was not…crafted to have awareness of physical agony, just the one from her hunger to induce trauma in others. The sentient walking dead equal to her do not recognize injuries as more than hassles by and large.

In this ordeal, she struggles to reclaim some manner of consciousness, or security, as to not be awash in it. She will become a helpless prey in that scenario, and she is not a woman who bears that. She lashes at what minute sensation she sources from him, but each hapless strike is for naught. There is nothing there, beyond shadows and the festering swell of panic.

“You’re growing sloppy, Captain. Bludgeoning dust now? And here I was ripening to the belief that your adaptability would avert such mediocre elements. It’s feasible I overestimated you.”

Is she hearing him…inside her head? The taunting, patronizing sentiment in his tone is not hidden, not even subtle. It exacerbates her condition, mixing in rage, which is likely intentional.
“What…what did you do to me?”, she overcharges herself to ask.

“Nothing complex. I was merely…prodding your essence.”

As a flat mortal effect, Trienza proceeds to breathe heavily, despite no longer boasting functional lungs.


“Twisting it, reforming you; albeit not to any great lengths.”

“…what are you talking about? Show yourself, you coward.”

“Oh, dear misfortune Instructor – you do not own the mental aptitude to fathom what it is I’m giving expression to, do you? Then permit me to translate it in clearer terms for you to fully ingest them.”

The smug self-satisfaction to his words and articulation provokes Trienza’s lust to rip him in half, but the rawness to her inner systems disturbs her chances to discover his refuge.

“You deem yourself a knight, Instructor. A fighter, a protector, a killer, a…redeemer. But what are you, when we boil it down, if we dig into your very core? A grunt. A corpse. A tool. Did you in good faith conceive of yourself as something momentous, a key component in the Scourge’s lifeline and organization? Only a meathead like you would expect to surpass your superiors, the necromancers. We are in control. We spawn and we modulate you according to our whims. Like the Lich King did to me, like I have for my inventions – and now to you.”

His phrasing, the pure echo of his sound is inciting a looming headache within her and she feels her teeth grinding and her arms vibrating involuntarily.

“What…did you do?”

“This is a test, Captain.”

“Of what?”

“Your attributes. Your…structure. You take yourself for a being, a living organism, but this is a false presumption, a distortion of truth. The hard fact is that you are nothing but another necromantically conjured contraption. A device destined to serve the Lich King’s will. Magic given movement; and magic can be bent, with the adequate tools.”

He then re-emerges ten meters in front of her, his locks dangling in the wind, regarding her bereft of any real emotion or passion. His stance is serene, dignified.

“I do not occupy the astronomical bounty of necromantic properties which the one King manipulates at his fingertips, but I can exhibit to you the incompatibility of our productions.”

Trienza breathes in sharply, steels herself for what she’s about to do, and then angels her sword into a combat-drifting action, bolting in a beeline for him. In response, Acranius lifts his hand, curls his fingers and drags them sideways, like one would pull at strings. Trienza is paralyzed to do anything else but stumble into a wall, missing him, while she hisses in agony. She holds up her arm onto the curtains she crashed into, gritting her teeth to resist the torture’s whispers, coercing her to scream. She won’t. She will not capitulate again.

“Here, have a glimpse.” Eerie green-black rings encircle his fingers, while he calls on another spell. “I shall open up the locks of your mind, have a decent search in there.”

Trienza inhales thickly once more, as the ache from whatever hex he’s put on her overtakes her senses, bringing whiteness all across her vision, and she loses sight of where she is.

This lasts for but a instant, until she regains ocular capabilities, only to delve into another moment
in time, travelling backwards, into the horrors of memory. Flashes of destruction, of quel’dorei blood on the grass of Eversong, bone-chilling outcries in the air, the poisoning and befouling of the vegetation – the invasion of the Scourge on her beloved homeland. Her emotions are saturated with horror, wrath, puzzlement, and an unspeakable frantic urge to act. To save what cannot be protected, to preserve what is long since desiccated.

“A fascinating occasion to recall, but too basic. Too surface-level. We must dig deeper.”

Before she can even get herself settled, the reminiscence is wrested from her grasp. Seconds later, she is positioned in a Farstrider outpost in southwestern Quel’Thalamas, overseeing a midday summer training session with bows from recent recruits.

It’s out in the target practice range, multiple decades ago, with two dozen elves lined up, bows in hand, stringing their arrows into the weapons. Some of them hit bull’s eye, the majority impact near the center or on the rim, while a couple miss. Trienza’s stern cadence is a regular stream for many of them, but she consistently holds down the criticism for a later instance. For now, her shout orders the next batch of arrows, and then the subsequent one.

She glances around, only now gleaning that someone is missing – where’s Silvershroud, that young recruit? She’s usually on time, respecting the commands issued to her, but not now. Combing the surrounding field with her gaze, the Ranger-Captain peers out past the wall and notices the black-haired woman seated on the ground. Trienza squints to get an enhanced look – is that a lynx cub she’s cuddling with? Where did that one come from? They don’t stable any here.

She’s seconds away from barking a directive at the recruit, when the whiteness takes her and she is transferred to another era, another location, now out to the east with a squad patrolling the woods.

In the position as the south’s head combat instructor, Trienza often has to police their borders with recently-trained or at least in-training troops, to supply them with experience in risk-filled scenarios. More often than not, these treks are uneventful and undisturbed, for though they’re pulling plenty of minor enemies, few of them have a way of assailing Quel’Thalamas, in light of the elves’ severe defenses and their human allies to the south.

Be that as it may, this day is supposedly special, of its own pattern, for Trienza’s veteran ears and exacting eyes can determine stirring up in the trees. Even though they are stealthy creatures, blending into the environment with tremendous efficiency, Trienza has inhabited these woods for longer than any of them and can make out the Amani in the trees. She hefts her hand with a closed fist and the two squads with her come to a halt forthwith. Good, implies they’re learning fast. To the dismay of some, she then engages combat-formation delegation with the left hand.

The Amani does, every other year or so, dispatch search parties or impetuous pillaging groups into elven soil, to test their strength or scavenge their materials. But if they presume they can just trespass here and butcher a few newcomers, they have another thing coming. Trienza fishes her swords out from their scabbards and holds them near, but waits. Perhaps today, the trolls will learn their lesson and not hit in advance of talking it out, though it’s farfetched to be optimistic.

Crystallizing from the shadows of one of the branches, the Amani troll at the fore perceives that they’ve been spotted, and his purple stare collides with her blue. Within the span of ten seconds, his face has warped into one of antagonism and scorn, and his hand now bares his own bow with an arrow, guiding it into her pathway.

He loosens it and the projectile darts in a clear-cut order for her, but never pierces its mark, for Trienza has long ago practiced how to head such things off. The arrow is parried in midair, thrown
aside with impeccable precision. Begrudgingly, he calls to his allies for the assault to get underway, without regard to its doom.

Trienza does not observe its progress, for the vision fades. “We cannot get much work done with this. Let us take a shift to familiar faces”, she catches Acranius’ mildly discontent frequency in the back-end of her awareness.

Suddenly, there is a stream of lightning before her, which morphs into images that she became acquainted with over her lifetime, ones that converted her into who she is today. First to pop in is a fair-skinned quel’dorei; a sweet-faced, clean-shaven man with auburn hair in a ponytail, and a string of locks sliding down from the left side of his visage, often in his fancy robes with tall, extravagant collars. Her dear, often irresistible little brother, over two centuries younger than her and almost her polar opposite. Jedleyn Sah’nir, unendingly up to no good, charming and partying his way through life. Sometimes, Trienza had wished she didn’t love him so dearly. Many a fool has faced her icy stare for attempting to hurt him.

A subsequent lightning flash and a fresh face – this one portraying a dark brown-skinned and neatly bearded man in black and violet-tinged travelling clothes, sticking to a young age, but so was Trienza when they happened upon each other. How can she ever blank on him? Farlan – the first human she ever met up with as a young ranger. An envoy of the Kirin Tor, appointed to investigate the Amani border centuries ago and she was to be his escort. They launched with the mindsets of uneasy allies and closed out as friends, weeks later, following a bout of mishaps and afflictions neither had foreseen. She knew him for the rest of his life, and he taught her a lasting respect for humans.

A new blinding light, another breath – nor can she neglect how aware she is of the young black-haired, light pink-tinted elf that slides up into her vision, though this was centuries down the road. Rivaryn Silvershroud, the one subordinate that managed to capture her heart greater than any other. A ranger with one of the finest affinities for animals she had ever encountered. Born from a family with a dark and dishonorable past, Trienza took it upon herself to grant the lighthearted youngster a chance and coach her personally. Then on, Rivaryn took the role of Trienza’s aide, evolved into the daughter she’d never received and became privy to personal secrets few others had the ear for. The Captain had such high hopes for her, until…the invasion.

She is torn away from this joy, over to an image that instills her with the one likeness that ever made her feel small – a pale elf with wild blonde hair, the most excellent bow ever crafted and a perennial glint of wisdom in her sky blue eyes. Ranger-General Líreesa Windrunner. Is there any person beyond her that Trienza can say, with a clean conscience, that she held in extremely high regard, like a mentor? Serving her rotated from being a pain, to a fine education, to an honor and in the final section, a firm friendship. Losing her, from Trienza’s perspective, was a more massive blow to their homeland than the King decades after. Had she been alive in the Third War, maybe…

“Ah, here we are – precisely the cog of your animation”, she retrieves an earful of in her psychological reaches, briefly before the closing actor pops into place, one that will stir the whole deal.

There is no one who has touched her more in this world than this individual. She finds herself walking up the runway to her estate, to where this woman once made her way into the house and Trienza’s heart.

Skirting the exterior of the house, she spots this lady with her back turned on the hind region of it, casually humming in her heavenly rhythm. It’s a riddle to Trienza why she never pursued a career in singing. With the footfalls of the Captain’s boots, the other woman glances across her shoulder.
and then spins to meet her with a glittering smile, the very picture of Trienza’s sun.
Her warm medium brown complexion, her shoulder-length ruby hair tilted to the left, the mischievous flittering in her gaze. A woman that enriched Trienza’s life so vigorously.

“Efaria, yes – your pest turned root of joy. In the right circles, I heard the rumors of your flourishing romance were the chatter of many nobles. Some believed you incapable of love. How she toppled them, yes?”

To this day, Trienza can recollect the amplitude of her giggling, the touch of her hair on Trienza’s skin, the aroma of that Arathi perfume she was so charmed with. Their rapport was not an assortment of passion and lust, but one of compassion, understanding and affection. She was the person like no other who could read Trienza unimpaired. It was what inspired her to marry Efaria, a style of union that Trienza had not seen as likely for her own future, not until that striking bureaucrat penetrated her thick shell.

Alas, it is the flawless bait, the gear which Acranius needs to maneuver her. Her psyche endeavors to repel his charges at her integrity, but it’s dwindling. She can only ride this out for so long.

“Yes. Let it slide, Instructor. Entitle her memory to be the key I call upon. Why would you fight it? You were deprived of her, but my handiwork can set you into her embrace again."

As an accompaniment to his words, Efaria’s vision strides closer to Trienza, her sky blue and white robes quivering in the breeze, and her hair being joggled. The Commander does not deny it, doesn’t revise her direction nor her distrust. For isn’t this exactly what she craves? Isn’t this the substance of her actions? It’s all for her… Efaria blossomed into a woman that fulfilled Trienza, which exceeded any person she’d ever had the pleasure to bond with. They belong together, the one soul who can bring her harmony. Here, in this fantasy world, Efaria’s lips brushing onto her cheek, their fingers entwining, her soft words carried on the wind to her ears – Trienza has never been so tired, never so ready to just…yield.

What eludes her wits is what this manipulation is doing to her in the waking world, what devious repercussions it is sowing on her true bodily formation outside of this dream. Acranius is burrowing his mental barometers into her veins, gaining readings and grasp of how her thoughts operate, how their chemistry flows and intertwines. Every spell is akin to a chisel, sculpting and performing detailed adjustments to orchestrate what Trienza witnesses, what she gloms onto and what she can touch. It is all a bid to manage her settings, to open up her aspirations and rewire them, until those click with his own ambitions.

Trienza utters merely a few whispers in the room, catalyzed by the illusions.

“Efaria, I…I failed you. I’m so sorry…”
Her legs stagger and she falls, winding up on her knees, fingers brushing the freezing floor below her. None of this is obvious to her, as her brain is wired to observe only Efaria. She fixes onto no escape from this tunnel, for indeed she does not put in an effort to discover it. Her mind is reeling, in an intelligent tailspin as to where to progress.

It is here that Acranius would not anticipate an interruption. He too is captured by the emotions, the environment of Trienza’s mental affinity. He simply requires another minute or two, and then…

Inner warning signals blare to him. His eyes burst open, barely in time to take note of the golden light that rushes at him. His hand ascends at rocket speed and a barrier wards it off in the nick of time. His attacker pushes on and a wave of bright energy hits her foot, which she stomps with, to diffuse it all over the position where the two are standing. Acranius retreats in his jarring situation,
teleporting a few meters to the stairs.

What is rendered before him is not undead, nor is it a mere warrior or a standard trooper from the armies of the south, but a full-fledged and conditioned paladin. The golden and blue thorium armor, the Argent Crusade tabard, the Thalassian symbol-inscribed sword and the spiked shield tipped with the Light’s repulsive stench is enough to alert him to this.

Due to her rushed entry and the breeze originating from the open balcony, Ashindra’s long red hair undulates and bright green eyes glares at her adversary with defiance.
“Enough. In the name of the Light, you will release her or I’ll sear your body until she’s free.”

Chapter End Notes

A death knight is technically a kind of necromancer, but I just imagine they have more control of undead than DKs in lore. And Acranius is a very good necromancer.
This wasn't going to be a long chapter, but I really like writing Trienza
An inner fire and a brightness that envelops her whole being, radiating from her in pulsating streams, akin to a lamp fueled by the blazing of a flared up sun. It was down to the wire for Ashindra, having caught a string of shift in the ambience of the necropolis, like necromantic subterfuge was afoot and she couldn’t let that stand. On the road here, she’d borne witness to a cluster of fallen enemies, a trail of death that guided her into the core. She had crossed her fingers that she was incorrect in the way of ill omens on Trienza’s fate, but no such luck.

To glimpse the Strike-Commander on the floor, practically lying on her knees…there are few revelations that could transmit a horrid shiver down her spine, for fear that her efforts were too little, too late. She had failed Rivaryn’s belief in her once and she did not cherish the idea of doing so again. With an ounce of life force remaining in Trienza, she had leapt in, with really no plan. And yet, here she rises, face-to-face with whatever abuser the Prince is.

He, naturally, is less than pleased. Weirdly enough, he resembles the bearing of a man who was awoken out of turn, or had something ripped out of his hands prior to finishing it. “Hmph. A sanctimonious warrior of Light, intruding upon my lodgings? How typical for one of your Order, with no regard for privacy or to render much of an entrance.”

Ash’s grip is tauter than a few seconds ago, while she frowns at him. “You presume you can behave however you wish with our people? Whatever Arthas has done with your type sickens me.”

“Such ferocity. The good Instructor and I were merely getting accustomed to one another. In minutes, she will be grateful that I instructed her return to the King’s fold.”

“Never in a million lifetimes.”

Ash sidles adjacent to Trienza and then puts her sword towards the skies. Magical matter swarms its blade, to Acranius’ bemusement. “What are you-”

But his sentence is never concluded. With her sword, Ash shreds the air in her vicinity and a ripple of Light-based charge slams everything inside, including Trienza, purging the enchantment upon her. The haze lying as a sheet on her eyes is lifted and they begin darting left and right, while she construes what just occurred and where she’s situated. “What…what’s happening? Where…”

The paladin has her shield suspended in front of her, if the vampire deceiver were to stage anything. Ash sets her hand with the weapon tenderly on Trienza’s shoulder. “Commander? It’s me, Ashindra. Are you here? Do you apprehend my words?”
Trienza sucks in air and out of her corroded throat in frail, wobbling breaths. Ash theorizes it has to be a mortal remnant. Then, she snaps to and directs her gaze at the paladin. “...Sergeant?”

“It’s me, yes. Do you recall where you are?”

“I… I’m…”
It’s an exceptionally bizarre day when she gets to view Trienza looking around in a stumped fashion.
“Efaria, she…”

“What? Who are you referring to?”

Trienza appears to swallow, studying the chamber longingly and distraughtly, until she comes to terms with that it was all an illusion. Her accurate behavior and assessment are then locking in, and the Commander feels for the hilt of her blade, which she forsook in her bewilderment. Without it, she’s nude.
“What… what are you doing here, Sergeant?”, she questions, still somewhat out of breath; or to get into her perspective, her physique is busting its gut to…repair her guts.

“Sparing you from a second death, Commander.”

“Last I remember, I ordered you to assist Sydela with locating the engine for this monstrosity.”

“And we prevailed with the search. The mission is ongoing.”

“Why are you here then?”

“Given how perilous it is to combat a san’layn Prince singlehandedly, I decided against letting you.”

“I don’t remember authorizing.”

“Commander, you’re not my superior. I don’t obey commands from you.”

Trienza then finally heaves herself to her feet, with Viri’valheen in her fingers, and stares challengingly into Ash’s contrasting eyes.
“I don’t appreciate being underestimated.” She then softens, quite marginally, and angles herself forward. “But… you have my thanks for pitching in.”

Ash’s lips curl upwards and she refocuses on their joint opponent.
“We’re in this together, didn’t you say? Let’s end this as one. I will be your shield.”

“A repeat performance? So be it.”

Acranius has been monitoring the two meanwhile, possibly getting a read on where and how to go at them, but he does not take the shape of a man who’s fearful of being outnumbered.
“Does this convey that I now must attend to a duo of guests? How marvelous. There is something at hand for this express instance, though you’ll have to forgive me for the hasty foundation – I did not obtain an abundance of a preparational period.”
He stretches his hand to either flank of himself and kicks off with a channeling spell.
“You see, entering this land, I did my research and had my minions ransack the Drakkari’s landscape for their most valuable artefacts and rituals. My master ordained that I augment this nation in his image, and I shall not disappoint. It’s fitting that you will claim the first tickets to its gifts.”
He seems to pull from some external source, calling upon its intensity to serve him in wiping out two gnats to his project of enslaving Zul’Drak below the Lich King. A red circle protrudes on the floor at their feet, which automatically jots down a variety of runes and languages, with incantations from arcane, necromantic and shamanistic disciplines. But as it hits the highest elevation, to his and the duo’s disbelief, it ceases operations, cracks and powers down, related to a vehicle that doesn’t hold enough juice in its tanks.

Acranius is at a loss as he stares not at the floor, but something faraway, imperceptible for their eyes.

“No…”, he mutters. “No, this can’t…this can’t be…” He then flies into a fit of rage, his red gaze blazing. “Where is it?!?” He attempts another loading of it, but with the same result. “It is not present. How…how can this be? I specifically placed it in the container, so that I would-…” His eyes that had not recognized them, now barrels for them.

“You. You’ve engaged with it, done something…mistaken. Thieves. You assume you can slip through my fingers with this?”

In the process of his build-up, the two has stood at the ready in defensive poses, for whatever he would throw at them, but now that he levels accusations of deceit, Ash is boggled.

“Do you…know what he’s babbling about?”

Trienza’s out of breath status bides to a nominal degree, her chest bobbing.

“Hmm. I have an inkling, I believe…” She increases her volume. “The Siren of Akali, isn’t it?” Acranius’ fury unceremoniously inflates and his red sight flickers. However, is that rage…or terror in it? Not of them, surely. Is he frightened what failure to the Lich King will denote?

“Cor’zel pulled something beneficial off, for once.”

“This charade is over”, states the san’layn. “You will return the Siren, or I will obliterate your sorry existence.”

Ash slams Vem’tavir onto the side of Brightwall in a goading sense.

“Let’s see you try, ‘Prince’. Come at us.”

His hands shimmer with the darkness of his skills once more and he paints symbols in midair, a version of summoning sorcery, but with a necromancer’s corrupted slant.

“I may not be a lich, but the Blood-Queen granted me this commission for a reason. You will lament your miscalculations.”

Trienza grips Viri’valheen with both hands.

“If she did, we’ll send you back to her in pieces.”

In the air behind him, a trio of banshees spawn, the ghostly presences of murdered quel’dorei taken vengeful shape. They are followed by a few skeletons, ghouls, nerubians and undead dragon whelpings.

The shrieking of the banshees’ echoes is unloaded onto them, and Ash slaps up a Light reinforcement to buffer them against it.

“So, not a two-on-one fight after all.”

“I’m still somewhat impaired, but I can make this battlefield more arduous for them. However, I can’t filter you out of it.”

“With your…ice storm aura? I can erect a barrier around myself, temporarily.”

Trienza watches how the ground troops march in on them, during which she ponders their predicament.
“Then let’s save that one for a suitable juncture. Be armed for my signal.”

“As you say.”

Then, Ash charges ahead, ostensibly to scuffle with them, but she stops a few meters short, upon which she sets off another consecration field beneath herself, to put a brazier under the Scourge who assault her. The blinding nature of it keeps some of them at bay, but the nerubians and the gargoyles force themselves upon her anyhow, likely on the san’layn’s orders, unable to defy him. Spider limbs and gargoyle claws slam against her shield, and if they try to circumvent her from overhead, Vem’tavir’s frenzied bite hacks at them, licking its Light-blessed energy into their susceptible bodies.

The paladin doesn’t meet them in solitude anyhow, as the frozen surface of the death knight’s greatsword brutally mangles and severs their extremities and hides. Trienza exerts herself to enact her swings, however, for she too can’t directly step onto the Light areas, inasmuch as it toasts her undead flesh to an equal amount.

In her capacity as a death knight, though, there are patently a number of privileges she can profit from and she lets one come into play now, harnessing her deathly grip to drag one of the more sizable nerubians to her, so she can gut it.

But it’s Acranius who is supervising them, and he inoculates his soldiers with his tactics and thus, they take a pass at hemming the duo in, trapping them in the center of the circle.

In time, Ash’s Light zone runs out and she can’t waste all her energy on maintaining it, which intimates that she’s left with no choice but to take them on with only her own physical mass. The elven women come into an occasion where they’re nearly inserted back to back, fending off onslaughts from Acranius’ quite considerable inventory of lackeys. They’re under no illusion that the Blood Prince is envisioning this will somehow eradicate them once and for all, for he’s gotta have something in the cards, but they’re in no position to investigate here.

That is, until Trienza deems that the moment has come.

“Sergeant, now!”

Ash, for the briefest of seconds, glances over her shoulder, gleaning only Trienza’s back, but certain what it entails. She thus solicits the Light for a new favor and a golden - albeit sheer - bubble encompasses her, cloaking her from everything that roams outside of it, damage or otherwise.

And at this stage, Trienza unlocks the floodgates of her anatomy, and the chill of winter pours out of her, like the center of a twister. A rotating ice storm plasters and lathers itself onto every surface.

Though the undead possess no sensory inputs for it, the inherent chill of it is so excruciating that it bruises and fractures their skins, eating at them like an arctic acid. Not only that, it renders flexible movement and hasty swings all but impossible. That is, for everyone but the user and Trienza does not intend to let it go down the drain.

For the span of Ash’s untouchability, Trienza goes into a frenzy, chopping and slicing through every piece of ghoulish flesh she can access, as the remorseless climate makes it more expedient to shatter them, when their limbs freeze.

Her unimpeded reveling in decimation does not outlast the whole bunch of them, however, because Acranius has something against it. With half of his forces unmade, Trienza detects his charge. Safeguarding himself with a necromantic-energized aegis foregoes his own personal descent onto Trienza. She arches her runeblade at a radically close call, parrying a sword from atop her. It can’t quite be named a runeblade, but Acranius’ thin one-handed sword with a black base and edge, holds glimmering garnet red signs down the blunt end as well. Trienza can’t read them, but they
appear out-of-worldly, perhaps demonic.

His pummeling does not cripple her storm per se, but given that perpetuating it any further without valid targets would be counterproductive and a sabotage for Ash, she stows it, for now. “You will join us anew, Instructor, or you will perish. This Citadel is mine.”

“You can keep it, while we send it crashing into a heap of junk on the ground.” She thrusts him back. “And it’s Commander.” Shortly thereafter, she lays into him.

“Commander!”, shouts Ash, as the bubble collapses. “You can’t take him on alone!”

Her words are somewhat moot, for she is swarmed in a matter of seconds by the thawing Scourge. Trienza and Acranius duel on the sidelines, their swords grinding into each other, dispersing sparks and passions in the same phase. “Your wretched pet is on point – a foolhardy performance like yours will turn you into easy prey.”

“You’re neglecting something, ‘Prince’”, Trienza insists. “You’re not skulking in the shadows anymore. The battlefield is my domain.”

She substantiates this by lading her arms with death’s ice, reinforcing her muscles. This progresses when she slams his sword aside, as if it were a leaf in the wind, reflects his meager pursuit of a follow-up and socks him square in the cheek. His body tumbles chest-first to the sturdy floor and twists over it. He was guarded to counter her default setup, but he sold the death knight Order terribly short.

Trientza hounds him, hoisting her sword up to skewer her foe, but he gains control of his body and whirls away, out of reach from her agonizing ferocity and does all he can to rise. He deflects two weighty blows to his defenses, but the third is so pressurized that his techniques shatter. He withdraws by teleporting, getting loud and clear that moving into melee was an overoptimistic prerogative. He then makes a place for a fresh piece of spellwork, testing out an illusion which he concludes will have more value.

Did he truly imagine that Trienza would condone this indemnity? Utilizing a spell of her own, which is far more instant, the black lightning of her death grip latches onto his waist and pulls him back to her. “There’s no more escape.”

As he’s catapulted into her radius, he arbitrarily positions the sword to align with hers, but she simply bats it aside, letting it shoot into the room and expose him. With his unshielded exterior, Trienza carries her foot up, propels it into his belly and punts him into the adjoining wall, with adequate force to momentarily get him unsteady. Being passed the most golden chance in this entire showdown to maim him for what he perpetrated on her, she comes at him with both barrels and puts her sword into a comprehensive overhead trajectory. Concentrating without reservation on this pounding, Viri’valheen unleashes a homicidal lullaby with its carving of his chest, cutting it exceedingly close at hacking him into two distinct pieces.

Profoundly rocked by this violation to his corporeal form, Acranius falters and sinks to the floor. Very sparse liquid actually exits his skin, by nature of his interior systems already being prevailingly nonfunctional. He, like Trienza, runs on magic. As it’s do or die for him, he puts all his willpower into relocating his body, deserting his physical munitions where they are now, to shelter himself on the far end of his minions.

Ash is yet fighting tooth and nail against these select creatures, but her struggle is coming to an end in the short term, which is quite a left turn for the paladin who had been riding this out, holding her
breath that Trienza would manage.
The Commander doesn’t stay on his heels, conscious of that he’s close to dropping off. Or if nothing else, it’s what she invested in, that her mauling had caught him in a death zone.

“You…you are talented, Instructor”, he utters with remarkable temperance, though there is an undertone of strain. “I would…expect nothing less from the King’s core knight teacher.”

Trienza proceeds gradually and steadily to Ash’s side, to facilitate her defense.
“Your King hijacked my experience and competence for himself. I was never his to begin with.”

“But without you…the death knight Order might not…have such a flurry of excelling fighters under its belt. They will be of his service sooner or later.”

“False. The Ebon Blade will oppose him ‘til all is said and done. He ravaged our remains and we’ll get even.”

“We all…earn our little delusions, I suppose. But you won’t be present to contribute to their disastrous campaign.”

Trienza lightens some of Ash’s load, given how abundantly the paladin has served this for her in the past few minutes.
“A dying man shouldn’t presume to field threats.”

“My assumed death is…thoroughly out of turn.”
Stretching out his hand, he draws on a dissimilar spell, but one in the same category – his fingers blast his minions with blood red strings, which catches and then drains every single one of them. The Scourge henchmen, including the banshees, disperse or drop to the floor, while the Prince himself rises in seconds, revitalized on the vitals of his slaves.
“Much better. Now, it occurs to me that my actual conjuration is ripe. I shall introduce you.”

A rift cracks open in the canopy of the room, and from it soars a beast with sprawling skeletal wings, tatty remnants of scales, an elongated skull and horns on its head. Though it is not as enormous as it has a habit of being, there is no mistake made that what lunges at the two is a frost wyrm from the infamous Frostbrood subservient to the Lich King. Due to its size, it was irrefutably a drake in an earlier life.

Spewing a thunderous roar at them, the wyrm gets to work by showering the duo in a virulent breath. Ash intends to block it with her shield, but it warrants no such measures, for she isn’t left standing in this seat. Her wrist is snatched by the Commander, who dramatically yanks her out of the wyrm’s trail and retreats a good range, to where they can post up with a secure footing.
“Let’s not get overeager, Sergeant. The temperature of this thing’s attacks rivals my own. Do not get yourself you trapped underneath it, unless you actually have a death wish.”

“Sorry. Instinct told me to defend.”

The wyrm flaps its wings to mitigate its fall, and the steel-like edges of its claws cuts into the stone. Acranius then steps up to its side.
“Please bid welcome to Galemaw. It has arrived to devour you.”

Ash sets her sword into a defensive pattern, holding her shield up high.
“Why do I get the feeling that’s not what its parents named it?”

Trienza frowns at the Prince and his pet, sword angled downwards.
“They are slaves, like I was. Like he is; though less contently than him. Our names in life are swept
“Can we free it?”

“Not with this monster presiding”, she nods at Acranius.

The Blood Prince himself narrows his gaze and indicates the duo.

“Turn them into a distant memory, will you?”

The wyrm thunders at them and goes in a fixed pace. Ash’s arm vibrates slightly with a tinge of indecision.

“Okay, if you can benefit from some wisdom on how to grapple with this thing, now would be the time to share.”

The two of them are giving ground, but Trienza also holds her sword as if it’s good to go.

“I speculate there is a manner for me to alter this wyrm into a resource for us.”

“Why do I sense there’s a catch?”

“It’s a credit to your astute perspective. Yes, the caveat is that you must keep Acranius preoccupied whilst I wrangle the wyrm.”

“By myself? I couldn’t take Lord Veysir unattended. I’ve got mixed feelings if this would-“

Trientza veers to her briskly.

“You sought to be my shield? Then this is your opportunity, Sergeant. I’m giving you your head – stall him.”

Though Ash is loath to acknowledge it, Trienza has it the right way around. She headed here to be the Commander’s backup and now she better fulfill this job. No choice otherwise.

Ash sucks in a deep breath and nods.

“Very well. I’ll...see to it that he doesn’t badger you. But don’t slack, will you?”

Trientza grips the horn at her belt.

“I never do.”

Once the wyrm dishes out a secondary breath, the women split, going left and right respectively. Trienza then puts the horn up to her lips on the go and blows into it. With the paladin becoming a diminutive target, the wyrm keeps after Trienza with its reanimated eyes, and she bears her hand to blast it with a howling ice gust. This doesn’t do more than graze the bones, but the shamelessness of it agitates the wyrm, who enters a menacing stride, growling furiously.

Trientza has a road in mind and rushes towards the room of the Prince, with the wyrm clambering after her. She dashes to the balcony, rolling in behind the wall for a refuge when an additional blast is launched at her back.

The Commander unravels a satisfying chunk of herself to draw out the wyrm.

“I fought real dragons in the Second War. You think you can do better?”

The partially mindless beast claws its way out onto the balcony, scraping the framing of the entrance until it shatters a portion of the wall, to get at her.

Upon the second they’re both on the terrace, Trienza jeers it into tackling her, shaking her blade wildly in its face. This bears fruit, with Galemaw propelling itself in her direction. Trienza, however, skips aside and dodges the attack, with a bare minimum of space not to get squashed by the wyrm’s size. That said, as the wyrm’s momentum swishes by her, she injects her gauntlet amid
Boasting natural flight capabilities, the wyrm drifts off the balcony, crushing the small railing in its stride, and spreads its wings to take flight. But in the same maneuver, it fails to prevent acquiring a stowaway. Trienza makes use of the spikes jutting out from its back, to ascend her way towards the head and then embeds her blade into its gut, stirring an ailing cry from its skeletal maw.

“You and I are going to get acquainted, dragon”, she states, with it meanwhile striving haplessly to get free.

Awaiting Trienza’s return, Ash is deposited in her lonesome ahead of the san’layn, who has dwelled on the foot of the stairs. He now balances his red vision at her outright.

“What a curious settlement – to consign you to a position here with me, while she dooms herself to become its meal. I estimate you will equally come to regret this folly.”

Ash travels to the center of the room, but her steps are vigilant, cautious.

“It isn’t foolish if we’re aware that you’re not eternal.”

The san’layn has tucked away his arms into his sleeves, and though Ash can’t trace him flawlessly, she can note a stream of something below his robes.

“I’ll give you that, at the very least, but no such qualifications are necessary to forge you into a commodity for me to exploit. All mortals are but nourishment.”

Acranius treads at her, but since no palpable spell was cast, it’s fairly out of nowhere for her that with each footfall, his figure procedurally evaporates like smoke, transitioning into a void. Ash is conscious of that this does not suggest he’s self-destructed; quite the contrary. She’s been set upon by san’layn twice in earlier settings, and so she resolves that he’s concealed himself. Despite her counterpart’s advantageous physical attributes in dispensing damage and a frozen hell, Ash harbors one merit which Trienza does not and that Acranius could have been remiss of – paladins can feel undead. Initiating her ability to sense such signatures and essences, she’s utterly primed for when he takes a stab at ambushing her hind regions, conceivably to sap her health. What he pushes into instead is a fortified Brightwall, steeped in the Light’s vivacity, which repels him, even prompting him to grit his teeth, unveiling his fangs in umbrage.

“Gah. That vile stench and brightness. Dismiss it at once!”

“What’s wrong?”, she asks, her tone moderately sarcastic. “And here I wagered that a modicum of the Light brushing against you wouldn’t be suited to refrain you from getting near. Maybe I overestimated your type.”

Her gloating does professedly have an effect, whether desired or not, as he takes great offense.

“Don’t be smug, Light-licker. There is nothing your flash can do that genuine darkness can’t blot out.”

He then violently unfurls his cloak and a maelstrom of pure, undiluted blackness and shadow rushes forth, like a waterfall of it that threatens to inundate her. To prevent herself from getting overrun, Ash raises her shield and hones the efficiency of the Light’s gifts, wishing it will be sufficient to infringe on his productivity.

In actuality, however, the sole aspect it achieves is delaying the inevitable, for the wave of black smog sweeps over and encapsulates her, until she distinguish almost none of the environment – she’s trapped in a dark vacuum. Confusing her further, it apparently does not limit her motions, for she’s capable of strolling around, even though she can’t spot a goal to advance at, other than more of the abyss.

“What’s wrong, crusader?”, he imitates from somewhere unknown. “Is your Light failing you?
You were so confident a moment ago, that it could not be dimmed. Let this be a lesson to such childish optimism – it is as weak-willed as you petty mortals."

To her absolute surprise and terror, Ash senses that she gets struck from behind, like claws drilling into the right side of her armor, tearing at her in a fleeting interval. She refashions her posture and orientation, to contain any upcoming blows, but none originating from this direction comes a second time. She’s not even clear if this is the accurate point, what with the murkiness. And then, a second unannounced carving delves into her flesh, this one from the left, which deprives her of a larger chunk. Examining her interior, she doesn’t get a sentiment that this is corporeal. Rather, Acranius must be depleting her vitality remotely. She can fact check it in no time, as she’s becoming out of breath, like she’s forfeiting her stamina, which someone is pilfering from her. She can’t abide that, but what is she to preserve herself with?

With no other substitute, Ash gets down on one knee, shield held before her. “Light, I beseech you to join me in solidarity and justice. Without you, I…am lost…”

No response. That’s strange. Even if she will grant that it is evidently in a bind to get across to her within Acranius’ suppression field, the Light has no boundaries, no ceilings – there is no one that can block it out in full. Or is that not what she was taught? What the preachers, priests, and the other faithful has spoken since time immemorial, and what Lady Liadrin promised? No amount of heartlessness and villainy can shutter a formless organism.

But for what comes across as minutes, maybe hours, she is resigned to sit there guessing at her fate, if the Light has disavowed her, omitted her from its consciousness. And it’s not unthinkable, is it? Quel’Thalas is rife with citizens and communities arguing this explicit matter, that the Light no longer shines upon their nation. Maybe it has relegated her to this low tier too, not deserving of its grace…

These dismal thoughts are swept away in an instant, when Ash registers a warmth caressing her hair and back, and unexpectedly, she catches hold of that her eyes have been shut. Now that she uncovers them, she beholds a quartet of figures orbiting her, laying her in the middle. But it’s dubious to designate them as living allies, for they are no more than translucent effigies.

To be more precise, they are souls, ones painted in undiminished gold and pure white. They are, for all Ash can ascertain, beings of the Light itself, represented in mortal shapes. Guardians of Light, priests of yore. They’ve placed her in their custody, blanketing her with their bodies and bulwarks of the Holy Light. Looking closer at their traits, Ash can define long, sharp, almost vertical ears. Elves then, and it stands to reason they’re quel’ or sin’dorei. Could it be that the Sunwell…?

“What is this trickery?”, echoes Acranius’ frustrated voice. “You’ve employed some flavor of Light goons? How naïve. This abject display won’t invalidate what’s coming for you.”

But that’s where he’s got it backwards, or if anything, he undervalues their resourcefulness. Every consecutive blast from his commands are nullified, parried by the guardians. They won’t break, not when there’s a hope to cling to.

The dispersal of both them and the darkness coincides, in tandem with Acranius himself coming under fire – or a frosty cloud would be more appropriate to label what he endures. The Prince is shaken up as the breath of his enslaved frost wyrm is turned against him, and it rains down destruction upon him, coercing him to dismantle his imprisonment of Ash. Trienza supposedly came out on top of the strife for dominance between her and the wyrm, and though it goes for broke to tear itself away, the deathly grip she has on its throat and vitals serves
her to conduct some of its attacks on defined targets.

Seizing her liberty, Ash takes advantage of it to channel a Light-generated hammer into her hand. She lobbs it at the Prince to knock him out of balance, causing his escape to deteriorate. Ash’s sneak attack and the wyrm’s aerial siege culminates in Trienza’s ultimate strike – she hops off the wyrm, angles her blade, coordinates herself to fasten onto Acranius and then prays.

Thankfully, she aces it. It’s ambiguous what hits him prior to the other, whether its her boots that engage his belly or the sword which penetrates his chest approximately dead center. In the grand scheme of things, such considerations are trivial, for the end result is that she tackles him rigidly to the floor, and nails him into the ground.

Acranius hardly takes note of the beating in the critical moment. He’s so diverted by separate quarrels, to recover his wyrm under his spell, or cripple the paladin and cut her annoyance of him short.

Upon landfall, his arms are extended motionlessly, his lips are ajar but muffled, and his eyes are distended in an uncomprehended question, bewildered how he was brought to this aftereffect. The mental pull to his frost wyrm is vanished, which tells him it must’ve flown away.

Then, he peers with tranquility and composure at his subjugator, the one who so elegantly flattened him; both metaphorically and quite literally, with this deed. Astonishingly, they are in harmony regarding the connotations of their consequence. There is no hostility, no viciousness, no belittling at what was wrought.

“Ah…”, he emits weakly. “It turns out…he was mistaken about you…”

Trienta stares at him apathetically, though not out of choice. At present, she simply finds it tricky to express emotions. Furthermore, she sifts out how the frost from her blade is exiting his wound and is piecemeal glazing his body, to hinder excessive roaming and resistance.

“Isn’t he always?”

“I…was convinced it couldn’t be. He is the King, the master of the north…”

“A glorified self-professed title. His might is usurped, his office a sham. We owe him nothing and retribution is fast approaching. That is a certainty you can take for granted.”

The two tarries on the floor in this vein for no less than half a minute. All the while, her runeblade enervates his essence, which in time gives him a freedom, if ephemeral. The red in his gaze dims.

“Commander…”, he vocalizes feebly.

“I’m listening.”

“Swear to me…that you will have this body purged. I do not…want him to bring me back again.”

Trienta mulls it over for a few seconds, and then inclines her head.

“You have my oath, Tamherrin.”

“In addition…do not enable him to escape with what he’s waged on this world. He…he must…pay. Let him hear…the red hot sun…of the dead children of Quel’Thalas.”

The Strike-Commander squeezes the hilt of her sword and nods once more.

“He will hear us, each and every one. It will be his final moment of clarity.”

Then, as a show of mercy, she closes his eyes.

“Sleep, and bask forever in the Eternal Sun.”

With his spirit bled dry, Trienza extracts her blade from the floor and attempts to rise, but discovers
that she’s unsteady on her feet. Fortunately, Ash has not departed and emerges to clutch the older elf’s arm, keeping her upright.

“Commander? How are you faring?”

Trienza, uncomfortable with betraying susceptibility, inserts the tip of her sword into the stone, applying it as a support.

“I’m… alright. My mind is just a tad… faint. Whatever he administered to me, blatantly destabilized my locomotion. I simply require time to recuperate. Don’t concern yourself over me.”

“But-“

Trienza takes a step in solitude to the right and then gestures at Acranius.

“You’ve cultivated a pile of undead-purification enchantments during your career, yes? Imagine you can cleanse his carcass, to deny the Lich King his second rebirth?”

Ash is not satisfied with Trienza disregarding her own welfare, but she exhales and shrugs.

“Yeah, I can manage that.”

“Then, would you be so kind?”

In the interim, she rescinds her position, to share some space.

While Ash gets around to it, Trienza’s left ear twitches, picking up expanded mobility and buzzing outside. She uplifts her sword, but can count her blessings it’s none other than her two aides.

“Commander, there you are”, states Sydela.

“Really did a number on the Scourge out there, eh, boss?”, comments Lah’kur. “Could be forgiven for feeling sorry for the hopeless bastards.”

Their words are then caught in their throats, when they’re furnished a rude awakening at watching Trienza for all intents and purposes hobble in their path.

“The outside engagements were more than manageable. It was in here that I faced challenges.”

“Uh, yeah, we can… we can see that.”

Her aides approach her and Sydela lifts her hand.

“Commander, are you in need of assist-“

“No”, Trienza cuts her off. “I’m alive and in survivable condition. I’ll bear this burden. Focus instead – status report.”

Centered on the mission as ever, overlooking her own potential detriments.

They can’t bear to oppose the directive, however, and Sydela stands at attention.

“Yes, Commander. The teams are on hold below. We’ve secured our objectives, but we’re not quite done.”

Lah’kur sets a hand on her own left hip.

“Yeah, the machine that drives the pillars? It can’t be powered down without the Siren of Akali.”

Trienza nods curtly.

“As I understand it, Cor’zel hunted it down.”

“Oh. You knew?”, wonders the kaldorei.

“Acranius took a shot at enlisting its handiwork, but nothing came of it. Someone or something had removed the item from its relevant slot. Saved us an assortment of trouble.”
“I see. Well, Private Gniklas spied his outlines earlier and we were meaning to chase him down, but thought we’d wait for you.”

The Amani shakes her head.
“Not Akilvah, though. She’s probably at the chamber in question.”

Trienza dips her head once again and then curves to meet Ash’s image.
“Mopped it up yet, Sergeant?”

Ash rolls back a nudge and shows her hand, where there is now zero residue of the Blood Prince, not even dust.
“Yeah, he’s gone. I’m prepared to get out of here.”

“Then let’s vacate the premises.”

Ash’s team is holding tight outside, with only two casualties, no fatalities. They’re all overjoyed to see her and that she’s in at least relatively good form. They pat her back and shoulder. The hallways en route to the chamber are impressively vacant of opposition. It’s either Acranius’ demise or merely a fine task completed by their subordinates that has brought them to this outstanding performance.

They locate the scholar in an incredibly tiny abode for something that would boast such an exquisite value, since it pegs them as a minimalistic compartment, almost like a workroom for nonessential personnel. This could’ve been done on purpose, to throw Acranius’ enemies off. Cor’zel himself is poised in the heart of the room, with lilac rings circling him, relaying the language of arcane spellwork no doubt. He’s placed within, his arms upraised. His hands are parted and hovering in their midst is an item, what they could describe as an ornate and decorated horn of a rhino, but more solid, possibly stone or some mineral. He’s chanting, likely in Zandalari.

Akilvah and her team have trickled in, but not forayed at him. She nods at Ash and Trienza.
“Yo. Prince guy got tapped out?”

“More than you realize”, Trienza responds. “What is going on?”

“Haven’t made a move on him so far. Don’t think we’re up to it.”

“He’s cloistered himself.”

“Yeah, some barrier or other. Can’t knock it down. Won’t even listen to us. Or maybe he can’t hear, dunno.” She points downwards, at couple of stones layered with glyphs. “Couldn’t tell you what that is, but you can bank on it’s not regular Zandalari property.”

“Hmm, I see. Can’t say I have much insight either.”

Wynne, the former Stormwind mage, approaches.
“Sergeant Revenor, ma’am, I believe I can contribute. I visited Dalaran during my apprenticeship, where I witnessed such objects. Arcane Dimensional Translocator – has the hallmarks of a stasis field, but doesn’t cease time. Lends itself to secure a user’s wellbeing, though.”

“Can you destroy it?”, Ash inquires.

“Normally, I would say no, but these ones have quite resoundingly been placed a bit improperly. If
the Zandalari shaman and Vihara lend me their hands, we can piece together a weapon to shatter it.”

“Very well, you have my clearance.”

The trio obliges her, and well inside of a minute, Cor’zel’s barricade is undone, revealing him to them. Akilvah snarls and instantly marches at the scholar.

“Hey, old man, listen up!”

The Chronicler is startled, possibly having locked out the complete range of sound to his little capsule, that he hadn’t anticipated he’d be disrupted so rapidly.

“W…what? How did you-“

“Shut down your damn ritual, pronto, and gimme that thing!”

Cor’zel’s gaze shifts between all of them, though mainly the leaders of this team.

“Akilvah? What are you doing?”

“I got no idea what you’re up to, but I’m putting a stop to this nonsense.”

She strides at him, like she’s due to wrest the Siren from his grasp. This is something he won’t be subject to, though, and he reverses from where he’s stood.

“Excuse me? No! This artifact is mine. Stay back, Battleclaw!”

“And sit by while you perform some deranged shit? Not gonna happen.”

“I…I said halt! Take another step and I’ll unleash the Siren.”

Akilvah is ignorant of what that entails, but for safety causes, she kills her charge at him.

“Hand over the Siren, Cor’zel. Now.”

The scholar has stepped in behind a desk for now.

“Are you insane? I was on the verge of unlocking its secrets!”

“What secrets?”

“Ones that are beyond your miniscule comprehension!”

“Tsk. Sounds like you’re trying to babble yourself out of this one.”

His frown augments and he clutches the horn closer.

“Imagine what you will, but this Siren is in possession of unbridled power, if staged with the prudent magical arrangements.”

From her slot, Lah’kur rolls her eyes.

“Yeah, we kinda figured that out. And we need it.”

“What secrets?”

“Pardon? For what?”

“The Scourge built a machine to operate the pillars down on the surface, and we can only override it with that thing.”

Cor’zel glances in passing at what he’s clenching in his fingers and then stares back at them dismissively.

“Why should I care? This is meaningless in comparison to the wealth of information I can derive from it. I can’t waste an ounce of its capability.”
Akilvah’s fists stiffen in unuttered seething.
“Say that again? You calling your own troops meaningless?”

“When likened to the Siren’s versatility, yes. Do you grok what it could bequeath to us back home? This device contains inscribed information, locked with complex codes - it can open a mental vault to their navigation of this world. Ancient Drakkari rituals, long-lost histories, insight into the cycles of life and death, secrets of the loa! Our soldiers will defy the undead’s onslaught, or they will fall for the glory of the Empire. That is their purpose.”

But the Battleclaw is thoroughly uninterested. She steers her open hand at him.
“Turn over the Siren, Cor’zel. I won’t ask again.”

“Ask? The audacity, to address me this way. Have you forgotten who’s in command here?”

“The Siren, scholar. It’s that or your neck.”

“Stand down this instant, Battleclaw, or I’ll have Zul deprive you of-“

Akilvah then lets her voice erupt with volume.
“I serve Gonk – the Loa of the Hunt – and King Rastakhan of the Zandalari Empire, not Zul! That means adhering to the will of the Zandalari citizens. If you willfully endanger our people, I’ll view that as an act of treason! Don’t care who issued you with some dumbass document that says you’re leader.”

The Battleclaw has, in the span of their expedition together, been on the brink of disobedience more than once. She is not a woman who bows to hollow administration and power native to books and scrolls. And while escalated power for the nation is a prospect she can strive for, it is the survival of her soldiers which consistently influence her, regardless of the mission’s success. But this is the first moment where she relinquishes something wholeheartedly harsh that can be interpreted as nothing other than a threat. And he doesn’t doubt she can back it up.

With little else to go on, he shrugs to portray his dismay.
“If you must have it this way, fine. Killing the undead below isn’t possible without eliminating our soldiers in the blast, but I can reverse the device so that the undead are calmed and sink into their graves.”

“Then get to it. I won’t say this twice.”
A promise of fire

Quiet. Cold and soothing winds, a gust of tempered snow. Squawking, off across the mountain peak. The glittering of the rising sun attempting to pierce the clouds’ adamantine sheet. The Storm Peaks do not live up to their name all days of the year, from what Rivaryn’s team has been able to observe. Mornings like these are aplenty, and though the temperature retains a low quality, they have means to block that.

And it would appear the denizens aren’t poor hosts either, for the frost giants of Dun Niffelem have graciously permitted them to stay for more than a couple of days, to let the blue dragons recuperate. Though, that does not imply they have a wish to overly expand upon their visit. The mercs must press on soon enough, return to civilization and restock their stores. It’s been a satisfying distraction, but it can’t continue in perpetuity.

To be away from war isn’t an unwelcoming circumstance per se, however. It has afforded them leeway to spend time together, commit their schedules on each other and relax. Besides, it’s not like they remain unmoving at all hours of the day. Riv and Razz have gone out hunting more than once, Thariss and Raxeen spar every other day for a few hours and all three work out to stay in shape whenever possible. Helps staying warm in this ice cube of a land too. But the necessity to scrape by on the battlefield isn’t there.

Nadelgosa has joined her friends on occasion, in between the moments she speaks or cares for her brethren. She has thanked them a couple of times already, and sworn she’ll repay them, though she hasn’t detailed how.

She comes again today, on this early morning, whilst the group is sitting and having their breakfast by a fire in the outskirts of the fortress, eating bread and some cooked vegetable soup. She enters in her elven form, presuming it causes them the most comfort when she’s not in her real body. Though she has never been enormous in magnitude for her kind, she’s still a young dragon, which far outperforms them. At any rate, she does not mind standing at equal footing.

“Good morning”, she greets them.

Thariss waves at the drake with her mouth full of warm soup - avoiding to speak in that manner, as she doesn’t desire more glares from Riv – whilst the blood elf nods and smiles. The sin’dorei is seated on the side of her raptor, who’s wrapped in the warm enchanted blankets he’s had for this entire journey, to keep him heated, due to his body otherwise getting too cold.

“Good morning to you too.”

“Yes, good morning”, says Rax.

“I hope you’ve had a pleasant night”, expresses Nadel.

The draenei shrugs casually.

“Mine was uneventful.”

Riv is on the verge of answering, when she feels a nudge from Thariss’ elbow, noting a knowing smirk on the kaldorei’s lips. The hunter rolls her eyes.

“Yes, yes, ours certainly involved…pleasure.”

Rax smiles at her friends, but the drake coughs with evident bashfulness.

“I…uh, I see. Perhaps it’s best if you keep the specifics of this to yourselves.”
“Don’t worry, we will.”

Thariss stifles a chuckle, and then tilts her head downwards to smooch her fiancée’s cheek. The blood elf marginally shrinks away.

“Hey. Don’t kiss me with those greasy soup lips, thanks.”

The kaldorei arches her brow skeptically at Riv, but then a devious notion enters her mind. She smirks, swallows her current portion of food, and then puts the bowl down on the blanket they’re seated by. Shortly after, she pounces her fiancée, pins her arms down and plants kiss after kiss on Riv’s face, shifting spot every time.

“Sorry, what was that ‘bout soup lips, babe?”

“Nooo! Stop it! Razz, save me! Save me, boy!”

The raptor merely glances at them with half-open eyes and sniffs in their direction, but he lets them mess around, still comfortable under his pelts.

Rax smiles and shakes her head, with Nadel clearing her throat abashedly.

“Erm, so I don’t wish to intrude, but…”

“’s no problem, Naddy”, calls Thariss. “Intrude however you like.”

“Get off me, you oaf!”, shouts Riv, but there’s a faint laughter in her throat.

“Make me.”

With the others fairly preoccupied, Nadel directs her icy blue gaze at Rax.

“Raxeen, I was hoping to sit down and talk with you, as a matter of fact. Uh…on our own, if that is fair.”

Rax inclines her head.

“By all means. I was done with breakfast anyhow.”

“Oh, you two going somewhere?”, asks Thariss on top of Riv.

Nadel nods curtly.

“Yes. It’s okay, feel free to carry on smearing your future wife.”

The hunter groans.

“…Sunwell, no! Don’t encourage her!”

Thariss grins down at her smaller partner.

“You heard the dragon.”

Meanwhile, Rax gets on her hooves and slides in next to Nadel.

“Where do you wish to go?”

The drake, to Rax’s mild surprise, takes her hand.

“Follow me, please. I…had a special area in mind.”

Nadel leads Rax out of the present stage, out of the fortress and then lets up just outside of it. There, she uncouples their hands, steps a couple of meters to the right and assumes her natural drake form. She sinks to the snow and shifts her wings back to deliver Rax some space.

“Hop up.”

“Oh. I had not predicted this result.” But she yields to the drake’s dictates and straddles her upper back. “Are we travelling far?”
“Not excessively. I wanted to…establish some reach between us and the others. Do you mind?”

“Not one bit, but I had to ask, just in case.”

“Then we fly.”

The drake rises to her feet without issue and leaps up into the skies. As soon as she’s up, her wings set in, guiding the air beneath them and then ascends higher. Rax does not voice this feeling, but though she’s now ridden on Nadel more than once, doing so up in the heights of the clouds is an exhilarating, breathtaking event. Even if it’s decidedly fundamental to a dragon’s life, Rax continues to be enthralled by it, potentially even a tad jealous at the accomplishment of so fluently soaring atop the world.

She grasps the drake’s scales, placing her trust unrestrainedly in her companion. Nadel sustains a lenient pace, until she arrives at a significant and solitary cliff, where she circles it once and then clears them for landing.

Once they’re down, she drops to enable the draenei to jump off, in advance of her own transformation to the elven shape once more. Rax must internally fess up to being a little captured by the fact that the drake seemingly does not require extra layers of protection against the cold. She was under the impression that the Azurewing settled in warmer climates, but perhaps she has invisible arcane environmental wards.

Now that they’re stood on the ground, Nadel holds her arms behind herself, though she’s not looking at Rax, but instead peers out across the cliff with a foggy sight. This precedes Rax’s impending perception, that Nadel is conflicted.

“So…”, starts the drake.

“Yes?”

“I erm…I felt we had to discuss some…matters that’s rotated us for a while.”

“Such as?”

Nadel lowers her gaze and nudges her foot into the snow, kicking some of it up to reveal the hard, dark soil beneath and she does not continue the topic. Perhaps Rax can ease her way somehow.

“How is your grandfather?”

Nadel blinks in her perplexed state, before she catches on.

“Oh, he’s quite alright, thank you. He isn’t fully rejuvenated yet, but he’s on his way. Then again, he is old now…senior to a substantial number of dragons, with the exception of the Aspects, I suppose.

He’s told me he’s going to find my brother and sister, devote some time at their side.”

“Ah, that is excellent.”

“Yes. The politics here on Northrend has…depleted him somewhat. Now that Deradgos is free, he won’t need to pursue Malygos anymore.”

“You believe he will bow out from the war?”

“Most likely, yes. It’s what I would opt for, anyway. He’s our elder, and though he is a sagely, enlightened man, his direct presence isn’t an imperative every time.”

“Heh. I suspect he disagrees.”

“…he does, but he is stubborn.”
The drake then grabs a gradual and measured breath, which she blows out in a comparable vein. "This wasn’t why I escorted you to this lonely cliff. I had something more…essential in mind. Connected to us."

"I theorized as much. Go ahead, I am listening."

Nadel is grateful to Rax for being patient, but this is a topic easier said than done. Or easier considered than said. For a sparing value of seconds, she explores the other woman’s face, her poise, the sloping of her lips, her strong albeit well-shaped physique, her lovely curved horns… Then, an exhale derived of her nose, which precedes her turnabout to the valleys below once again. She speaks softly, but not inaudibly.

"You’ve…assisted me on multiple occasions this year or more."

"Hmm. Well, me and the team."

"You especially. No less than three separate events. Four, if we count the healing post-gronn fight, which I would argue is applicable."

"Well, I believe it would be foolish to deny that this is right to an extent, but why are you emphasizing it? All things considered, you recompensed us in every case."

"Not the entirety. Not this one here. But, to be frank, it’s important because I’ve had space to gather my thoughts and draw it out, scrutinize what it’s done for and to me. Coming off the back of our encounters on Outland, I…haven’t had a break in thoughts of you. At the outset, I regarded this as a clue of my guilt, but…"

She caresses her hair with one hand, suffused by a measure of unease.

"Our stay in the Nexus has had me ruminating on it, if this may in fact be…something unequal to such ideas."

"In what fashion?"

The drake amends the position of her hand, squeezing her neck instead, extrapolating her words from thoughts in a decipherable respect. She then angles herself to focus on Rax. Her look is irresolute, with a clear awkwardness incorporated into it. It’s not a new response from the drake, but unusual.

"I…I want to be direct."

"I shall not hinder you."

"Mm. It’s just…” She shuts her eyes for a couple of seconds, sighing with unmasked self-aggravation. Then she reopens them. "I…have feelings for you."

Rax is significantly lighter on the awkwardness of this, and she smiles tenderly and understandingly.

"Feelings, hmm?"

"Yes. Ones of um, affection and…desire."

"I had kind of realized."

"…I see. But-“ She drives her face down into her hands and rubs it in an attempt to concentrate. She rearranges her hair and strokes some of it behind one ear.

"It’s not…straightforward for me. It’s not seen as wholly acceptable among dragonkin to engage with the younger species in…well, this capacity.” She briefly angles her gaze at Rax. "Uh, even if draenei aren’t…young, per se. You are, but-“
The paladin chuckles and dips her head.
“I understand. So, that is it? You are discouraged by the reactions of others, of your people?”

Nadel bites her lower lip and barely sways her head.
“…not fully. It’s nothing but one of my worries. I have never…how do I say this? I’ve never quite felt like this for anyone.”

“You have never fallen in love?”

“I have had…relationships. Short ones, relatively. But within those bonds, I never truly felt so markedly…drawn to anyone.” She gets a glimpse of the draenei at the peripheries of her sight, a shimmer of ambivalence in them.
“I can’t tell if this can be described as heartfelt love, but…there is an atmosphere around you that I can’t altogether distinguish. And no, it’s not the amulet; I’m aware what it’s capable of.” She rotates herself so that she’s half-facing the draenei. “I took you here by virtue of that I…would enjoy exploring these emotions, that paradox. And um, I was perhaps anxious at the idea that you…well, that you’d care to as well.”

Now that the drake has come to a full stop, Rax tries to read her, to figure Nadel out, including deliberating on her own way of thinking in this regard. This is a monumental step.
“I am delighted and honored that you would exhibit and concede to exposing your heart on this level. It is striking and heartwarming to hear, particularly in the aftermath of our clash in Netherstorm.”

Nadel’s eyes flit to and fro, reflecting some ailing.
“It’s…not mutual?”

Rax is startled and widens her own.
“What? No, no! That is not what I was getting at! In fact, I do share your fondness, quite substantially, you might say.”

“Then…”

“My concern is not that we could not be even in this, but rather the setback of…my friends.”

“Your friends? Rivaryn and Thariss?”

“Yes. They…have left their marks on me. They brought me from Outland, and gave me…a motivation. I cannot abandon them. I realize that if you and I were to explore this matter, you might ask me to desert them, to remain with you. I am inclined to get closer to you, but not at the expense of walking out on them.”

Nadel’s gaze now flitter somewhat in an expression of excitement, but flavored with undeniable shyness.
“I-I know! And I’m not putting you on the spot. Quite the contrary.”

Rax tips her head sideways.
“Oh? What then?”

The drake can’t fully meet her eyes dead on anymore, and they dart downwards.
“Um, heh…well, I could come with you.”

The white of Rax’s eyes glisten curiously.
“You are asking to travel with us?”
“Yes! Uh, if…if that’s okay. I don’t seek to meddle where I’m not welcome or anything, but to me it is…an appealing prospect.
And eh, better yet, having a dragon along for the ride would be a decent boon, yes?” She chuckles, though it’s more nervously than anything. “Although I would of course venture in this form…”

Then, her sight drifts up expectantly to the paladin’s. Rax herself taps her chin in thought, as she analyzes the situation inwardly.
“Hmm. It is a fine image indeed.” But then, this is interrupted and superseded by a hint of mischief. “I am ignorant of the customs of dragons, but on my world, if one takes a fancy to another, there are certain…rites and formalities which should be followed.”

Nadel is a little deterred.
“Oh, I didn’t—such as?”

“Asking them out, spending time with them, learning about them and more.”

The drake raises one of her eyebrows in mild perplexity, before it dawns on her.
“Uh…wait, are you talking about dating?”

Nadel’s cheeks now redden and the draenei giggles.
“In a manner of speaking, yes. And I am unsure if I could label our stay in prison a ‘date’.”

The drake clears her throat embarrassingly.
“I believe you’re right, yes. That would be relatively…unsuitable. But erm, the Azurewing traditions contain conceits of dating as well. Though, predominantly, they’re composed of such activities as flying in unison, sometimes performances in that light – to entice, of course – interaction of scales, as well as constructing arcane bonds or other magical schools. But…well, you don’t possess wings and you’re no mage, so either of these would be quite a fix.”

“Indeed. But we need not complicate this, do we? We could try a more local precedent instead.”

“You have a suggestion?”

“Dining together in Dalaran. How does that sound?”

The notion of it does nothing to diminish Nadel’s blush, but she does grow a noticeable smile, even if it is a tad shy when she turns the premise around in her head.
“I…would love that.”

To multiply her reaction, Rax delicately fetches her hand, lifts it, and kisses its back. Nadel’s delight skyrockets.
“Then it is a date.”

“Y-yes…yes, it is. And I look forward to it.”

“Have you ever visited Dalaran?”

“I have, although it was quite a few decades ago now. My grandfather brought me and my brother for a meeting with someone from the Council of Six, long before what the eastern continent races call the ‘First War’.”

“Did you converse with anyone?”

“I did. Some mages there, although I wasn’t too impressed.”
Rax snickers.
“I can imagine it.”

For a moment then, Nadel goes quiet, and Rax studies her to grok if there’s anything amiss, but what she sees isn’t reluctance this time. Rather, it’s a nervous warmth.
“Erm, Rax. Could we-” She halts and pinches her own nose. “…may I call you Rax?”

The paladin laughs softly; the sound bringing an elated shiver inside the drake.
“My friends tend to do, so I do not find any objections to it.”

Nadel’s face glows once more.
“Rax, could we…possibly…?”

The draenei tilts her head questioningly.
“Hm?”

“I…” Nadel’s blue sight roams across Rax’s face and then downwards, at the lower end of it, towards two pillowy lines below, that make up her lips.
“I realize we should wait.”

“For what?”

“Until the date, but…you were so tremendously talented at a…specific act.”

The lips now curve into a light smirk.
“What might that act have been? Narrow it down for me.”

The drake nibbles at her own lip, her gaze piercing the draenei’s, to construe whether it’s welcomed or if she’s solidly misread the scenario from end to end. Luckily, there is no unwillingness, no barriers to her approach and urge. Rax stands there with the kindest and most caring appearance, and Nadel senses that she would permit anything.

Thus, the drake fastens her slim hands onto Rax’s shoulders, pulls at them slightly and then pushes herself upwards with her toes. With proximity, her eyes shut, up to the moment where their lips make contact. At that point, Rax’s own lids have sunk and to bring Nadel over the moon, her arms snake around the drake’s waist, gripping and motivating her to go deeper. She gladly reciprocates.

With the wind of the north enclosing them, they stand there in partnered solitude, never being warmer.
At dawn's crevice

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Peace and quiet. This is almost an absurd notion to the travelers of the shattered empire of the Drakkari at this stage, in the wake of weeks of wandering and hours of life-threatening, strenuous and intensive combat. Zul’Drak in its current state isn’t exactly a land to get a sense of safety and relaxation, for the soil of a considerable majority is nevertheless tarnished and just about every corner is infested with hostile undead. But at least one landscape has now been purged of a Scourge army. The product of all their efforts is now no more than a smoking ruin and bodily remains which are gradually being purged and cleansed.

In fact, it’s quite literally on fire, a phenomenon that Crusade-Sergeant Ashindra can attest to. As she stands in the periphery of the triple-faction camp, off in the distance, she can spot the dwindling flames of the August Corona Citadel, the necropolis and flying fortress of the late Blood-Prince Acranius, which hurtled down onto the earth on command of its conquerors. Once they’d deactivated the spires that brought life to the Drakkari dead, the leaders made the collective decision to set the necropolis on a collision course into the ground. As luck would have it, a fresh Scourge division was approaching from the south, which had bulldozed over a Drakkari encampment. This army would not get to hunt the stragglers, however, as the Citadel smashed into them and sent fireworks which could be viewed for miles.

Standing here now upon a minor hill, with Northrend’s breezes cocooning and chilling her, Ash can’t honestly say that she’s overjoyed by what they came to. It’d be handier to call it…relief. Solace, that it’s over at long last. Not the war itself, of course. The Lich King remains an affliction upon the land and the people to the south, but with their troop-deficit here, and the low odds, she wasn’t wholly assured they’d carry their mission through. But somehow, they did. Something to cherish, perhaps.

But her pondering and reminiscing meets an abrupt wall when her ears perk. There have been sounds from behind her for quite some time, given the fact that it’s where the camp is, but now a rising agitation is catching her attention.

Stepping down from the hill, while rebalancing the shoulder pad on her left – really ought to get these off for the night – she strides to one of the ruins where they’ve gathered, which she knows belongs to two other leaders. Situated within the sturdy and yet crumbled walls of a former residential building – prevailingly because the Scourge obviously bombarded this area – is Strike-Commander Shadespire and Chronicler Cor’zel.

Ash has to come nearer to make out all the words, but from what she can tell of the vibe, they’re arguing in relation to some indiscernible topic. Well, ‘bickering’ could well be more pertinent. And to be fair, Ash is not oblivious to the contents of the debate. She’s very aware what it is they cannot track down consent on, for it’s been a sore spot since the necropolis. “You don’t seem to comprehend the severity of our situation, Commander”, Ash hears the scholar debating, when she’s in reach. “The Siren must be preserved for posterity. It is not yet drained to its fullest and it’s far too valuable to discard. Surely you can process the necessity of this?”

The paladin circles the building so that she gets a visual on them, from the outside, via a window. Trienza is in full regalia, while the older troll stands in his robes and pelts. The Commander keeps her arms folded across her chest plate, and her lengthy eyebrows are knitted stiffly on her face,
though her weapon is sheathed on her back, for the time being. “This is out of the question. It can’t be allowed to remain intact.”

“And waste all this indispensable knowledge of the Drakkari?”

“What will you do if the Scourge obtains it again, Chronicler? They constructed a way to exploit that horn to raise the once-great dead. What if they alter it to broaden their goals? Reanimate the dead loa? This is unacceptable.”

“My expedition force retrieved what we entered for, Commander – Prince Acranius is deceased and the Siren of Akali is secured. I can issue the marching orders right after our meeting, if need be. The Siren would be taken back and conserved in Dazar’alor.”

The high elf glares at him with a measure of contempt and she mutters in thalassian, which Ash can only somewhat listen in on. It would seem to be related trolls and their callousness, though. Cor’zel regards her with disapproval.

“Commander, I would appreciate it if you did not make an effort to hurl hidden insults at me and my people in this capacity.” Trienza stares at him now both irritated and confused. Tremors run over her ears, to portray her corresponding sentiment. “Yes, though I’m not fluent in it, I do in fact speak a modicum of thalassian and I could make out elements of your current opinion – albeit, I must admit your dialect is unfamiliar to my ears.”

Of course, why wouldn’t a scholar of his make be learned in this aspect too? Trienza half turns away and exhales from her nose. “It’s southern.”

“Fascinating. I was confident you would’ve hailed from Silvermoon.”

“My family was, but I lived elsewhere. Regardless, this is not an endeavor I can give you. The Siren poses too great a peril to Zul’Drak and to the world. It would be irresponsible of me to let you walk away with it.”

The scholar observes her for a small number of seconds, waiting to discern if she aims to say any further, until he nods when she’s finished and paces on his side of the ruin. “I see. Well, I imagine I get the gist of your reluctance, Commander.”

“Then you agree?”

“Oh, no. There are…some additional incentives that we would have to put on the table.”

Trienza’s frown does not wane, but now she’s rendered bemused. “What?”

“Tell me, Commander, what can the Zandalari Empire provide the Ebon Blade? Intelligence on Northrend? Gold? Fortified armaments?”

The reality is awakened in Trienza and he’s now wearing thin on her. “I’m engaged by none of them and I take offense that you would think to buy me off. I’m not some common pirate that sails the South Seas. You can’t butter me up that easily.”

“And I don’t relish generalizations of this ilk either, Commander. You assume none but the lawless do trade with the Empire? We’ve established communication and commercial lines with every faction across Azeroth, from the Horde to the Alliance, to Pandaria and Northrend. Everyone wants something.”

“Then you’ve now met your match in negotiations.”
“Perhaps…or maybe this simply calls for a more personal inducement.”

The elf refolds her arms and flips her eyes elsewhere. “You have nothing that would pull me.”

Cor’zel lifts one of his fingers up and wags it, as if he’s indicating to her not to be so presumptuous. Then he strays off to the side, where he grabs one of his bags. He rummages through it until he fishes out a scroll. He partially unfurls this item and displays it for the Commander, though Ash cannot spy what it says. “Are you certain of your words, Commander?”

Trienda’s icy vision narrows, but her protests are somewhat quelled for numerous seconds. Then she stares up at him, nearly with a vague hint of concern. “…how did you get this?”

“Commander, the Zandalari Empire is one of the most long-standing civilizations in recorded history, outstripped only by the Shath’Yar and their Black Empire. You shouldn’t be startled at the depth of ancient knowledge inside our libraries.”

With this unveiling, Trienza visibly sucks in air and takes probably half a minute to ponder it. All the ebb and flow of this conundrum, the ups and downs. Then, she stretches out her hand with a resigned look on her face. “Very well, Chronicler. You have yourself a deal.”

A satisfied smile appears on his and he meaningfully sets the scroll in her gauntlet. “I’m pleased we could reach an accord, Commander. Believe me when I say this will be a favor for us both.”

Trienda rips the document away and instantly turns her back on him. “Let’s hope so, for your sake.”

Ash stands and weighs the event of what she witnessed in her head. What was it that he uncovered for the Commander which was so influential that it could budge her? What did they bargain for? She may never know and perhaps, it’s for the best. This is no longer Crusade business, if she’s honest with herself. This temporary faction will disband at the end of this journey and they’ll all go their distinct ways.

She therefore departs from the ruin and heads closer to the center of the camp, where the crusaders and Zandalari have set up tents and cooking arrangements. The death knights are roaming with them, to guard, assist the healers, distribute supplies for the living and discuss the battle they fought together. Though it’s been rough, and they were all on the absolute cusp of ultimate demise, what Ash will take away from this experience more than anything is the bonds they’ve forged and the unity that can be created between unlikely parties. These few weeks and up to today, death knights, crusaders – both living and undead – and Zandalari trolls stand side by side, as one.

She strolls among her companions here, seeing how Lieutenant Foghorn is doing in his healing bed, greeting her squad to share a quick toast with them and a unit of Zandalari, saluting a couple of Ebon Knights that have helped a few priests cleanse bodies and dig situational graves for the fallen, who will conceivably be reburied when they get home, and now help preside over the ceremonies held in various cultural rites.

Eventually, she pops up on the other end, where she sees another circle made against all odds – it is Battleclaw Akilvah standing in front of Knight Lah’kur. At her side is priestess Cherile, and with the Amani stands her fellow aide, Sydela. The death knights look fairly laid back at this express
moment, with Lah’kur’s hands at her waist and Sydela’s arms crossed, as they gauge the Zandalari before them.

Akilvah scratches the back of her neck in a sign of discomfort and shame. For such a previously spirited and adversarial woman, this is an unprecedented offer. “I just felt like saying…well, sorry. For uh, for what I’ve been spouting earlier - during the planning, in the camps, at the fighting and…all that.”

While Lah’kur is on the doorstep of a response, Cherile is not a fan of this statement. She nudges her elbow gently into her wife’s back. “Come now, Redtail. You can do better than that.”

The Battleclaw grumbles. “…I said sorry, didn’t I?”

“If you don’t mean it, does it truly have a point?”

“I did mean it!”

“Then prove it to me right here and now, please.”

With a heavy sigh and tugging at her own right tusk, Akilvah is vigilant of that there’s no point in rising up against her wife. Cherile is too tireless, even for her. “Lah’kur, I really, sincerely apologize for my behavior in the past few weeks. You didn’t much earn it, you stood with us the whole way through and…in the Citadel, you saved my life. I underestimated you and…shamed myself. I’m in your debt and I dunno if I can ever requite that in any valid way, other than…that you’ve got my friendship and trust from now on.”

Satisfied, Cherile smiles and bows her head. “As well as mine. You supported my wife, Knight. This won’t be forgotten.”

Akilvah then, potentially in a gesture of hope and optimism, extends her hand to the Amani and seeks a return. On her pocket of the field, Lah’kur stares at the hand for a couple of seconds and then throws her partner a glance; though it’s unclear if it’s in question or amusement. Sydela doesn’t reply verbally, but their collaborative look is overlapped by some form of concerted interpretation. Then, the night elf shrugs, albeit her lips are ever so slightly bent upwards.

Lah’kur then offers a guffaw and slaps her hand onto the druid’s, to shake it. “Never figured I’d get the ‘privilege’ of hearing you be this nice to me, Claw. But you’ve got me. No score required or whatever – we were two soldiers on the battlefield, and we scrambled for victory with worthy enemies. It was a blast and saving you was just a bonus. Let’s do it again sometime.”

The druid is blown away by the relative ‘generosity’ of this, but then joins her in the laughter. “You really are mad, Amani—uh, I mean, Lah’kur. ‘Course, I’ll fight with ya whenever. We’re sisters in blood now.”

“Damn right. Though, not sure that’s the same for an islander like you. Don’t have enough salt in my—well, don’t got much blood anymore at all!”

She laughs at herself and nudges her shoulder into Akilvah’s arm, who cracks up too. “You got what it takes.”

Cherile’s gaze is soon thick with pride as she rests it on her wife, sliding her arms around Akilvah’s right one, while leaning her body tenderly into the slightly taller druid. Akilvah is unmistakably in
good spirits of this as well, equally from Lah’kur as from being able to soothe her beloved’s apprehension at possible side effects of earlier indiscretions.

Lah’kur rotates her own vision towards Sydela and the kaldorei is modestly amused. “Find this funny, Syd’jal?”

“A little. It’s entertaining to watch you actually managing to make a rival into a friend.”

“Tsk, what? Ever doubted me?”

“From the start.”

“Hey!” The Amani lodges her arm cheekily onto the night elf’s shoulders. “And here I thought we be partners.”

The kaldorei leaves it, with her arms staying crossed, and stares at the troll like she’s armed to play if Lah’kur attempts anything. For fun, of course.

“We are.”

“Partners do anything for each other, right?”

“Including preparing for failure, yes.”

“Hah! Alright, ya got me there.” She playfully presses her fist into Sydela’s shoulder, who winks.

In the borders of her sight, Akilvah then notes another figure and swaps her spotlight for that direction, smiling at the by far shortest woman in the vicinity.

“Hey, Sergeant. Don’t need to stand and watch from all the way over there.”

Ash coughs a tad unassumingly, prior to flashing her own smile and treads over to them.

“Apologies, Battleclaw. I didn’t mean to impose.”

“You weren’t. We just had a chat.”

“Indeed, I noticed. Glad you two could get along. Heard you performed above and beyond in the necropolis.”

“It was a helluva battle, yeah.”

Lah’kur grins at the sin’dorei.

“Already said it once, but thanks to you too, Revenor. Seriously saved the boss’ ass.”

“Though she would not like to view it in that light…”, remarks Sydela.

“Bah, ya don’t give her enough credit. She can be grateful too.”

Ash, however, declines with a shake of her head.

“There is nothing owed in our dilemma. She paid me back practically in an instant. In the spirit of this effort, I wish to express my gratitude to all of you. I’ve expanded my horizons considerably by joining the Argent Crusade, and working with the Ebon Blade as well as the Zandalari even more so. It’s been an honor fighting alongside you and I hope, in the future, that we can repeat this sociable interaction at some stage. Although eh, perhaps with a bit less violence and near-death experiences.”

Some of them chuckle and Lah’kur pats her shoulder.

“The boss seems to like ya, so I wouldn’t mind.”
“You’re an upstanding member of your homeland”, utters Sydela. “I’m pleased to have done battle with you too.”

The Zandalari combat leader shakes her hand.

“Didn’t have much of an impression of mainlanders ahead of time, ‘specially not the Quel’Thalas elves, who our ancestors butted heads with, but you and the rest are soldiers even the loa would praise. If ya ever get to Zandalar, Sergeant, I’d make damn sure you’re welcome.”

“And I echo her sentiment”, says Cherile.

In turn, Ash follows their example.

“And I vow to bring word home of the honor and bravery of the Zandalari, the kaldorei and the Amani. This will be an eye-opener for some, like it was for me.”

With this party now sitting down to loosen up and maybe share a meal – or at least some stories – Ash excuses herself, as she wishes to go inspect more of the surroundings.

She continues her stroll and greets a few other crusaders, having a brisk drink with a couple of Zandalari from what they call ‘Jani Juice’, gives some pointers to a handful of Forsaken on how to speak with the Ebon Knights, and allows a dwarven death knight to survey her blade, as he fancies to admire the handiwork.

Once she’s out on the other end, she takes in the scenery and reflects on where to go next. Perhaps she should simply decompress with her squad, get some rest finally.

But that is when her ear flickers, as she picks up the resonance of a voice she’s acquainted with – her very own Lieutenant Haven. She’s somewhere in the neighborhood, speaking with another entity. Ash was wondering why she hadn’t distinguished the human among the rest. Not that…she had fervently ransacked the entire camp just for Melia. Definitely not.

She has to bypass some bushes in the northern edges, for she can’t get an angle on the Lieutenant until she’s there, seeing the human behind a tree, though not fully in hiding. The gorgeous sight of her brings a stimulating fire into Ash’s chest, and she explores the length of the grey and gold robes, lined and undergirded by a scarf, earmuffs and some fur.

But Ash does not approach, for she beholds how the Lieutenant is not alone. She’s out here conversing with an old ally of hers – Wilthorn, Trienza’s second-in-command. Unlike the wider range of days they’ve linked up, the other dark-hued human is not wearing a helmet today. His own partially scarred and burnt exterior is all out in the open, as is his frozen gaze.

Melia has her attention pointed upwards at him, one of her hands delicately caressing his forearm, regardless of that his armor is disqualifying her from an active touch. There’s a soft-hearted indication spelled out over her appearance, welded with worry. He, on the other hand, is far more sedated, a bit unaffected almost, one could say.

“You shouldn’t be embarrassed for who you are, nor tuck yourself away, Wil. What you’ve become, it’s not on your hands, but the ones who murdered you. You remain one of the most valiant, warmhearted and protective people that I know or have met in this world. How you look or talk or smell or whatever, is not an issue, not to me.”

Wilthorn himself appears to have mixed feelings on this business as of yet.

“Mel, you don’t—…you are…more understanding, more open-hearted and open-minded. Not everyone is gonna be that gentle.”

“Well, okay, I’ll give you that, but it’s not supposed to frighten you from being yourself, for as long as you feel your new existence is worth it. I won’t be, anyhow. And if you ever yearn for company, get through to me. I’ll offer a shoulder, anything you need. We haven’t stopped being friends, even in this miserable time.”
The knight sighs and scratches his beard, but then shoots her a mellow and faint smile.
“Thanks. For…being around. It means a lot to hear you say it.”

She gives him an equal expression in return.
“Anytime, my friend.”
With their somber condition tenuously receding, Ash steps out onto the snow, to bare her form and not be skulking in the shadows too overtly. This garners their concentration. Wilthorn is neutral, but Melia is initially curious, until it shifts into a favoring smile. She then waves the elf over, who acquiesces.
“Ash, what are you hiding over there for?”

“Hiding? I could ask you the same, Lieutenant”, says the sin’dorei with a hint of a joke.

“Tsk. And my response would imitate yours, I bet.”

“I noticed you, but I took it I had to give you some space.”

“Well, come here and let me introduce you two properly. Ash, this is Wilthorn Siddall, the old friend I spoke to you about. Wil, this is Ashindra, a…” Her eyes traverse the impressive and heroic stature of the elf, as her red hair dances in the breeze and bright green irises sparkle with an endearing softness. “…a woman I’ve grown close to in the last few months.”

Wil surveys his childhood friend for a couple of moments, until he sees where this is going. Then he extends his hand to Ash.
“Good to meet you, Sergeant. Used to be in the Stratholme City Guard. Guess you know that, though.”

Ash smiles graciously at him and accepts the hand.
“So I did. Melia filled me in. Ashindra Revenor, previously of the Church of the Holy Light and the Blood Knights.”

“Good to know. Well, wanna go for a walk and chat ‘bout what you two’ve been up to?”

Ash and Melia glance at each other, with the human seeming delighted that the two most essential people in her present life are starting amicably. Ash then falls in on Melia’s opposite end.
“Let’s get to it.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m getting back to these two awkwardly flirting more again now, on this side of the story. Felt like they had to experience some adventures and tough times together first. And also, it was critical for this and future fics to fully introduce Trienza.
Warmth of conjunction

No rigid winds, no continuous loads of incoming snow, no rocks with pinnacles that elongate to the rim of the world, no quaking of the earth under the steps of hulking mega beings. Yeah, Rivaryn’s team is definitely no longer in the raised ascension of the Storm Peaks, not jumping through hoops for the sole purpose of making it on to another day.

These visions and natural components are replaced by other approximations of altitude, yet diverging by the fact that they’re towers tipped with lavender, purple and violet. The austerity and daily impermanence of the Peaks have been swapped for the tentative stability of Dalaran; despite the fact that it is a humongous metropolis very literally floating in the air. Though they could’ve seen fit to journey to a location apart from this one, it seemed like the natural evolution of their voyage, to revisit some much-needed heat and luxuries.

The trip back incidentally excluded most environmental hazards this time, for they did not have the need to descend the mountain in the same fashion as they had gone up. After saying their farewells to Heimir, and the giant informing them that they’re more than welcome for a return trip any day they fancy it, they flew away in style.

Taking into account that they owed the group a plural of favors, Senegos and the Azurewing dragons were all in agreement that they could fly the quartet to the magical city. It was a fair spectacle and with astonishment from the Kirin Tor guards, who were initially rather soundly uneasy at the sight of half a dozen blue dragons sailing for their home.
It was a good thing then that Kassari and Khroga were standing by for their combined entry and chiefly allayed these concerns. Riv’s team had been clever enough to head towards the goblin town of K3 first, to discharge letters that would announce their reappearance and that they’d bring an unconventional escort. The dragons did not linger anyhow, for they had to depart to meet up with Stellagosa and Deradgos. Senegos wished his granddaughter good luck, and that he’d be resurging again in their home isle.

In the wake of the one or two days of rest and recuperation, the Arcanist and her girlfriend invited the team to sup with them inside the inn that lies within the territory of the Sunreaver’s Sanctuary. Kass has on this evening procured a private room for them to dine together in, and thus, she put the criterion for them to all wear something nice and fitting. This included not merely Thariss and Riv, but Raxeen and Nadelgosa too, who were driven to pick over the city’s various traders and tailors for an array of outfits that would be cut out for what Kass had in mind. Not exactly something which necessitates ball gowns, but marginally finer clothes that one would be inclined to wear in decent company.

This is why, as they enter the facilities and group up with her sister, Kass gets to view Riv in a somewhat cropped violet shirt, which exposes her toned stomach, with a long matching skirt hanging nearly fully to the floor on her lower half, and sandals. The sleeves only cover half the hunter’s arms. Additionally, it has lined silver patterns along the fringes of the front and back. Around her neck dangles a silver chain, and she has one armband in leather on her left wrist. Her facial features are adorned with darkening eyeshadow and rouge, as well as black lipstick and nail polish. The majority of this was purchased from a sin’dorei-owned store, materials hailing from her homeland.

It’s safe to say that Thariss is rocking the navy blue suit she bought on their previous stay here, which has been kept in fine condition by Kass and Khroga. Unlike her fiancée, however, Thariss isn’t really wearing much makeup, besides some mild shading over her cheeks. She’s also enjoyed
a nice prolonged shower beforehand, so her shoulder-length white hair is nice and glistening; similar to Riv’s black, which is held in a braided ponytail today.

Behind them comes Nadelgosa in a red-brown sleeveless shirt and a loose-fitting set of sky blue pants with flowery symbols drawn above them. In light of her arms being disclosed, an abundance of her scaly spots is visible across them. Her neck is prevailingly unveiled, besides a velvet choker around it, with an attached pink-purple miniature draenei-sourced crystal in the center. Resembling the sin’dorei, her countenance is also painted, though most of this is in dark blue tints, a faintly darker shade than her scales as well as her hair.

Rax is clothed in perhaps one of the primary extravagant pieces, as she’s using a tall denim-blue dress, with open slits on the right and left for her long curved legs to poke through. The dress doesn’t sit flawlessly on her, due to the reality that it was intended for a kaldorei body, but this is why they opted for something further relaxed and free. Her waist is wrapped in a wide azure sash decorated with silver lines and her ears are pierced with tiny and thin lilac crystal earrings. Her face is marginally less painted than the elves, but she too uses a black color. Sitting on the center of her neck and carried across her chest is the necklace and amulet which she was gifted by her now blue drake sort-of-girlfriend, presenting it proudly.

As for their hosts, or at least the ones who dispatched invitations and are forking out for the get-together, Kass frequently regards it as quite a puzzle not to be relatively ostentatious. This is seen in the tight cherry red silk dress she’s wearing, which accentuates the butt and hips – the latter which is distinctly a facet that she is mindful of is endearing to her beloved Khroga. The top of it is fairly bare, not covering her shoulders in more than the lithe straps it hangs from and a declined neckline. Her wrists, neck and earlobes all have golden jewelry dangling from them - the earrings themselves exhibiting icons of small phoenixes. To top it off, her long black hair descends in a liberated wavy form today, resting on her right shoulder, once more rendering it expedient for her girlfriend to touch and nuzzle into.

The orc has her hair in its routine spirited mohawk with braids plummeting from the sides, but over her chest is a Horde red sleeveless shirt, with black pants below and a hardy leather belt, laced with iron, to tighten it. She’s wearing wrist bands with fur on them for a cosmetic look, but by and large, it’s the brawny arms that are spotlighted, predominantly as it makes her girlfriend partially weak in the knees. Her tusks have been polished and the bottom of them have also been accessorized with emerald and black cloth bands. Besides that, she doesn’t wear any real ornamentation.

As this is a Horde-based inn, it incorporates features from each of the races’ building standards – the design of the Forsaken, the material formation of the orcs, the foundational construction of the tauren, the intrinsic polish of the Darkspear and the magical enchantments of the sin’dorei. A selection of decorations and accessories have been assembled from all the five origins, and the workers as well as the visiting customers are derived from each too.

The wooden and steel table that the group is seated by is clearly a joint sin’dorei and tauren production, the candle in the center is Darkspear, the tablecloth is orcish and the cutlery is Lordaeronian. They’ve all ordered seafood, a delicacy among the Darkspear of Echo Isles, with some vegetables grown in Mulgore, as well as wine, cider and ale from Quel’Thallas, Lordaeron and Durotar respectively.

The lot of them are consuming their individual meals at separate paces, with the bulk of the drinking coming from Thariss, and Nadelgosa being the fastest and hardest eater – she is a dragon, after all. Kass washes down her latest chunks with some Blackrock ale and then continues her tale. “So, in essence, the Nexus War is now all but won. Briefings taken from Coldarra told of a great
struggle, which the blues lost. Malygos’ flight was driven into the heart of the isle, when the other flights united – even the blacks stood by them.”

This apparently astounds Nadel.
“Wait…you’re serious?”

“Mhm. I should add that it’s only a few, not exactly hundreds or anything. I was informed they’re ‘independents’.”

“But still, that is…unprecedented.”

“Quite. There are discussions and rumors of a final siege on Malygos’ hideout, where they hope to browbeat him into submission – death would not be at the highest rungs of their agenda.”

In this detailing of the ideal strike, Nadel is more concerned with another matter.
“What, erm…of the casualties?”, she wonders cautiously.

The Arcanist does not close her heart to the inner context of this inquiry.
“I’m sad to give word that it isn’t small, but likewise not as humongous as it could be. A liberal number of the blues surrendered or saw reason and turned to Kalecgos’ side, the main resistance stand-bearer of the blues.
I’m steadily attaining fresh reports and accounts, and when I get something more tactile, I’ll be sure to send a letter to you, lady Nadelgos.”

The dragon bows her head.
“I’d be grateful, Arcanist, and would view it as a great favor.”

Riv then seeps back into the conversation.
“Oh yeah, that reminds me – Kass, were you two alright after you reentered Dalaran? Because of the whole…book thing.”

Her sister bears her hand to alleviate the worry.
“Yes, don’t get too worked up, dear. I assure you, we were fine.”
But Khroga clears her throat pointedly, to which Kass stares at her for a couple of seconds and then breathes out from her nose.
“Okay, yes, they were…relatively averse to our actions, with a tunnel vision on me, but I-“

“What? Kass, you can’t say it’s fine if it’s not-“

“But! I briskly struck up a deal with them – I would assist them in collecting intelligence on the Old Gods, and they would overlook this little…mishap.”

This clarification prompts Thariss to laugh.
“Seriously? Huh. You’re smoother than I would’ve reckoned, fussbird.”

Kass shrugs casually.
“The Kirin Tor is child’s play to curry favor with, when measured up to the Magisters. And I managed to coax them into advancing me to Arcanist probably a century or two early.”

However, Riv, Rax and Nadel are quietly startled and a tad appalled.
“But, Kass…”, says Riv. “You’re going to attend to…studies on the Old Gods? Why is that? And isn’t that uh…extremely risky?”

“Well, in a way, but not by simply browsing and reading books, tomes and administration. By now, you’ve surely gotten wind of the influence of Yogg-Saron.”
Though they largely look discouraged, Thariss is the one to reply. “Yeah, we heard from Naddy’s grandpa.”

“The Kirin Tor are aiming to produce some form of foray into Ulduar. One of their agents surveyed that area and apparently discovered something disturbing. I couldn’t join in—”

“And thank the Sunwell for that”, Riv says while breathing out in relief.

“…but I snatched the moment to derail their ire from me. Short of that, eyes are now drawing towards the frontier described as ‘Icecrown’. The Argent Crusade is devising strategies and both the Horde and Alliance are flying airships from their headquarters in the southern sections.”

This data makes Thariss appear puzzled. “Uh, they’re gonna bombard the undead?”

“Hmm. Yes and no. Aerial bombing will incontestably be an ingredient of their attack sooner or later, but for starters, it would seem that they merely desire mobile bases of operation. Easier to navigate, when the undead otherwise swarm and infest every single centimeter of ground. For all intents and purposes, anyhow.”

Riv finishes chewing on some fish and rinses it with a sip of wine. “Then, for now, I suppose it’s ideal to…stay away.”

Kass places a hand on Khroga’s arm, but has her eyes for the team. “I was wondering about that. How lengthy of a stay were you planning?”

“For now, we’re not decided on that much. Enlisting with the assault on Icecrown is appealing in the fundamental idea of it all, as we might finally end this horrendous war for good, but…the who, what and where is less constructive.”

“I believe I can appreciate that. I would surmise that it’ll take approximately months to all-out conquer that zone, considering that the Lich King’s most vast and robust legions are centered there. Come to think of it, from the estimates we’ve accrued, he’s reportedly not deployed even a moderate percentage of his extended forces, which of course…bodes ill.”

The older sister rubs the bridge of her nose. “Yeah…not saying I’m not unsettled still.”

“If I were to advise you, however, I’d speculate that the Argent Crusade is one of the safer bets to bank on. They do cooperate with…freelancers like yourselves, and that association may have the grandest defensive and offensive capabilities against the Scourge.”

“Yep. And Ash is with them.”

“Indeed. If you’d be clear anywhere, it’s at her side. That said, if you don’t mind me bringing this up, I would ask you to postpone any departures for a week or so, at least.”

Thariss was cherishing more of the ale, but now puts it down on the table once more. “Oh yeah? Want our company that badly, huh?”

“As a matter of fact, yes I do.” But her bearing then takes on some severity as she looks at her sister. She ensures that she’s speaking in Common too, for this occasion.
“Riv, the Day of Eclipse takes place in a week.”

The other four in the room carry their sights to the hunter, only to see her be driven to introspection and that her head dips downwards out of a tinge of sorrow.
“I see…”

That, of course, triggers Thariss’ protective instincts.
“Uh, hold it for a sec. Day of Eclipse? Never heard a lick of that before. What is it?”

“Sherath’in’beldu”, Kass states somberly. “This is what we’ve taken to calling it.”

Riv seals her eyes.
“It’s…our phrase for when the Scourge invasion began.”

It’s almost subconscious for Thariss to drag her hand over and interlock her fingers with those of her betrothed, squeezing them affectionately and supportively, in case she requires it.
“There is no official remembrance day, as implemented by the state”, Kass puts into words, “but lots of sin’dorei have gravitated towards convening and assembling naturally, in our grief for this day, to honor the fallen and dream of a stronger future. Everyone has lost someone, or they may very well be the final members, for some. For the Silvershrouds, well…”

She doesn’t even clean this sentence up. There’s a hint of shame in her eyes, knowing what their family committed. Though she castigated Riv for her undertakings in the invasion, she has come to terms with that it was their parents at fault. They betrayed their own people. Riv and Thariss both realize this is part of why Kass works so unimaginably hard to assist and shield her people now, to somewhat undo that damage.

Riv gladly accepts the love and warmth from her beloved, while she thinks through Kass’ intimation.
“I…have never attended one of these events. Never felt relaxed in those settings.”

“There will be a commemoration gathering in the park area of the Sunreaver’s Sanctuary, conducted by Aethas Sunreaver himself, partially the Horde’s representative in the Council of Six. Normally, we likely would’ve journeyed to Silvermoon, but the distortion of the leyline system hasn’t been repaired and recalibrated, so we have to make do with what we get.”

The hunter turns her head in denial.
“To be honest, I’m not completely confident that I could’ve ventured to the capital regardless. It’s quite an ordeal enough as it is, to maintain my discipline at the thought of it.”

Kass’ brow slumps with a tacit plaintiveness and she lifts her hand to envelop Riv’s free one.
“Please…come with me. I know how hard this is, but…I’d like to memorize this day with my sister, for the first time. Now that I have you back, I want us to be together. Please, Riv…”

The pleading isn’t one that Riv had fully prepared for in terms of mental defenses, and thus, it impacts her monumentally. It’s not impossible that she was too hasty. She expels some air and then glances at her fiancée.
“I won’t go without Thariss.”

The kaldorei raises Riv’s hand that she’s caressing, to kiss the back of it.
“I’ll always be there.”

“That’s not a certainty, though. Your people may not be allowed, love – this is a sin’dorei summoning, after all.”
But Kass shakes her head vigorously. “I won’t permit them to prevent her. I’m raring to have my sister present, and if this dictates that Thariss must accompany you, then I’ll pull some strings, get you both inside. Khroga is going to partake already, so it won’t be an issue.”

The orc nods. “Yeah, Kass asked me to. Not gonna turn her down.”

Kass peeks at the other two at the table. “And perhaps you wish to…?”

But Nadel’s head angles elsewhere and Rax puts up her hand. “Thank you, but we must decline, miss Kassari. You four should go, however.”

With a weighty but bleeding heart, Riv clasps her sister’s hand. “…fine. I’ll come.”

Highly satisfied, Kass smiles and walks up to Riv’s side, to hug and kiss her cheek. “Thank you. You won’t regret it.”

“We’ll see.”

Reverting to her seat, and as a response to how gloomy it’s turning into, Kass bounces the topic over to the third couple. “Raxeen, Nadelgosa – I hadn’t expected you to commence dating.”

The draenei and the drake look at one another, and the former smiles softly, while the latter emulates her, but also with a flush across her paler cheeks. “It has been a…choppy situation up to this point, and perhaps it yet remains”, admits Rax.

Nadel nervously strokes two fingers along the crystal at her velvet choker. “It’s not clear if we can be deemed to be…together, but I’m here wishing to explore. Being with a non-dragon is…a new experience for me. It’s exhilarating and erm, somewhat muddled.”

Kass’ lips shift upwards. “Oh, I’m well aware what that sensation is like, to go out with someone…uncommon for my people. Orcs and sin’dorei – or quel’dorei, rather – fought a war on opposite sides just a few decades ago. And not to forget my sister, who’s practically above unorthodox. We’ve been hostile to the kaldorei for generations, thousands of years, in the aftermath of the Sundering. I suspect it’ll go great for you.”

Riv’s mood does seem to brighten somewhat. “I do too. You two will be amazing together.”

“Providing of course, that you don’t indulge in anything wild – like, say, attempting to have an impromptu wedding without your family’s knowledge, in another country.”

The hunter rolls her eyes vexedly. “You still mad about that?”

“Still? Still?! We’ve hardly had a moment to converse about it! You owe me an explanation, lest you forget.”

Riv elevates her shoulders. “What’s there to be enlightened on? We intend to host a wedding at some stage in the future.”
Surely you’re acquainted with those?”

The younger sister squints at her.
“…I do not care for your tone, nor the dismissal. Where is this ceremony going to take place? When? And did you ever mean for me to be asked?”

“Kass…stop it.”

“What? It’s a legitimate concern!”

“We haven’t selected a defined date right now. Some people are preoccupied with their duties and we have to hold for them.”

“Can bet your boots it’ll go down in Auberdine, though”, Thariss confirms. “My mom’ll be the woman to preside over it, so it only adds up we stick it in our home.”

“And yes”, Riv continues, “I was going to invite you, but due to it potentially being more than a year in the distance, I didn’t want to grant you an abundance of time to digest it.”

The Arcanist intertwines her arms.
“And what, get in your way?”

Riv’s hand rises and she scratches her own neck uncertainly.
“Well…to come between things, yes. Judging by your previous actions, you do enjoy gaming systems.”

Expressing an ounce of her irritability, Kass pouts.
“I only put this into action when I’m at work! Not with my damn sister.”

“You haven’t yet showcased an example of this, which is why I was cautious.”

But the mage snorts denyingly.
“Well, I…I’m going to have to tell uncle Calanis, you know!”

“Yes, I’m aware. You can send a letter, if you insist.”

Khroga glances from one sister to the other.
“Calanis Silvershroud, the…farmer? That’s what you said, right, zak’tro?”

“Indeed”, says Kass.

Riv slips in an amendment.
“Uh, he’s not a Silvershroud, though.”

The orc faintly leans her head sideways.
“Oh. Really? But he’s your uncle.”

“Calanis Wela’ryn”, Kass declares. “He’s from our mother’s family, the elder child. Or…was. Not much left of them now either.”

A worn exhale spews from Riv’s mouth.
“He…always insisted our father was a bad influence on her. I wish she had listened…”

Thariss is sticking to sweeping her thumb along Riv’s hand.
“That mean he don’t like you two?”
Kass rejects this allusion with a flick of her hand. “Oh, Sun’s glimmer, no. He loves us both, like his own children, and he was especially proud of Riv for walking another path in life. He only attended Silvershroud family meetings to speak with us and I suppose, in a way, defend us from the prevalent ideas of our House.”

“Wait, he’s got kids? So, you two have cousins?”

The ears on Riv drop slightly and Kass hesitates. “I…yes, but we don’t know if they’re alive”, unveils the younger. “Salywe, his daughter and oldest, was a ranger. She travelled with the Alliance Expedition into Outland in the Second War, but she’s on the list of missing people. Bemir, his oldest son, was a mage apprentice and…fell to the Scourge. Alrenis, his youngest son and child, was a sailor in the navy. During the invasion, the ship he was stationed on was incorporated in the evacuations, but it went missing and we have not had news of either since…”

Thariss’ own ears lower to display her being distraught. “Well…crap. Sorry for bringing it up.”

Riv shakes her head. “No need. You didn’t know.”

“But, hold up, your uncle was a farmer? You never mentioned that.”

The hunter fondles her chin in consideration. “Didn’t I? Hmm.”

“I didn’t even have an idea you guys had farmers.”

Riv blinks at her lover, rather baffled. “…what?”

“What would we eat then?”, questions Kass. "Besides fish."

Thariss raises her free arm. “I…I dunno. Guess I never thought about it.”

“Maybe because…most of your people don’t have farmers?”, Riv points out.

“Yeah, suppose. Lotta kaldorei are – or were – nomads. Darnassus is kinda our first big city since Zin-Azshari, Eldre’Thas, Suramar and…all those old imperial locations. Not sure I’ve ever even heard of a quel’dorei farmer.”

Riv grows absent and solemn once more. “That’s…not so strange. Probably since…they by and large lived in the south.”

Kass’ ears twitch uncomfortably. “Mm…”

It dawns on the kaldorei then too. “Ah. Where the Scourge—shit. Riv, I’m sorry, babe.”

“It’s fine. No one told you.”

At this point, Khroga tries to pull up the reins on some of the dreary factors then. “So, your uncle was used to hard labor, then?”
Once she’s drank some more of her ale, Kass locks eyes with her girlfriend.

“Hm? Ah, no, he wasn’t—

Wait, let me rephrase that. Yes, he was, but not quite like…humans or orcs farm. Quel’dorei farmers mainly worked for the state, and thus they either were unaffiliated mages or had Magister mages – traditionally apprentices or Arcanists – who crafted and enchanted tools, which came complete with arcane constructs to do more menial tasks. This was to speed up crop yield and productivity, in addition to reduce strain of labor. A lot of our society operate that way.”

“Hah! That’s nifty.”

“And highly efficient.”

“And your uncle was…?”

“The former”, Riv elaborates. “He possessed magical aptitude, but was never fond of the Magisters, so he applied for a license and opened a farm to do his part for Quel’Thalas. His family helped him build it – that was before Kass and I were born, though. Met his future wife, Deyle – an alchemist – about a decade later. They both reside in Eversong right now.”

“But to rewind to your oncoming wedding”, says Kass, “I simply reasoned that it is a smidgen… extreme and out of the ordinary. Your relationship with Thariss has lasted now for…what, two years? More? You and Ash were a thing on and off for multiple decades and never married.”

The hunter tardily inclines her head.

“This is…an aspect too”, she says with a somberness to her voice. “Thanks to all that’s transpired, all we’ve suffered and undergone, I’ve…gained fresh perspectives. I’d now like to treasure what time I have, whenever it arrives, with the people I love.”

Kass opens her mouth to contest this, but then pauses and puts her finger together.

“I…imagine that I can process this to some extent.”

She glances at Khroga, but neither comments on it. The orc merely holds her hand, and their fingers interact with care. Riv doesn’t confront it, but internally wonders if Kass has pondered that she and Khroga will have even less time as partners, if their connection extends that far. When the orc passes, the Arcanist won’t even be within visible distance of being counted as middle-aged for their people.

“Truth be told, I wouldn’t have foreseen you getting married before you were well over two or three hundred.”

The orc lifts an eyebrow.

“You wait that long?”

“It falls on the person. As a rule, sin’dorei or quel’dorei tend to go one of two routes – get married several times in your first few hundred years to try it out, or don’t do so whatsoever until you’re a few hundred years old. There are exceptions, naturally.”

“Wow. Uh…orcs generally pick one and go with it.”

“Guess my people are like, somewhere in between ‘em”, adds Thariss.

Rax feels like commenting too.

“Draenei do not quite have the same concept of ‘marriage’, but long-length relationships are chosen mindfully, therefore later on.”

“Same with dragons”, Nadel points out. “Blue ones, anyhow.”
Kass listens to their remarks with interest, prior to proceeding.
“To the sin’dorei, marriage is a fluid notion, like love or gender. You test it, you learn and evolve. Our Kingdom was - and is - very closely bonded. We have classes and nobility, of course, but no real fracturing of our nation into smaller realms. Unlike humans, there’s very little use for marriage alliances. It exists, but it’s never been paramount to hold us intact.”

Riv nods slowly.
“Mm. To be honest, I actually was on the verge of being married once.”

Her sister then blinks in shock.
“Excuse me? That’s so not true! Don’t try to pull a fast one on me, Riv.”

“It’s no lie, Kass. I was. Uh…sort of. I had played with the idea of getting hitched to Vestarial once.”

The Arcanist levels her hand in the air.
“Hold your strider. Vesta? Ash’s twin sister?”

“Erm…yes.”

Thariss suddenly chortles.
“Hah! Babe, you haven’t recounted this story either!”

Riv brushes the back of her own neck.
“…yeah. It wasn’t….hmm. You see, I was…in a relationship and in bed with her a few times, as you both know. And on one of those occasions…Vesta made an effort to goad me into marrying her.”

“Goad you?”, wonders Kass, still aghast. “Why?”

“You know why – to spite her sister.”

The mage’s head dives into her hand.
“Oh, right. Practically looked past that those two were…not fantastic together.”

“It was following one of our breakups. Ash opened up to date Niyena, one of my…minor rivals in the Farstriders, you could make an argument for.”

Thariss smirks, ever amused.
“How’d she accomplish that?”

“She seduced her.” Thariss sniggles at this curt response. "Didn't take much. Affection didn't abound between me and Niyena…So…well, I waltzed over to Vesta, and we got really…really drunk together. And at the height – or bottom, maybe – of our…uh, spree of lovemaking, we got into scheming and…y’know, one thing led to another…”

Thariss slaps her own knee and laughs.
“That’s hilarious!”

Kass’ eyes spiral, out of an unimpressed state.
“In the past, you truly were foolish to no end.”

“It didn’t happen!”, Riv insists. “I sobered up and stopped it in its tracks.”
“And praise the Eternal Sun for that. Though I detect that no sobering up will occur here…or is needed.”

The hunter cracks a smile at her sister, and then ties her own and Thariss’ fingers together. “Not a chance. I’ve tracked down my sun right here. Or I wager ‘moon’ is more applicable in this scenario.”

Thariss smirks once more, leaning nearer to her and kisses the shorter woman heartily. “Leave the poetry to the experts, gorgeous.”

“Hah. What, like you?”

“Oh, good goddess, no. Only art I know is the sword and the chisel. And sick abs, ‘course.”

Riv giggles and angles herself right into the kaldorei’s embrace. Kass notes from her end of the table that her sister appears utterly secure in those beefy arms, an aspect that flourishes her inner fire. More and more, Kass is getting resolute that she’ll ensure their wedding will be the best it conceivably can.
Warm fires, joyful festivities, hot and fresh food and drinks. It’s been a good long while since Ashindra has gotten to revel in any of these luxuries. The months she’s invested in fighting for the Argent Crusade has abided an urgent lack of space for relaxation and merriment, even less of the opulent sort. Particularly in the weeks – or months? – that she and her team trudged through the frosty and rotten misery that Zul’Drak had been rendered, was a tough thing to weather. But in some inexplicable fashion, they prevailed and managed to march the whole way back from the belly of that territory, towards a more central site for this continent.

Some in the lands of the living to the south tend to cast Quel’Thallas in the light of a magical and nearly surreal land, where anything can occur and there’s a mystery awaiting in every nook. To Ash, a denizen of that country, that’s exaggerated. There was never anything utterly illegible about her home nation, not even their forests, but she would at the very least grant them that Eversong did lay claim to an arcane nature, by reason of its interplay with the Sunwell. However, a rich sum of venues could say the same – Ashenvale, Duskwood, Tirisfal, Feralas, they all present some package of enchantment and sorcery at work, which could astound the newcomer and the unlearned.

And yet Ash would likely declare just the same that none of them measure up to the sheer daze that her current station induced when she laid her eyes on it. They call it ‘Crystalsong Forest’, though Ash can’t imagine that’s what it was titled in the days of her ancestors. For in reality, this was once a land of the kaldorei, and the Highborne more specifically.

Ash is not a historian, nor is her people endowed with much information of this precise section of Northrend – or Northrend in its entirety - so she cannot substantiate anything, but when asking for information from scholars it would appear this zone was once in terrible disarray and thus experimented with untold levels of arcane magic. That is why half of this forest was transformed, into a glittering purple crystal version of one, with the soil barren and the trees gleaming with primitive arcane energies. Some in the Crusade nearby have asserted that they find it sinister and grim, but Ash thinks the very sight itself is rather beautiful. Then again, perhaps that’s just the one-time arcane dependency in her talking, or her own attunement.

Whatever the case, the crux of her visit is not to sightsee or to gratify herself anyway, but it’s a result of the Argent Crusade’s call to convene in this section. Troops have been pouring into the forest from coast to coast across Northrend for the past few days. Practically every single Crusade platoon is being mobilized and fixed for the next stage of their plans here. The first real assault on Icecrown is projected to be fulfilled in all but a week or two, though it’s unclear if they will be setting this to work in seclusion or with aid.

Regardless, this has not merely yielded the Crusade a time for rallying, but a chance for recruitment too. People are signing up en masse, from the Horde, Alliance and other factions, swelling their pool of soldiers willing to watch the Lich King’s downfall.

With cultures and people from numerous lands on Azeroth’s shores, a slight celebration has popped off. It seemed a good a time as any, and out here, they are not in any imminent danger. Not that Crystalsong is a 100% secure area on its own, even if the Crusade has put up their lodgings on the un-crystallized side, but marginally above other regions; in no uncertain terms thanks to their size.
Drinks and food derived of a mishmash of homes have been set into pots and mugs to be relished, which the adjoining presence of Dalaran is partially the supplier for. Ash has only spotted him once so far, but Highlord Fordring is supposedly among them as well, somewhere. He was involved in the first toast of the party, but then departed to speak with what she assumed were his advisors.

Melia’s squads ended up in here roughly a few days ago. They had broken off from the Zandalari who had travelled northwest towards the command post of their comrades, while the Ebon Knights took off to the southwest, into Dragonblight. Why that was, they didn’t elaborate. They were not the first to step forward, obviously, for the orders to journey here had been given to them in Zul’Drak, so the base was already in the process of being set up.

Upon arrival and passing along of their report, Melia and her soldiers were commended, winning awards, praises and on top of this, promotions for a bunch of them. Melia was bestowed the rank of Crusade-Captain in light of her expertise, leadership proficiency, constructing worthwhile alliances and for saving lives with her healing. Ashindra was brought up to Crusade-First Lieutenant – a rank also granted to Second Lieutenant Foghorn – for her heroic actions, bravery and assertiveness.

Ranks remain fairly loose in the Crusade, due to how new the organization is, but this was not the sole reason for Ashindra rising to a full Lieutenant. Apparently, a report had been sent from a Commander in the Ebon Blade, which directly lauded Ash’s superb deeds, recommending her for elevation or decorations, if nothing else. Ash did not have to inquire who the source of this could be, though she was startled that this person would go to the trouble. Perhaps Shadespire isn’t too proud after all.

Those three weren’t alone in excelling, for their team was on a roll – Braktog’s execution of controlling their squad in Ash’s absence earned him the rank of Crusade-Corporal, with a major window to be Sergeant, if he aces the next couple of missions. Everyone else in the strike team received medals for going above and beyond the call of duty. Even though Ash can practically head up her own detachments now, her role as Melia’s adjutant and advisor stays firm and the blood elf isn’t grousing over it. Melia is a stupendous officer, a trustworthy woman and…quite radiant. No qualms in residing with her.

But discourse on ranks and military protocol has given way for an entirely unrelated commotion in the Crusade outpost – the air is teeming with song, cheering and elated yelling. Few could’ve conceived of such a reverie and rhapsodic display in the core of this cursed land, one that has borne little apart from extinction and muted purges in the preceding decades. Though Ash’s emotions harbor a looming cageyness, never taking for granted what the Scourge and Northrend at large have the capacity for, even she would validate the statement that their efforts merit acknowledgment and to put up their feet for a while.

In the course of this hustle and bustle, Ash has attended her team; not merely the dozen or so which she led, but the pile of squads as a whole who charged into death’s maw of Zul’Drak, and passed its gruesome tests. A couple of them – Braktog especially – has a go at softening Ash up to the idea of putting up a melody of her own, but the sin’dorei solely smiles and continues drinking. She’ll join their carousing, sure, but she will not break into anything tonight, other than her bed.

Quite auspiciously, a separate and warming face comes to seek her out – none other than Melia herself. The human discharges a clear-cut smile for Ash, which the elf distinguishes and returns in kind. But so do a couple of the rest, and they address her.

“Hah, and there’s our Captain!”, calls Braktog. The crew cheers and applauds her as a welcome.
“Hey, come celebrate with us, ma’am! Got beer and wine from every house on Azeroth ‘round here!”

Melia blinks at first, prior to emitting a giggle that runs deep and savoring shivers into Ash’s veins. “Thanks for the invitation, Corporal, but…well, I might jump in later. For now, I need to have a few words with my deputy.”

A portion of those here protest, maintaining that they should stick together and get off their faces before the big show, but others – like Braktog – do nothing more than smirk knowingly. “Alright, you kids don’t stay up too late, though”, jokes the orc, who’s roughly the same age as the human. A few years younger even.

Ash releases air blandly and Melia giggles at his gibe, but the blood elf rises and ducks out with the Captain regardless. After Ash hurries up to Melia, the duo steers east and drifts off in concert, at least faintly departing from the noise of the happy people, to submerge themselves in the cadence of their individual voices. Melia is in good spirits, as she smiles at her companion. “This wasn’t the picture I had in mind for our meetup with the rest of the Crusade, but it’s fun to see everyone so cheery.”

“Heh, I’ll give you that”, says Ash. “Although I’ll freely admit I’m not a party person.”

“No? Your friend Rivaryn conveyed that you’ve been plenty rowdier back in the day.”

The paladin swallows indecisively. “That…was some years ago now.”

“So, it’s all run dry, is what you mean?”

“Well… I wouldn’t be that bold, but…things come and go in times of hardship.”

Melia’s lips angle upwards, though internally, this hangs over her. It repeats itself, this sentiment of self-deprecation, like Ash has eaten crow for…something. Whatever that is. But Melia does not enable it to carry on. “Anyway, I wished to congratulate you. Didn’t get that chance earlier, what with all the hectic hubbub. You’ve done well, my dear Lieutenant.”

Ash is moderately lit up once more. “Thank you, Captain. It’s all owing to you, of course.”

“Pff, nonsense.”

“It’s true. Without you, I wouldn’t even be here.”

“Ash, I tried to abort your part in the mission, remember?”

“For good reason. But I must also stress ‘tried’. You didn’t merely relent, but acquiesced to our tactic and its soundness. Your decisions were a shining example of Crusade leadership, to ascertain when to heed your soldiers’ guidance and how to employ it.”

“Yeah, but—…” She then hoists her hand to cut back on this back-and-forth for them both, and draws her lips up again. “Alright, alright. You win this one. Reckon it would be indecent to tell you off for complimenting me… So how ‘bout we roll on from here? We should celebrate our achievements somehow, have a
couple of drinks together. What do you say?”

“Hmm. Well, I was having my fill before you pulled me off. Ma’am.”

The priestess smirks and nudges her elbow into the paladin’s.
“No, no, no! I meant like, having something legitimately celebratory. Upscale stuff that we can really luxuriate in. Uh…what I would consider luxurious anyway. Not royalty, but…”

The elf arches one of her broad eyebrows in amusement.
“If you can locate a bottle of Brightsong wine from eastern Eversong all the way up here, do inform me. I’d be impressed, to say the least.”

Melia lets off a minor chuckle.
“Couldn’t identify a fine origin like that, but I did dig up a good year of something from western Lordaeron.”

“Ah, I see. Honestly, I’m…not very well-versed in wine stock or years or…anything. My family wasn’t from any upper class. Father was a blacksmith and mother an administrative assistant – and a non-Silvermoon one at that.”

“Hey, mine neither! But I hear this is pretty sweet. C'mon, it'll be fun! What do we have to lose? Besides our discipline for the day.”

Being swayed, Ash smiles and shrugs casually.
“Fine. Drinking anything with you is bound to be rewarding. How can I refuse?”

This remark has Melia equally overjoyed and aflush.
“Hah! Then uh…what are we waiting for, eh?” She encases Ash’s neighboring arm with her own and pulls her away.

A couple of hours pass, with the duo having shared the aforementioned bottle of wine in the interim. If an expert were to have perused it, there would be no doubt that it was in fact one of the less costly versions, but it intoxicated just the same.
It goes without saying that neither of them are immune to the effects of such a drink and here in the wake of it, they’re wandering the perimeter, sloshed, but within reason.
The drunker Ash’s mind grew, the further her lips loosened, and internal defenses untightened themselves. Thus, they entered into sundry personal stories and accounts. Overall quite harmless moments, of course. Nothing that could be misconstrued as a revelation of the heart, but certainly deemed as fun.
For Ash, this constituted interactions in general amid her and Riv, exposing old mannerisms from the hunter in a day prior to her present state. As a result of this, Melia dipped into her own anecdotes in Stratholme, pertaining to Wilthorn and other flings and friendly figures she was familiar with and attached to in the olden days, though exclusively the happy memories. These throwbacks are intermingled with jokes and needlessly to say, amusement. Truth be told, Ash isn’t positive she’s had this much thrill, smiled and outright, sincerely laughed in quite a while. There’s a reception of rejuvenation bubbling within her.
Some moments later, she slows down and her intent resumes in the present. She spins the mug tardily in her hand, tapping the tip of it with the other, as her gaze is mesmerized by the red liquid.
“Hadn’t been prepared for that the brass would actually agree to retain us in our earlier setup, to
stay together. What with you now being at a good rank to go off alone, I mean. Turning Captain, you could lead a whole company.”

Melia directs her inebriated joy at Ash. “Wasn’t that straightforward. They asked me to helm a company like that, with a whole new set of LTs and other staff. Expressed my love to do that, but how it can’t be done without my previous squad, nor excluding my Lieutenant. Our superiors believed you could be beneficial elsewhere, but I insisted. The upper tier is fond of me and my positive impression on the soldiers at my command, but I was persistent that I’d slip up unless I had my favorite LT. And so, they budged. Not much else to do right now, on account of how ill-defined this organization is. Practically still in its infancy, if we’re being honest.”

Ash ends up ostensibly mildly struck by this. “I…but you didn’t need to go to all that effort simply to bring us close to each other. I could’ve survived.”

The Captain raises an eyebrow with light confusion and then chuckles. “What, are you gonna fight me in this?”

“…no, but…”

“Since I doubt I could say the same for myself.”

“What? Melia, I have to differ – you are a fantastic leader, one I hold in high esteem. Our whole squad does. You wouldn’t be desperate if I was gone.”

The Captain then looks at her with wondering and more serene eyes than her current state of mind would appear to imply. Empty of much care, Melia slips her hand – which is not wearing a glove at this time – above Ash’s, blanketing her fingers and pulling it somewhat nearer to herself. “Your view is not…holistic. If you’d glance into your heart, you’d be wise to it too. There are no qualms from me on that part. After all, you spared me from death’s hold more than once – in the vrykul crypt, early on in Zul’Drak, and I could argue even in the battle below the Citadel.”

Ash does not resist the capturing of her hand and instead permits Melia to secure it. “But…I would then counter you’ve matched that, easily. I was almost lost when we initially made landfall, but you kept me stable. In Dragonblight, I’d never have made it out if you had not intervened. And when we struggled before the Ebon Blade’s arrival, you similarly bolstered me. I realize you’re rarely motivated to boast, and I empathize with that a great deal, but you are more exceptional than you give yourself credit for, Mel.”

The Captain’s sight is circling Ash’s, a slightly idle one, shortly prior to a snicker leaving her lips, with a diffident undertone. Has Ash ever called her ‘Mel’ before, or is this a new thing? She can’t help but find it incredibly precious. “Well, while this is true to some extent, I…feel safe with you, Ash. Not specifically in the role of a guardian or anything, but…in a further spiritual pattern. It’s as if I can draw energy and mental strength from you. A wide variety of people have been deprived of family and friends, key members of their lives. However, for me, there’s no one else I can pry such…kinship with. It’s not our origins in the north alone that does it – though that is one part. You are earnest and avid in your pursuit of fairness, but also…tender and sentimental, like a kitten clothed in a hardened shell to ward off the pitilessness of the world. I find that…appealing.”

Ash allows the thought to flourish and imbue her, looking at the value of this and if it can be applied to her. In some respects…probably? To be fair, Ash is not an expert on cats. She briefly
wishes Riv was present to verify if this is a fact, for her animal mastery and Ashindra mastery in equal measure. In truth, that woman could provide the paladin with answers beyond anything she might imagine.

But then, the blasted state of her mind neutralizes these musings and she begins chuckling instead, casting her vision at the Captain.

“First you weigh me next to puppies, and then kittens?” She snickers to herself and boops Melia square on the nose, but in a kind and delicate manner. “You humans. Can’t keep your metaphors straight, can you?”

“Hey!” But Melia is brought to a shred of laughter as well. “Can’t help it! You’re just so cute sometimes. Figure I associate that with soft, sweet animals.”

This remark, perhaps unintentionally, does cause the effect of a blush on Ash’s cheeks. With such a mark, Melia herself groks what she’s asserted and her body warms with a light bashfulness too.

The two of them sit there for the next minute or so, rubbing one another’s hands, grey gaze aligned into bright green; dark brown surface tangled with the pink. To the two of them, for just a short period, this instant strikes them as decreasing in pace and presence, with the wind halting and the cold transitioning into a meaningful heat.

Then, attributed to the spirit of exhilaration and passion, Melia acts purely on the instinct of the moment itself – she squeezes Ash’s hand, poses her own behind the paladin’s neck and drags her nearer. Ash, caught entirely off-guard, does not raise defenses or repelling maneuvers, and is thus won over in a second. Who is she to resist a compulsion of desire?

In the center of their union then, they clash and engage, the human’s lips driven over the elf’s mildly thinner and rougher ones, their chests thinly brushing the exterior of the other’s shirt. Though Ash had not called for or even entertained the promises of this prospect, she nonetheless shuts her eyes in response and condones Melia to lead, for the time being. But that is the extent of her concessions – she does not slither her second arm over Melia’s waist, nor does she press into the human to present a swelling wave of frenzy.

The kiss on its own is a haphazard affair. Their mouths pin and skid into one another, with Melia showcasing the fiercest affection, but their drunkenness does render it gawky and not with a ton of grace whatsoever, yet deep and vigorous nonetheless.

It does progress to an end in time, and with its finality, Melia pegs Ash as hugely flabbergasted, awestruck by the thought of what just occurred between them.

The reticence and bewildered attitude were realistically not what Melia had expected, nor sought. She lays a hand on her own forehead and seals her eyes in distress.

“…shit. Ash, I…I’m sorry. I-I dunno what came over me. I hadn’t…this wasn’t how I-… I get very…impulsive when I’m drunk. Not that I’ve ever been accurate at reading social signals anyway…”

Melia comes off as mortified and defeated, made all the worse by Ash not immediately softening this blow in any way, when she herself is properly overwhelmed. But she soon comes to, and once Melia tries to pull away, the sin’dorei seizes her hand, albeit with lenience.

“Mel, you uh…you shouldn’t. It’s fine. Really.”

Her voice is hesitant, and her focus comes up even more empty, not daring to look her companion in the eyes. Internally, she’s toiling with emotions of elation, zest…and shame. If Melia was trained in the behavior of sin’dorei ears, she would make out some of this now on Ash’s, how they tilt backwards by a few degrees, with a low-level shiver.
Melia looks up at Ash with a hopeful drive, but she is not invigorated by how Ash falters. Is she merely saying that to assuage Melia’s guilt or something else?
“Are you certain?”

“I…it’s not…” Ash drags in a hefty amount of air and then digs her fingers into Melia’s. The human responds, but she doesn’t comprehend what ails the one who has her heart.
“I just don’t…deserve…”

Her quiet sentence is cut off at the pass and Melia’s gaze dashes left and right, at a loss.
“Deserve what? Love?”

“It’s…”
Ash appears to be on the edge of release, of clearing the air once and for all. But can she rightly do this? Explain to this lovely, wondrous creature what she’s done? Will Melia accept her with this burden and crime on her conscience?
Eventually, Ash swallows and closes her eyes.
“Could we…go back to the tents? I…I’ve got a real headache. Think I need a nap…or more.”

Melia is discontent with this conclusion, but she does not defy it.
“Provided you didn’t have anything else to say…?”

“No…not now. I’m sorry. Truly.”

Chapter End Notes

*This will be better, I swear. But there is one topic they must solve first. Next time.  
Well, after the Rivaryn chapter*
Day of Eclipse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sherath’in’beldu. Not an official issued state holiday by the royals of Quel’Thalas – or now, simply the temporary government, what with the absence of a royal house. Nevertheless, in their grieving and mournful atmosphere, which lingers in the memories and mindset of the people who survived, and is bound to continue to do for millennia to come, the sin’dorei played it by ear and set out to craft a date for the sake of their losses. A day they could come together in order to reminisce, mourn, but also cultivate a sense of collective strength for the future.

Such losses were felt and endured in that invasion, unprecedented in untold generations. An embellished estimate in the first few months stated that only a tenth of the population outlived the horrors, though needless to say, this was an undercalculation. Despite still lacking precise records, a majority of scholars are now of the opinion that somewhere between 40-60% of quel’dorei fell to the Scourge’s brutality. An incomparable atrocity regardless, but not to the point where despair wholesale overwhelms them. With such massive numbers yet missing, though, potentially hiding or journeying away from their old home, nothing is certain. The evacuations made out to sea at the height of the slaughter have not all been accounted for.

Ordinarily, these assemblages are conducted and formed inside the borders of Quel’Thalas, hitherto within visual distance of Silvermoon City. It’s where they experience the greatest measure of stability and shelter, in spite of that it was the very site for the atrocities they sustained. They’re soundly familiar with this matter, but more than that, Quel’Thalas contributes the ambience of nostalgia and a better past.

That is why today is a historic date – for the first time since that fateful, excruciating period half a decade ago, a blood elven Day of Eclipse gathering is arranged beyond the borders of their homeland. In the minor park area of Sunreaver’s Sanctuary, the Horde territory in Dalaran, blood elves of diverse ilk, origin and ranks are dropping in, greeting and addressing one another in thalassian.

The formally accepted outfit and color composition in this ceremony replicates that of ex-quel’dorei funerals – long, quite plain robes, unadorned by symbols or marks. They must be sown in grey, the national color of mourning and bleak times, with a faint scarlet lining along the hems. It’s contingent on the circumstances, but the latter can symbolize the royal house or the nation of Quel’Thalas in general.

The park is not a humongous installation in the Sanctuary, not above a block, with fertile grass encompassed by strictly-trimmed bushes, but certainly doable for a couple of hundred people to congregate in the vicinity of the fountain that runs in the center.

At the outskirts of this enclave, one may notice that the sin’dorei are not damned to solitude, for warriors, spellcasters and representatives of other races of the Horde stand in solidarity. Though, in the main, the non-elves collected were dispatched here by request from sin’dorei command, as guards and watchers, on the off chance that an incident occurs externally. Such precautions are presumably overcautious and perhaps amount to nothing, but given the nature of them doing this abroad and the unstable quality of this landscape, they wished to be mindful and prepared. With that said, the audience is not made up exclusively of soldiers, for there is a proportion – mainly Forsaken – who are engrossed and curious of blood elven customs and rites.

At the front of the itinerary into the Sanctuary, a duo of figures clad in equipment compatible with
those in attendance stand and ambivalently contemplate what their following move is supposed to be. Rivaryn can’t for the life of her recall when she was most recently covered in this sorrow-filled cloth, this meld of shades which denote only aching and life turning askew. The Second War, perhaps? Seems probable.

Oh yes, now it comes back to her. She can call up visions of a grand service in the aftermath, on the streets of Silvermoon. She was affixed to Ranger-Captain Trienza, who as always was a stoic and enduring inspiration, and a bunch of additional Farstriders. The Captain and Efaria held hands later on, the administrator laying her head on her wife’s shoulder.

During a march across the enchanted stone, Riv summons thoughts of how uncle Calanis was there in the crowd, with Kassari and his wife Deyle – a lovely dark brown-skinned and average-heighted quel’dorei, now a sin’dorei, with intelligent light blue eyes and short pale blonde hair – as they waved at her. Her parents were absent. Later on, they met up and her uncle spoke with lamenting words that their daughter had yet to return from Outland. They both feared they might never see her again. Riv, in vain, tried to console the couple, told them that she knows of no more versatile woman in this world than her cousin Salywe. She’ll make it back. Or so she hoped…

The event at hand is more than a little divergent from the comparative halcyon days of the post-Second War era. Not only is she not coming along for the ride out of duty, but simple familial obligation, and to double down on the misery, she has but one person to lean on and it’s her fiancée. It’s a good thing then that Thariss is large and well-built enough to shoulder that burden.

The elven duo departed from the neutral inn at the midpoint of Dalaran, but has come to a short break twenty meters to the north of the eastern district in the city. The premise of this standstill is Riv’s fumbling. She continues to carry this uncertainty of her own mettle, whether she can muster it to wade into a mass of sin’dorei conventions. They did rest in Quel’Thalas last year, but this is… different somehow. It will directly evoke memories of Riv’s principal traumatic failure.

Luckily, Thariss is a considerate presence and emerges to buoy her beloved. She lays a steady and protective hand on the smaller elf’s shoulder, grasping it softly.

“Riv…we don’t need to go, if you’d rather not.”

The hunter’s eyebrows sink faintly, and she drives her eyes up towards the white ones of her stalwart fiancéé. Her lips remain tight, though.

“If you wanna swing back to the inn, I’m game. Whatever’s to your fancy, babe. I’m not fussed.”

“Mm. I just…don’t know right now.”

“They’re not gonna curse you in there if you don’t. I mean, not any more or less than they do already.”

There is a marked splinter in Riv, which would gladly take Thariss up on that, to tell this whole establishment to piss off and simply bury her face in Thariss’ chest, while forgetting her past somewhere in the bottom of her imaginary bag.

But this is not a straightforward solution. Considering what they had agreed and the responsibilities of an older sister, one who was compelled to take drastic actions to rip their family asunder, can she honest to the Sunwell discard her sister’s petition and simply do whatever she pleases?

“No”, Riv acquiesces. “I promised her, Thariss. I can’t spite her here, or everything we’ve rebuilt for the last year will fall to pieces. My family can’t break now. Not again.”

Thariss digests Riv’s sentiment, the teetering tone she exudes with her voice. It’s evident enough that she’s coming aboard for no one else than her sister. Something to give her props for?

With the future minutes looming large, Riv and Thariss hold hands and crawl closer towards the
entrance once more, which today is overseen by two sin'dorei guards at the fore, two men. These two are dressed in equal setup, with heavy scarlet and gold sin'dorei-originated armors, but Horde tabards on their chests. One might’ve wagered that they’d run with Quel’Thalah or Sunreaver-specialized symbols, but it appears they try to indicate their larger allegiance here.

The guards’ watch is compressed to staring at their immediate subspace, to ensure no one unauthorized endeavors to slip inside, and so, they do not get onto the women in a heartbeat. A turnaround occurs when they’re a few meters off, and the green-glowing eyes snap in the direction of the women, though this is overarchingly funneled at the gigantic elf. Thariss towers over both, much the same way she does with the bulk of Horde and Alliance races, besides tauren, draenei and some Darkspear.

“You there, don’t move!”, calls the one on the right in Common – a fair-skinned man with long red hair – his hand plunging to the hilt of his blade. The one on the left, of a tanned hue and black extended hair in a ponytail, is a more solemn and composed entity, and he merely idles for his companion to act out his measures.

“Is there a problem?”, wonders Riv, even if no such probing is necessitated. She’s well on top of what this constitutes, as is the woman on her left, who is the target.

The guard on the right throws the briefest of glances at Riv, and then homes in with a scowl at Thariss.

“Yes, you’re damn straight it is. You’re not welcome here.”

This pronouncement quite blatantly excludes Riv, since it is meant purely for the night elf. Thariss mildly furrows her brow, but she doesn’t take on a fighting stance. This isn’t isolated to appeasing Riv, for she honestly would rather avoid a fight. She hasn’t even brought her gear.

“Don’t wanna cause a stir, pal. I’m just here with her.”

“And why would we let you inside, night elf? This is Horde soil.”

“Buddy, that’s not grass you’re standing on. And I’m not with the Alliance.”

“Wha—–I-I know that, you cur! If you’re starved for battle, then you best be off. This is not the place.”

“Uh, what? No, I—sorry, I wasn’t picking any. I just wanna enter.”

“If there was any veracity to your apology, you’d retire, right now. You show disrespect by your approach alone. Your kind doesn’t belong here, night-dweller.”

Riv nods gently.

“She’s right, though. She’s not with the Alliance and I’m not a Horde loyalist. We’re freelancers. I’m Rivaryn and this is Thariss, my belobidin.”

The utterance of those exact words sets something ablaze in the guard duo. The one on the left is half surprised, half intrigued. It’s quite telling he’s never heard of this. The man on the right, the previous speaker, is aghast, virtually appalled.

“Your…belobidin?! You’d marry…one of them?!”, he asks her sharply in thalassian.

Riv inhales troublingly, but also with a bitter frown at him, and she declines to play his game, staying in Common, so that Thariss is yet able to comprehend.

“Who I marry or not is none of your business. But yes, she’s going to be my wife and I would appreciate it if you did not insult her right in front of us.”
He continues, but sticks to thalassian.
“No respectable official would entitle this oaf or a traitor like you to complete the Dawn’s Harmony ceremony.”

“Then I guess we’re on the lucky side that we’re not uniting in Quel’Thalas.”

The guard’s eyes shoot daggers right at her, and huffs, but he does not speak quite so forthright after this. Instead, he mutters something slightly indiscernible for Riv, except words of their people sinking so low.
The man on the left then finally dictates that it’s his time to enter.
“Cut that out”, he tells his comrade. “We’re not stationed here to lash at anyone or anything.” His colleague folds his arms in a sullen gesture, but the left man addresses Riv with a measure of patience.
“Apologies. It can be…tense here sometimes.”

“Mm, I believe I get it”, answers Riv.

“Regrettably, that doesn’t alter your deal. We can’t let your fiancée inside – it’d cause turmoil among the people, to see a kaldorei. I have to turn her away. I’m sorry.”

Riv shrugs at him with an implication of a mild challenge.
“How come? We’ve gained permission to drop in, so I’m confused by why you’d tell us that it’s not okay.”

“Permission? Who issued this?”

“The guilty party in this incident would be me”, they overhear from a conduit on the interior of the Sanctuary, which is gradually drawing nearer.

The guards both set their eyes over their shoulders, only to discover a second sin’dorei woman, one who boasts a few features that resemble Riv, but less well-trained and somewhat shapelier.
“Arcanist Silvershroud?”, says the left one.

His associate pulls his own eyebrows down in an angered omen.
“You would let a damn night elf into our floors?”, he wonders in thalassian.

Kass directs a rigid and resolved stare at this man.
“Do not speak of her as such in my presence, guard. This is my elder sister Rivaryn and her sunsworn, which would be my future kin. Demean her and I shall have you scrubbing the sewers for the next month.”

The man clasps his hand harder on his sword, straightening his form, but he doesn’t bite back; not in an adamant vein anyhow. He knows she can affirm this bluster.
“But…Archmage Sunreaver will not endorse this reckless display, Arcanist.”

“Then he is free to lodge his complaints personally to my office. I’m confident he would not be given pause in the slightest. Now move aside, before I project you to the other side of Dalaran.”

With flaring nostrils, the guard on the right surrenders his position, but the left one has already obeyed her word. Kass then waves at her companions to trail her, so they can have a dialogue in peace.
With some leeway now, Riv speaks up.
“Thanks, Kass, for picking us up.”

Kass drapes her arms across the hunter.
“I wasn’t going to stay put and let them drag my sister through the mud. That has come disproportionately from our family as is.”

Thariss looks at the mage.
“Yeah. And uh…well, much obliged for sticking up for me too.”

Kass then cedes her grip on Riv and puts Thariss in her line of sight.
“It was nothing. Really. Though you can be insufferable, you are my sister’s fiancée, what we call ‘belobidin’ or sunsworn, soon her din’alah enoran, ‘rays in harmony’ or her wife. You’re family, Thariss. Surely, you can appreciate the significance of this.”

The warrior smiles and then softly caresses Kass’ shoulder.
“Course I do. Just…wasn’t sure you were in the same boat.”

The Arcanist perches her own above Thariss’.
“Never doubt it. Just see to it that you care for her, and I’ll do something to match.”

In the backdrop of their conversation, a fourth grey-robed woman comes along. Thariss’ lips stay tugged up and she speaks to Kass in a lower tone.
“Speaking of future wives…”
“…be careful with what you suggest.”
“Just putting it out there.”

Kass leaves her unresponded and instead walks to meet her beloved Khroga halfway. She sets one of her hands in the orc’s and then the other up to a cheek, so that she can tilt it down and allow them to warmly lock lips. She remains with one of Khroga’s arms around her waist as she looks at her sister.
“I’m pleased you both chose to wear the robes I sent.”
“Well, I mean…we didn’t wanna come here looking like clowns.”
“It was sweet of you to keep us in mind, Kass”, notes her sister.

The mage shrugs casually.
“Should be taken for granted. I was the one who invited you. It was my responsibility to assure that you are comfortable.”

Khroga imitates Thariss’ expression.
“Glad you could make it too. Lots of people have already shown up. You ready for this, Rivaryn?”

The hunter breathes in and raises her shoulders with mild reluctance.
“We’ll see.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage. We’re here for moral support, if it declines.”

Kass inclines her head in assent.
“Stay near me, both of you, and I shall fend off any unwarranted stares.”

Together, they amble down the slope towards the park section, which is below some of the facilities and towers intended for the leadership of the Sunreavers. Riv can sense her stomach bubbling, fraught with the fear of how her body will respond when it is set into a terrain in this fashion once more, something she rarely does anymore.
Thariss is less nervous and more angled towards coping with outright and unhidden hostility. She
must practice her toughness against this too – if Riv can reflect the enmity of other kaldorei, then Thariss can be no worse.

They can spot the crowds up ahead, the myriad sin’dorei intertwined and interacting, those who withstood death’s face and can now dwell on the time to come. But to accept the future, one shall be required to recall the past, which is what they do here, and Riv can suddenly sniff something in the air, wisps of substances which she might identify from their funerals.

The first indicator of this is the aroma of burnt Redshade-bush leaves, adopted as a form of incense in mourning rites and burials in numerous sectors of Quel’Thalas. It induces calm, but also a soberness – a trait which it is known for whenever it’s drunk as tea. This is accompanied by the clanging of wind chimes crafted out of Limae Enna trees, which grow on the coastline of Quel’Danas, said to be the first piece of flora touched by the Sunwell. It is to remind them where they came from and where they traverse to the lands beyond. Riv can also spot a variety of red, blue and black flowers, as well as arcane runes that enhance the sensation of smells and sounds, but prevents them from escaping too far.

It is the scent in particular which sets Riv’s inner conflict in motion. Visions materialize before her eyes, ones that she thought were behind her. But recovery is by no means a trivial affair. She witnesses the dauntless Trienza leaping off a cliff and into her final battle; Salywe – a spirited elf with warm medium-brown complexion and flowing wavy black hair - kissing her cousin’s cheek, before departing with Captain Alleria Windrunner’s detachment into Outland, to never be seen again; her mother’s fire spell erupting in failure, as she’s interrupted by a Farstrider’s arrow in the midst of their great betrayal; Efaria’s dress fluttering in the wind, refusing to abandon Silvermoon bereft of her wife; her father’s disdainful and judgmental gaze, in the process of bleeding out.

And so, she comes to a standstill, abstaining from going any longer, which makes her friends glance at her. In a soft-spoken voice, she addresses her little sister within thalassian.
“Kass…” She inhales shakily. “I can’t do this.”

Kass’ face warps with mounting worry and bemusement.
“Huh? Riv, what are you saying?”

“I…I can’t.” She obscures her face with her own hands. “Everything here is so-…it reminds me too much of…”

Kass unhooks herself from her girlfriend and narrows the gap to her sister, to wrap her fingers over Riv’s arm, which is now shivering.
“Riv, it’s okay. You’re okay. You aren’t alone.”

“You don’t…understand. I…”

“What is it? What are you seeing?”

But the hunter does not relay any of this – her humiliation, her ordeals, the horrors of failure. However, Kass is not working in isolation. From the opposite side, Thariss, despite not processing the words, can glean the state of her betrothed. She clasps her arms over the hunter.
“Babe, if this is hurting you, I’m here. You’ve got us to lean on.”

She speaks this phrase with conviction, and on top of this, a layer of caring and kindness. Kass’ proximity does matter, does put a notch in her insecurity, but it is Thariss’ colossal, ever-lasting self-assurance that pushes Riv onto the river of totality. It is ironic that she’s a night elf, an adherent of the moon goddess, for to Riv, she is invariably a source of heat and growth, tantamount
to the brightness of the sun.

Riv stretches a hand into Kass’, but tilts her body into Thariss, who embraces her lover. “You’ll remain here…right?”, she whispers with vulnerability.

Thariss nuzzles her nose into the black hair. “Not budging a step, kal’dinel.”

After half a minute in this grasp, the emeralds reopen, and her ears perk with faint enthusiasm. “Kal…means star, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“So that makes…”

“Erm, think humans would say sort of like…”’blessed infinite star’. Something my mother used to call mom.”

The phrase and the fondness rejuvenate Riv to a medium degree and she dips her head in affirmation. “Okay. Let’s…let’s try it.”

Kass looks satisfied and Thariss kisses her head. “You’re strong, gorgeous. You’ll handle this.”

The four of them progress into the area then, and Riv notes how Kass greets a few people here and there with friendly and hospitable words. The hunter herself is somewhat out of a proper bearing. She throws her crosshairs from side to side, but she comes up short in identifying a single soul. A couple carry recognizable elements, but Riv can’t peg a name to them. It’s not as if she was friends with every quel’dorei, but even those she is convinced are Farstriders, she can by no means set any letters under them. Not the best of impressions.

While Kass skips ahead to a pair of Magisters – an older woman and a middle-aged man that she introduces to Khroga – Thariss gets an intuition of stares from probably half the venue. Venomous, biting and distasting green eyes are either in flux why a kaldorei would dare enter their turf, or indignant at the thought. Business as usual then. She cottons onto that they don’t hold her expressly responsible for the miseries of their people, but she is considered Alliance – an association which in their books condoned the broken human Prince to wreck their homeland and then deserted them in their most vicious plight.

In the meantime, Riv perseveres with her stationary location, never stepping up to anyone in particular. In light of her being docked to Thariss, the other elves are in the same position, and as a result, they’re in a weird sense of deadlock.

This is merely previous to the advent of a deviating batch from the east. Riv directs her eyes at them and instantly notes the chainmail and leather gear on their bodies, black and grey from head to toe, together with the swords at their girdles and bows at their cloaks. But this isn’t what garners her attention – it is the unnatural alterations to their skins at the sections that are visible, like the ears and barely below the hoods that cover their heads. Some are abnormally pale, nearly chalk-white. Others are brown still, but with hints of purple or grey – and some are entirely ashen-grey. Riv squints somewhat and believes she can also discern a red glow from the spot of their eyes.

On the grounds that their ears are next to vertically tilted, Riv would trust that these are high or blood elves, and the surface…deficiencies might imply they are of the dead variety. She’s met exceedingly few Forsaken, though she’s learned that a portion of their kind are supposedly former
quel’dorei. Is this group some of them, then? Ex-Farstriders, perhaps?

Riv feels divided on if she had best circumvent them or inquire of their identities. For now, they’re locked in the outskirts, practically passing the other Horde guards in separation. When Kass makes it appear that there’s a delay in her conversation, Riv taps her shoulder.

“Kass, those archers over there…you know anything about them?”

The mage glances first at her sister, preceding her ocular priority of these figures. And then, Riv overhears a deep and daunted inhale from her sister.

“Ah…yes. I believe those would be…Dark Rangers.”

And now, the copper drops for Riv. She hasn’t collided with one flat out, but she has caught wind of them in major cities.

“Oh. Former Farstriders, right?”

“As you say.”

“I’ve…never met one.”

“Yes, our information on them delineates that they stay as personal guards and operatives of the…erm…Banshee Queen, Sylvanas Windrunner. Generally, they’re dispatched on special assignments or in the Undercity, so they are in short supply on common battlefields.”

Similar to special forces in a way, then? Images and words of Aruunel pops into her head, though even the Farstriders boasted that style of troops somewhere, or so she’s heard. Trienza was never fully open with such confidential intelligence.

“Could I talk to them, you think?”

Kass blinks her eyes and steers them at Riv.

“What? No, Riv, keep your distance.”

“What for?”

“They are…” Kass pulls in a slice of air, to search for an adequate justification. “…tricky to grapple with. I’ve only ever spoken with a handful, and in every occasion, it has been somewhat intense. I can’t quite tell if they are resentful of those who survived, or if it’s…something else. They have a habit of chasing people off.”

Riv proceeds with staring at them wordlessly, regarding her branches in this road. If they are uniformly past Farstriders, were they not the same people? Equal in the ranks of the military? Half a minute later, with Kass meanwhile pitching what they are to do to fill in for this lack of activity, in advance of Sunreaver’s speech in ten or twenty minutes, Riv dismisses any validation and progresses right at them, with Kass crying out in her wake.

“Riv? Rivaryn! Wait, where are you heading? You shouldn’t-”

Thariss intercepts her, lowering a hand onto the Arcanist’s shoulder.

“Let her.”

Kass’ ears slump distraughtly.

“But…”

The answer is astoundingly decisive anyhow. The Dark Rangers at the anterior who handily heed her pathway, half-glare at the image of her, but none of them grasp weapons. Riv can draw from this that it is not – ostensibly at least – hatred. Perhaps they wish to be left alone, to duck the dismay of their old kin.
This is why Riv leverages no such outward flavor. She approaches serenely and openly, dipping her head in recognition. They merely nod at her in return, some of them crossing their arms.

“Hello there”, she speaks in thalassian.

They return the use of language.

“What do you want?”

Right to the point. Fair enough.

“I…was wondering. Are you the so-called ‘Dark Rangers’?”

The elves – predominantly women from what she can divine among these at least – share some mildly puzzled looks between them. The one at the front, a grey-hued lady with strands of black hair hanging out, shrugs.

“I dunno who else we would be.” Not defiant, but stated self-evidently. “If you’re after the Dark Lady, she is not participating. She’s elsewhere, occupied with groundwork for our assault on Icecrown.”

“Oh. Uh, no, I’m not interested in her. Nor…do I think she’d care about me. My name is Ranger-Sergeant Rivaryn Silvershroud. Um…former Sergeant. I…left the Farstriders after…” She gestures nervously with her hand, but does not expand too profusely. “…yeah.”

The curiosity of these archers is then piqued, as they now study her more intimately. One of them, a row behind the fore, voices her impression.

“Captain Sah’nir’s aide.”

“Oh, yes. That was….ah, her final one, anyway.”

These words are weighty, even to the Dark Rangers.

“Rumor has it that she perished in battle with the Scourge. And that you did not attend her.”

A comment founded on protocol. The aides joined the fray with their commanders. Riv shakes her head and her ears sag with humility.

“No, she…had a separate directive for me, to take care of a personal quest of hers. In retrospect, it saved my life, but she…”

The hunter emits an outtake of air, scratching her neck. The insinuation is not a fallacy – her commitments had set her on the path of aligning with Trienza into death, and she lapsed in that duty.

Riv steers her emerald vision then at the woman who half-challenged her in this, regardless of that it was not purportedly aimed with vitriol in mind. Riv examines her and upon getting stuck into this, there’s a familiarity to this lady. She’s endured noticeable scars traversing her facial aspects and the neck. She bears red eyes, a burnt-off left eyebrow and stitches down at her jaw, but Riv can’t mistake her.

“Wait, aren’t you…Niyena?”

The light grey-tinged and short light brown-haired woman pokes her head barely out from her hood, reading Riv’s expression of wonder.

“You…recognize me?” Her intonation vibrates with a dim echo.

“I…yes, of course. How could I not?”

“Well, I’ve transformed, as you may have concluded. Color me impressed.”
Her old rival. Well, to a point.
“I hadn’t heard you were…”

“Dead? Yeah, it happens. Our frontline wasn’t tremendously fortunate in our defense against the Scourge. You may recall.”

“Y…yeah.”

Another one of the Dark Rangers glances at Niyena.
“Friend of yours then, Meadowmist?”

She and Riv sample one another’s reaction to this assumption, though it’s quite muted either way. No hostility, but not aversion either.
“Something like that. ’less you wanna start something, Silvershroud.”

Riv ingests the pith of this half-dare, half-query. It isn’t…professedly antagonistic, but who can say? She can unproblematically order her own insight on this scrape, though, and smiles at Niyena.
“Why would I ever wish to do that with a friendly face?”

A combined joke and affectionate reference. Niyena is subtly stirred by it, hit by that Riv isn’t just polite, but outright welcoming.
“You’re sure? In the face of what we’ve been through? Doubt you’ve forgotten.”

“Niyena, that…that’s old news. Ancient past. I can only imagine you’ve tasted true, harrowing life lessons. Specters the rest of us will catch purely in stories. Why would I rub it in?”

When Niyena does not smile or really send feedback right away, Riv is deterred and her eyes trail down.
“I…I’m sorry. That I…that I wasn’t there. That I stepped away and you all had to…be on the receiving end of something I can’t fully navigate. Can’t contextualize. I wish this didn’t have to be or that I could’ve somehow…”

Even though it is addressed to Niyena, what she and those who get a line on it may not foresee is that this is not thoroughly and solely designed for them, but a contrasting entity. One she feels that she deserted.
“Don’t”, says Niyena tersely. “It’s not necessary. I get it.”

Does she? Does she see through the survivor’s guilt, the violations of the soul or the idea of self-deception?
“Everyone here went to war. We clashed with death, we made a stand and we fell beneath its oppression. Even you. Some of us just…had to pay a higher price.”

Riv is enthused by this, feeling how it reels her in, this unexpected and strengthening line of reassurance. Riv may have needed that. Niyena always was…better leader-material than her. It’s their loss she never got the opportunity to hone it.

But then, she wonders, is there scope here for reconciliation? Of a sort, anyway.
“Are you and the others here to…watch the speech and the ceremony too?”

Niyena raises the one eyebrow she has left, even though it is a tinge wilted.
“In a manner of speaking. We were mostly…intrigued. Simply heard stories, but never visited. We’re not usually invited.”

One of them shrugs.
“We’re some of those they mourn, so they’re not super ecstatic to see us.”

“Well…”, starts Riv, “would you like to erm, come with me and stay a bit closer, Niyena?”
Niyena’s glowing scarlets widen.
“…with you?”

“Yes.” She coughs. “Me and…my family.”

She nudges her head at the night elf, orc and less-fit blood elf ten meters behind her, who observe the encounter with keen inquisitiveness. Niyena sizes them up.
“That’s your family?”

“Since my life post-invasion. My sister and her girlfriend. The kaldorei is my sunsworn. She’s not Alliance.”

“Hmm.”

The Dark Ranger wavers and she glimpses at her comrades, but none of them run counter to it. The apparent ‘CO’ of this team just shrugs.
“Do what you like, Meadowmist.”

Another moment which would catch others by surprise, but they seem to respect Riv to a marginal level. They were once Farstriders, the whole pack of them together. Plus, she appears to look at them as people, and not walking lost nightmares. Niyena then stares at Riv, likely investigating the hunter for feints or underhanded methods, but Riv has lacked social manipulation talents since the days gone by.
“Assuming you’re fine with hanging out near a rotting corpse.”

Riv turns her head in denial.
“You seem like you. That’s what counts to me.”

“I…appreciate the sentiment.” Niyena gives off a kind of sigh. “Trust the old strife won’t get in the way, then? Off the top of my head, you wouldn’t speak a word to me for a year after that encounter with Revenor.”

The hunter chuckles softly.
“Too true. But we worked around that, didn’t we? Like I told you, this was a long-gone era, Niyena. I’ve…changed since then. I bet you have too.”

“All told, I guess.”

She then reaches out with her hand to the ranger.
“But I’m sure you could beat me at sharpshooting like you used to.”

Niyena glances at the hand, at Riv’s gesture of bonding, of a forgotten affinity. Though she’s somewhat reluctant, she displays what isn’t a wholehearted smile, but has the trappings of one. Then, she takes Riv’s hand with her own gloved one.
“No cat around to nip at my legs as a distraction, then?”

Riv giggles fleetingly, and pulls her former rival towards the others.
“No, that was…also something I left in the past. I’ll tell you more later. Come, let me show you some of those I’ve gotten to know.”

The rest of the team take this in with firing senses. Kass is proud to watch her sister attempt to befriend one that few others would even approach and Khroga enjoys an example of Horde unity, even if Riv doesn’t formally serve them. Thariss, however, is prevailingly glad that her fiancée is making a bid at peace with her inner torment.
Yeah, I know the official numbers say 90% of high elves died, but Blizzard is dumb and really like to exaggerate (and totally disregard the societal, cultural, psychological and spiritual effects of such events). This is my story, so fuck them.
I also know that in game, all Dark Rangers are pale, practically white. But as you can see in this - and in previous WoW stories of mine - I don't present high and blood elves as purely white/pink, so I don't wish to do any different with the Dark Rangers.
Blood's dishonor

Drinking and festivities amid the Argent Crusade has long since rolled back and gradually evaporated for each day. This was not purely a reaction of the higher officers determining that their infantry must stay alert for the challenges up ahead, which naturally was an obstacle, but actually the automatic efforts of the troopers themselves. There had materialized a facet of foresight, of sedated perspective, that the first invasion into Icecrown was to fall into place in the not-at-all-distant future. In such a case, one must be ready. This is why today, the last day in the camps of Crystalsong before the march north, has everyone not just free of booze in their bodies – on the whole, anyhow – but mentally girding themselves for the reawakening of combat.

In the intervening days, Melia has hardly spotted Ashindra’s contours even once, and there’s been a severe scarcity of communication. Not nonexistent, but too brief to really be palpable. As such, Melia has been calling herself into question, of what her risk-taking with the elf might’ve provoked. Did she hurt Ash after all?
At the beginning, it had sounded as if this was down to a private issue, a defect in Ash’s self-perception and ideation, but this is now becoming less and less of an acceptable observation.

Melia has struggled to cope, but it’s an uphill battle. The fact that she can’t approach this problem straight up, that it would feel wrong to press Ash for answers, is all the more frustrating. She has begun to entertain fancies of principles that she previously scorned as mere absurd and unfitting measures of the top-ranked, but now gets a weird sense of personal errors. One such is that she’s been contemplating if reassigning Ash was an equitable resolution after all. If Melia is the plague, then she better be excised from the paladin’s life, right? She wouldn’t ever lust for this to be the epilogue of their lives together, but…

Her conviction in this matter gets tilted on this early morning, while she’s sending orders for her squads – including the latest ones that have been directed to her command. Her heart flutters when she notices how her second-in-command comes strolling up to her. Ash’s extended red hair shifts and sways in the northern gust that encapsulates them, her frame holding the grey, gold and blue plate armor she’s usually found in, with the Crusade tabard on top.

Ash anticipates that she can stand and bide for Melia’s instructions to be distributed, but the Captain will not have it. She dismisses her squads posthaste, validating Ash’s headway. They stare at one another for an estimated ten seconds, before the paladin furthers her steps. Then, she gets to a second suspension no more than two meters off or so.
“We…need to talk”, Ash states curtly, but not rudely.

Melia is moderately allayed by this, but it is intersected with unease. What could Ash possibly seek? Will this be what the priestess was fleeing?
“Okay.”
The paladin’s eyes dart left and right.
“We uh…we should find somewhere private.”

“Ah. I have a tent we could use.”

“That’ll do.”

The trek to the right location is silent, anxious. Melia can’t ascertain what it is that would ride this to an improved state, and Ash herself is looking to wait, judging by her downturned visual fix.
The tent is only tenuously tall enough for them both to stand, and not big – fits a bed, a table and a box to place items within, such as clothes, which is what it contains. It’s not a confinement which lends ample privacy, for the walls aren’t insulated or anything, but it’s not bad for at least preventing the sound from bouncing across the forest.

Whereas Ash is mentally warming herself up for a couple of seconds, Melia scratches the surface of her own belief.

“Ash…I’m sorry. For…for what happened at the party. I understand where you’re coming from – I was out of line. It wasn’t becoming of a superior officer to just come on to you like that, so….yeah. I’d totally accept why you’d like to…you know, leave.”

Based off Ash’s face, it would seem Melia threw her for a loop.

“…what?”

“That’s what was on your mind, wasn’t it? Figured I’d come to it first, so it wouldn’t be awkward.”

But in the process, she somewhat made it increasingly uncomfortable.

“You-…no! Mel, no…” She shakes her head to rebuff it. “You’ve misread me. I’m not mad at you. It’s…it’s the opposite.”

Melia briskly blinks her eyes.

“The…opposite in what way?”

“I believed you might be…”

“Angry at you?”

“Something like it, yeah. Let me…let me start from the beginning and you’ll grasp what I mean. This is not actually a subject which belongs in your uh…region, but me personally. I wish to…unmask a topic I’ve never spoken of. Something I have been…too ashamed to specify.”

The priestess is now exceedingly absorbed by the prospect and crisscrosses her arms.

“Oh. Alright. Erm, speak your mind.”

Though Ash would love to do just that, she can’t jump into it in the blink of an eye. She leads with a showcasing of hesitation, pacing on the ground near the table, composing her thoughts and mental compass of this not-at-all-easy theme that she has plans to attack before Melia’s eyes.

“I…lied to you.”

“When?”

“I do have a direct family yet alive. Well…one person. I have a sister.”

“Huh. You do?”

“Mm. She-“ Ash swallows. “…Vestarial. My…my twin little sister.”

Melia’s gaze now enlarges with wonder and investment in this changing pinch.

“Wow. I…would’ve never expected you to have a twin.”

“Few do, outside of Quel’Thalas.”

“Why wouldn’t you talk about her? I’ve heard twins are like, practically inseparable.”
Ash’s lengthy ears retract with shame.
“Because she and I haven’t ever…fully gotten along. We’ve argued and squabbled for decades.”

“How come?”

“Well…I’ll have to relay some elements of the story between me and my sister.”

“Sure. Should I get seated?”

Ash shrugs hesitantly.
“If you wish.” She does hold out for Melia to arrive at her bed and rest her rear on it. The blood elf stays on her feet, though. “What really set it off was our parents’ faith and my sister’s mindset to it. They were disciples of the Holy Light, and very early on, I grew to respect and be fond of the same entity. I embraced their teachings and made them my own.
Vesta, on the other hand, was a sign of duality. She thought the Light was intrusive, too dominating, and eventually, joined those of our people who viewed it as a social construct of humanity, which was unsuited for quel’dorei society.
I often attempted to reintroduce her to the concept, to illustrate that the Light is beyond simplistic allegiances of race or nation or faction, but it did not succeed. In truth, she rebelled harder, calling me ‘blind’, sometimes ‘fanatical’. All evidence of the Light’s literal powers was rejected as rudimentary examples of magic. What’s sadder is that Rivaryn commonly ended up getting caught in the crossfire, and occasionally she was…manipulated as a means to enrage me further. A world of personal drama and vengefulness that now seems so frivolous…”
Ash apprehensively rubs her own forehead, prior to carrying on.
“Sooner or later, while I was inducted in the Church of the Holy Light, Vesta begun to serve the Spellbreakers.”

It is stated with a sort of concrete plainness, but Melia is eluded by it.
“Doubt I’ve heard of them.”

The sin’dorei is filled by astonishment.
“Truly? That’s a bit surprising, since they are fairly renowned. They are elite anti-magic using warriors. Few, but immensely strong in the military. Looking at the big picture, it’s actually an antique tradition, dating back to when we were affiliated with the Kaldorei Empire.
Even larger than any of these achievements, my sister was attached to Prince Kael’thas’ personal division, one of the highest privileges a soldier could ever attain. Our parents were proud with every bone in their bodies, notably when Vesta fought tooth and nail in the Second War, to safeguard Quel’Thalas from the Horde of that age.
But in the resulting time of the Scourge invasion, this glimmer of good prospects died. We were robbed of nearly everyone we cared for, and precisely few close family members remained. With so much fatalities, I forfeited hope. I solicited the newly organized Blood Knights for membership and training.” She lowers her gaze. “I…committed abuses upon the Light, in their name. I developed an inner detachment, dedicating myself to nothing but what could prolong the sin’dorei and our society. Every other matter was then secondary. I yielded Rivaryn’s affection and Vestarial’s trust alike. Riv vanished to Kalimdor, and Vesta, she…she jumped ship with Prince Kael’thas, to the world of Outland. While there, she encountered a subsection of the Illidari faction, which were styled ‘demon hunters’, governed by Illidan the Betrayer. And–”
But then she pauses. If Melia hadn’t learned about the spellbreakers, it’s improbable that she’d be an expert here.
“Have you had the rundown on this man?”

“Hmm. Illidan, you say? No, got nothing on him. With the demise of Lordaeron behind us, I was so fixated on ending the Scourge that I quit all updates on the rest of the world.”
“Ah, of course. Illidan was a kaldorei, one who had gone too far in his thirst for vengeance. The Illidari were elves who had volunteered to foil the demons of the Burning Legion by emulating him and…well, embedding their bodies with demonic essence and morphing into half demons.”

Melia suddenly looks quite perturbed.
“Okay, that…comes off as terribly unsafe.”

“Ultimately it is. The grander percentage of those who go through the ritual die, to all kinds of agents. Those who make it, however, they come away with monstrous powers…and burdens. Vesta was miraculously among those who persevered. At the start, her involvement was founded on the Prince’s orders, but the further it ran on, she gained an influx of admiration and faithfulness for Illidan. She became Illidari through and through.

Meanwhile, at home, I had toiled away to be at the service of our kin, in our initiation and membership into the Horde. I befriended people that were old enemies – orcs, Forsaken, even trolls. In consequence, months down the road, some of those contacts provided me with an intelligence report from Outland, that my sister had taken up with the demon hunters. To me, this looked to be categorically untrue, but since it had grabbed and unnerved me, I was set on discovering the accuracy of the claim, and if Vesta had…well, sold herself out. In my charge as a Blood Knight, I was entitled authority over a squad of Horde troops, destined to chase down and seize ex-Quel’Thalah citizens, to then bring them home.

Naturally, I painted a target on my sister. I extracted additional information from people, leads and traces of demon hunters, where my training as a paladin was enormously useful. Even more convenient, though, was that a demon hunter traitor offered up firsthand data on Vesta and her allies. I didn’t ask for his reasons, nor did I care.”

Ash’s bright greens are now taking on a misty streak, not quite present.

“At the moment I set my field of view on Vesta, overly tarnished and mutated, with demon fangs, claws, spikes protruding from her shoulders and arms, as well as compact horns, absorbing the simulacrum of the creatures that designed the beasts which levelled our homeland…I exploded. I presumed the demon had devoured my sister, dismembered the last part of my family…so I brought violence unto it.”

The human tries to keep it cool for now, but she is distinctly unnerved.
“You…struck her.”

Ash’s face nearly sinks to the floor.
“…worse.” She plunges into a mentally trounced state, her eyes aghast. “Melia, I…I tried to kill her. I had a burning motivation for nothing further in this world…than to murder my own sister. To put her down.”

This heartfelt laying bare of her immoral instincts incites a rush of shock inside Melia, who hauls a hand up above her mouth, but she does not remark on the contents. Ash must have more to voice.

She continues, her resonance next to breaking.
“There was nothing I wouldn’t give to watch that ‘abomination’ calling itself my sister be ‘cleansed’ in the Light’s pyre. And I was teetering on the brink of victory at that. Because…”

Melia can now distinguish how Ash’s eyes blinks in a swifter pace, tears all but forming at the internal images, staring into her open palm. “…because she couldn’t bring herself to clash with my hostility. She…she hated the very notion of…fighting her own big sister to the death. And I…”

“Ash…”

Ash exerts herself to bottle it up, but she’s now shuddering, frowning, her lips mildly quivering, the events of that day piercing her mind, replaying again and again.
“I tried to-…my little sister…”, she says, her utterance now in devastated notes.
Her hands seals so tightly that she’s not far off from digging her nails into her skin to draw blood. Melia gets up and advances towards her, but her steps stutter when she’s uninformed of what she can actually offer. Would her intimacy in all honesty comfort Ash in this instance?

“What…what happened?”

Thankfully, this is the right call and the appropriate question, for Ash discovers a solid ground to fasten herself onto, a road distant from the guilt.

“Vesta’s allies lifted and took her away, into presumed safety. I ordered my troops to pursue. This extended the whole way towards what is known as the ‘Black Temple’, Illidan’s main lair.”

Ash grabs a second to catch herself, her own thoughts bursting away at such breakneck speed that she feels her heart vibrating inside, her breathing now in a panting state. But it doesn’t amend much. Thus, she presses on.

“At the Temple, I chanced upon Rivaryn, who was operating as a freelancing mercenary, with her partners Thariss and Raxeen. It was here that Rivaryn…set me straight. The words which she relayed, the actions she had to specify for me…they haunt me to this day. It is what shattered my resolve.

I finally made the connection, where the discrepancy and miscalculations lied – with myself. With what course I was heading down. It would annihilate not just my sister, but what lingered of the real Ashindra.

I…fell into a pit of despair. My conviction was shed, my comprehension of the world wavered. It looked so…pointless. Hopeless, all of it. What I had went to, who I had constructed. With few other options, I begged the Blood Knight leadership to transfer me. If they did not, I…feared what I might’ve ended up doing. It could’ve spelled my own death.”

“And Vestarial?”, wonders Melia.

Ash’s sight drifts to the side.

“She was arrested by night elven elite jailors, the Wardens, including the remainder of her organization.”

“Arrested? Uh, what were the charges?”

“They were viewed as co-conspirators of the Betrayer. He had supposedly inflicted severe damage and death upon innocents in their homeland, even razed an entire town. I never got the chance to visit my sister once more, to see her. Never managed to…beg for forgiveness. And now, I’m not sure that day will ever arrive in my lifetime.

This incident, it…struck something in my essence, in the deepest reaches of my mind. I had been so conflicted. At times, I almost felt like a child again, who made a mistake. But there was no one around to punish me for it.”

“So…this was when you joined up with us? When you were travelling with someone.”

“…yes. I uh, chose to take a ride with Rivaryn’s younger sister, Kassari, and her girlfriend. She’s a member of the Magisters, one of the middle ranks. We’re old friends, practically family. The Argent Crusade was something…new. Refreshing. A clean slate in what I had trudged into. It wasn’t just fruitful, but downright vital. If I didn’t, I might’ve…”

She does not conclude this sentence, too harrowed by her own realization and inadequacy. That is when Melia breaks her cessation and goes forth to Ash, leaving her arms on the elf. She slides one along Ash’s waist, and the other up behind her head, so that Ash can slump down onto the priestess’ shoulder, burying herself into Melia. The Captain can feel the comprehensive chills across Ash’s form now, and Melia’s hold tightens with affection.

“You should’ve told me.”
“I couldn’t. I was afraid you would…”

“Would what?”

“Be…disgusted. See me for who I am. What I am. What I’ve done to get here…”

Melia sighs and shuts her eyes.

“Oh, Ash. You got it all wrong. I wouldn’t have to figure it out, since I already know. I’ve observed the woman that stands with me here now, out there on the field. You’ve risked your being and your health for every single person you’ve encountered in the Crusade. You’ve ventured into measures of atonement, by scrambling not simply to salvage your homeland, but this entire world from the Scourge. You’ve made friends from each race and origin of the Horde and Alliance. They think highly of you.”

“But…my sister…”

“What about her? You buy into that this’ll improve if you hate yourself? If you forsake everything, to…end this existence? How? How will you ever make it up to Vestarial that way? And you said it yourself – she did not wish to hurt her big sister, even when she stood as half a demon. What would she tell you if you said this to her?”

Ash listens to Melia, absorbs every syllable and sentiment. And so, she infers that this woman is greater than she ever imagined, who can track the real Ash and won’t discard her. Ash leans deeper into Melia, squeezing her arms around the human. Melia senses how her shoulder soon grows wet from the shaking elf in her arms and silence pervades them.
A darkened shimmer and a wailing cry of the gales surround the frosty and blighted lands of Icecrown, the belly of Northrend, and of more weight than that, the innards of the Scourge’s operations. Though it had seemed predestined to some of the factions which invaded these shores in the wake of the Scourge’s own assault on mortal turfs, the undead menace itself had not reacted as confidently or with the kind of forecast one might’ve projected them to have. Not that they were swamped by the living gaining inroads, but their resistance wasn’t as impregnable as the previous carnage would foreshadow.

This is possibly why the first incursion into Northrend has gone so comparatively well and casualties have been kept at a tolerably low rate. Quite a step up from the botched siege of the Wrathgate.

Having stated this, it’s not as if the armies of the south are dotting every molecule of territory on the glacier, by dint of how emphatically hazardous and detrimental it would be. This is the stimulus for the airships now in the air a couple of kilometers above the ground, holding flight crews of the Horde and the Alliance, who endlessly circle the premises, but also each other.

It’s limited to two organizations who’re earnestly making a full-blown effort to clear the road towards the Icecrown Citadel, which of course are the in-between ones – the Argent Crusade and the Ebon Knights. This duo of Light-sworn and rogue-Scourge warriors are grinding their way along the exterior, to bore into the softer center, as a means to institute a stronger and more consolidated main operations from which to launch strikes onto the Lich King’s seat. However, even this task has not been as concerted as they may have idealized, for the Ebon Knights went off on their own, as they’re prone to do.

Ashindra and Melia were two of the soldiers participating in the introductory rush heading for the outward holdings, where they assisted their comrades in commandeering grounds to assemble their first base on. This is where the Argent Vanguard has been plonked onto, in an area which the scouts had termed the ‘Valley of Echoes’, one of the snowier blocks of this northern province. The exchanges between the two opponents are recurrently brutal and grueling, with the Scourge doggedly endeavoring to swat them back, which has now taken a turn for the hopeless. The cause for this is the pool of troops which the Crusade has close to hand – there are more of them, diligently outweighing the estimates they disembarked with. And these mortals will not be disturbed by the macabre and eroded appearance of the undead, as they’ve grown thick-skinned to it, as well as tolerant towards the Forsaken at their sides. At this point, the dissonance is unmistakable – the Scourge is just a people enslaved to the Lich King, and without dethroning him, there can be no peace.

In the latest battle today, on the first half of the morning, the Crusade was in fact hard-pressed by the Scourge’s latest drop of minions and it was written all over the walls that they might not contain the capacity on this date, to push ahead like they’ve done in previous charges. But that was when help came from the outside. To rupture a set of gates that stood before them, a mass of mercenaries swooped down from Dalaran, which encompassed a blue drake who discharged her arcane breath and magical potency to cull the enemy undead and weaken the foundation of the supports, an act which eventually brought about its downfall by the mortal army and victory anew.
Here in the following minutes, Ash and Melia are positioned inside the main hub on the verge of Icecrown, debriefing and tending to their squads in a relevant manner. Ash is one of the Lieutenants reporting to Melia, as is Foghorn and a few more, but the blood elf has now been issued the reign over the entire squad which Melia previously ran the show for, and not just the small task force. Whilst the mercs are heading nearer to this segment, Ash addresses this squad.

“You all performed splendidly out there. I’m exceedingly satisfied that you held the line. Keep this up and I might just slap that Sergeant's badge on you, Braktog.” The orc happily taps his chest as one of the trolls in their team pats his shoulder. “And you know what? I could mull over the idea of making Marlyn a Corporal too.” The shy Forsaken reels when she hears this, stammering to say anything of substance, but her comrades offer encouraging comments.

She then notes how Melia releases the squads she was getting word from, to get some rest or head off to the healers’ tent for those who’ve taken scrapes, even if they actually incurred outstandingly few casualties.

“Alright, you can go settle down, decompress in one of the tents and get something to eat. In an hour or two, I’ll talk more with you on the subject of that promotion, Marlyn.”

The Forsaken nods her head perkily.

“I-I can’t wait, ma’am!”

With this finished, Ash approaches her CO, and Melia herself links up with her in the middle. In the past week since they began their march, Ash has developed adoration to spare for the human, for the comfort and ease of burden which Melia has served her. They haven’t discussed the matter of the kiss just yet, but it’s on the docket.

As one, they then push through to the mercenary tri-…well, it’s quartet now, sans animals. Weighed against their earlier meeting in Dragonblight, there is none of the stiffness or the labored pass at striking up a conversation. Here, Riv rushes to Ash and lunges her arms up around the paladin’s neck, sliding into Ash’s embrace. The paladin giggles and requites the sensation, laying her arms on Riv’s waist. She detects an increase in temperature as Riv sets her lips onto Ash’s right cheek.

Thankfully there is a decent amount of serenity which sticks to Ash’s form here, which also jumped out at Riv during the battle. She is not fearful of the intimacy, nor of doing something wrong, like she’s repossessed her assurance and self-belief of the glory days.

“I’m glad you're well and healthy, Ash”, Riv utters in thalassian.

Ash nods coolly.

“Likewise. Hmm. Did you cut your hair or something?”

“Eh, a smidgen, yeah, in Dalaran. Only trimmed the tips, though. Nothing fancy.”

“Ah, I suspected you did.” She searches Riv’s face fleetingly. “Looks good. Stylish.”

The tone and the glances that she extends are ones Riv is greatly familiar with, though she has not spotted them in many a year. A stare she has employed ahead of steamy nights together, which is why it catches Riv mildly unaware. The hunter then smirks and playfully slaps her arms.

“Careful there, Revenor. I’m engaged, you know.”

Ash smiles in a harmless vein and raises her arms.

“Wasn’t trying to, cross my heart.”

Riv sniggers and drops to Melia thereafter, to hug her as well. The human seems delighted to do so.

“You guys have amazing timing. Came right when we needed you.”

“I tend to agree”, says Riv, “even though it was unplanned.”
In the space of their short talk, Thariss treads to Ash and nudges her shoulder in a lighthearted expression.
“‘You gotta work on your overhead shield bashes, Revenor. Looking a lil’ shaky out there.’

The paladin folds her arms and snorts, though it’s in a friendly way.
“‘You’re not the hotshot you hallucinate of either, Dusksong. Nearly had your head sliced clean off, in light of overconfidence. Twice. I’m impressed that you’re yet standing.’

“‘Bah. Ain’t no chance that’d ever shake out! It was all just a buncha dumbos who were really into my dashing good looks and irresistible face.’

Though Ash would be pleased to give her the terse brush-off, she can’t hold it down and chuckles.
“‘You’re a silly strider.’

The kaldorei cocks one of her eyebrows at the paladin.
“‘Yeah, so what?’

“So I can definitely track why Riv is so in love with you.”
This tempts a raising of Thariss’ lips, who winks. Ash then pinpoints Razz among them, and she pops over to him. As he now recognizes her, he permits the patting and stroking of his nose, a purr-like hum seeping from him.
“‘You enjoy that, do you? Well, you’ve earned it, boy. Pretty damn brilliant out there.’

Riv shifts to them and inclines her head.
“‘He is as ever.’

“‘It’s almost magical seeing you two in unison. Can’t imagine why anyone would ever try to fight you.’

Razz is even more charmed, stretching his neck upwards in a proud movement. Thariss laughs at it.
“‘Oh no, you piqued his vanity.’

On her end, Melia smiles at their mercenary allies.
“I want to thank your whole group, Nadelgosa above all. Your support over there was absolutely grand. If you’re here to take up work, I would be more than happy to vouch for a bonus.”

The drake bows her head courteously.
“I was ever so willing to be a measure of relief. It’s terrific that I can prove to mortals there is a brighter side to the blue dragonflight, so promptly after the Nexus War.”

“Oh yeah, that one. I’m not fully up to speed on that episode of the war, but I know they won’t complain.”

Riv regards Ash happily and takes her shoulder.
“You were an abundantly heroic presence out there, ‘Sergeant’. Looked as if a mass of those soldiers held high esteem for you. You’re on the cusp of being back to your old regular self.”

The paladin shrugs in an affable manner.
“It’s completely attributed to Melia’s guidance and reinforcement, for supplying me with opportunities to grow and be a better soldier and person.
Oh and eh…it’s Lieutenant now.”

Riv is surprised and elated in even dispersion to hear this.
“Wow! Good going! It was a rightful promotion, I’m sure.”
“Thank you. I…hope it was too, and that I can prove myself worthy.”

“We can get an authentic contract written down and laid out in a jiffy”, Melia tells them, “if you wanna get paid and have that bonus in the bag too.”

“Damn right we do”, Thariss confirms.

But when they’re debating and loading up for the trek there, Ash intrudes.

“Thariss, could you administer this? I’d ask to borrow Rivaryn for a few minutes.”

The hunter looks at her old friend with engrossed eyes.

“Is it something crucial?”

“I would argue that it is. From a certain perspective anyway. You’d want to hear me out, that much I can say.”

Melia injects her own mind, as she sees what Ash is aiming for.

“Yeah, I’m on her side. No doubt about it, Rivaryn.”

Riv is now a tad scattered, but there is a shortage of doors.

“Well, if you’re urging me to…I’ll play along.”

Sharing a quick kiss with her with her fiancée, and telling Razz to stay with the others, she soon moves with Ashindra, into an area with wider solitary space and range. It is in the hushed moments where Icecrown’s identity is made the most plain. There’s a sort of intrinsic chill from the center of this terrain somewhere, which exceeds the definition of ‘cold’ and travels to areas which might better be specified as a piece of sorcerous activity, likely crafted with the explicit design to disincentivize the living.

To dispel such thoughts, Riv tries to bring up a subject of her own.

“I ran into an old companion of ours recently.”

This gets Ash looking at her.

“Who?”

“Niyena.”

The name is not vastly energizing, but Ash does recall her, that much is definite, being moderately shocked.

“Hmm. Haven’t had that woman on my mind in years.”

Such insinuations get Riv smirking craftily.

“You mean you haven’t had her in your bed in years.”

“Wha—…that’s not—…” Ash exhales faintly. “Okay, it’s a tiny bit fair, but also not.”

“How is it not?”

“Because that extended affair was to some degree your fault.”

Not what she had foreseen to come hurtling from Ash’s mouth and Riv inhales in an aghast sentiment.

“Excuse me??”

There’s now an air of mischief in Ash’s scope.
“You were seriously peeving me, so I had to frustrate you right back. Sounded like the greatest way.”

This is stated with a peaceful clarity, obvious in a sense, and however shocked she may be rendered, the amusement bubbles up within Riv, as she can glimpse a piece of the old Ash. Thus, she laughs in a mildly frustrated vein.

“How the hell is that on me, you prick?!”

Ash sets a smug pair of eyes on the hunter.

“What? Well, I had to win somehow. Obviously.”

The hunter erupts in more emphatic and appealing laughter, bumping her shoulder into her friend. It’s amazing and a relief to understand that they can both goof around and tease each other like they used to.

“You’re an asshole.”

“May I remind you that I did triumph in that little bout and got you back later?”

“That took months!”

“The result was the same, wasn’t it?”

Riv continues her snigger and then rests her head briefly on Ash’s shoulder. The paladin elects to encase Riv’s waist in her arm. Sometimes, she does miss these days.

The halcyon thoughts and bliss do not endure for long, as Ash unknowingly offers the incorrect question.

“How has she been doing nowadays then?”

It is upon this inquiry that Riv tangibly sobers up, averting her sight.

“She’s dead.”

Well, this took a turn for the positively ominous and in truth, quite baffling.

“Erm…but you said…”

Riv holds her tongue for a couple of seconds, deep in thought, until she orients back to Ash, determining the sensation in her friend.

“…what? Oh, wait! You thought—...I’m sorry, I’m sorry! That was dumb, really dumb. I meant she’s undead.” She breathes out in a taxed fashion. “It’s a real grim truth, but Niyena was one of the soldiers who…fell at the front lines and subsequently was brought back to another version of life.

Have you…been let in on info about the Dark Rangers?”

“Ah. Yeah, definitely. They serve Banshee Queen Windrunner, right?”

“Indeed. Niyena is in their count. From what I gleaned, a majority of her lingers, but she has altered resoundingly as well.”

“Oh. Did you chat?”

Riv dips her head affirmatively.

“Yes, we had a lovely conversation at the Day of Eclipse ceremony in Dalaran. You have by chance not gathered there was one, but yeah, I met her there. We each almost supposed there would be a mix-up or some such, but no. We got along splendidly, and she was quite fond of Thariss’ behavior and philosophy too. I’m strongly considering keeping in contact with her, if time and space permits us.”
Processing what she’s being granted, Ash nods mindfully.
“That’s a smart idea. I’m prepared to wager that Niyena would love to hear from someone she knew in the past, that the living hasn’t neglected them. My experience with other Forsaken has proved that much. However, I may be in possession of…less-than-stellar news for you.”

The hunter’s ears then elevate with curiosity.
“How come? Do you have an angle here?”

Ash seizes a great intake of air, settling herself for what this’ll mean for the both of them.
“Sort of. This demands some detailing.
Melia and I were stationed in Zul’Drak just a couple of weeks ago. It was an agonizing and desperate situation the whole way through, while we were attempting to stem the advance of a great threat to the land and everyone on Northrend, by the Scourge. A couple of moments, we were on the very precipice of being bested and perhaps the ultimate end, but we received aid. One was from a contingent of Zandalari, but there was a second group. This one was governed by…well, by Trienza.”

Upon pushing the name aloud, Ash herself feels how her heart is clenching, the air in her throat stopping short for a second or two. Riv, it’s safe to say, is absolutely stunned, in a level that leaves so many other such moments in the dust. She stares into the paladin’s eyes with the kind of demeanor which might imply that she was pierced by a blade. She needs a couple of instants to even extract another initiation of words from her mouth, for they’re stumped.

“What…what did you…”

Ash tries to help her along and move ahead.
“It was Trienza herself, Riv. Trienza Sah’nir, though she has done away with the second part.”

Riv has halted in her speech, appearing to be nearly mentally overrun, en route to faint, and Ash presents her hand to softly clasp the hunter’s arm.
“That’s…no. It’s impossible. No way. You can’t be—she’s gone. I saw it myself. She…”

Ash corrects some of the strands of hair blowing in her face.
“Yes, I recall you revealing that, but this had a decided truth to it. I met Trienza, I know it. We struggled and confronted the Scourge together on numerous occasions. That’s not to say she was completely herself, but it was close. Although she too has…transformed in some senses. But you also struck the right chord – she did perish. Or rather, she has descended into a state of undeath.”

That is when Riv catches on.
“Hold it. Is she…Forsaken as well?”

“No, not quite. She’s one of the Ebon Knights.”

“Ebon…Knights?”

“You haven’t…?” Ash exhales from her nose. “Right. They’re a form of death knight.”

Riv studies Ash intently, but looks no wiser.
“You’re losing me. What does that entail?”

“They’re a grander and…far deadlier construction of the Lich King. Warriors teeming with hideous collections of necromantic energies. In their natural guise, they are exceptionally
dangerous, but this specific brigade broke off from the Lich King’s autocracy, to discover an alternative to oppose him. Trienza is one of them, of the rank Strike-Commander. She’s got two fresh aides as well – the kaldorei Sydela, formerly of the Argent Dawn, and an Amani called Lah’kur.”

This was an account and news which Riv had not contemplated and she’s thoroughly inundated by it, to the point where she can’t determine what she wishes to say or think.

“Is…is she here?”

“No, she’s not. Well, not in this individual camp. The Ebon Knights ventured to the west somewhere, as they sought their own route into Icecrown. There was a target they were hunting, but didn’t convey what.”

Just when Riv was convinced she’d restored some stability into her life, the entire complex tumbles into piles of debris yet again, jibing with Quel’Thalas’ fate. But this is when Ash emerges and embraces her friend, pulling the hunter near to her.

“Riv, I sympathize with you. I can appreciate how exhausting this must be. I kept you in mind throughout the journey with Trienza and I knew I could brook no conclusion which meant she’d be lost, like she was before. I protected her, so I could broach it to you.

If you need anything, anything at all…you have me, at the blink of an eye, as your friend. I won’t turn my back on you or anyone this time, so help me Holy Light.”

Though she is swarmed by emotions and despite the circumstances, Riv is elated to catch those words, leaning into Ash’s arms.

“Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, so this is kinda where the last two arcs start - Riv meeting her old teacher (and replacement mother figure) and Ash/Melia getting going
Two shades of despair

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The term ‘winter’ has entirely divergent connotations within Northrend, in contradiction to the lands of Ashindra’s ancestors. Not that Quel’Thalas never tastes the lick of the cold winds and the peeks of white trickling sky shards, but the spellbound territory of the high and blood elves holds distinct aspects which shelter inhabitants from the worst of it. By courtesy and formidability of the Sunwell, they rarely have to stick it out along the lines of Winterspring over in Kalimdor. The arcane robustness of that pool could not only ward off swords and spells, but also modulate the scenery and the very essence of Azeroth’s seasons, at least inside its own borders. Small wonder that such a range of malicious minds sought to usurp it.

But Ash isn’t by definition driven to sorcerous instruments in so far as gaining escalated heat goes. In truth, the flash of a peculiar woman in the roster of the Argent Crusade bears innate virtues which can set Ash internally aflame and rejuvenate any frigidity which she’s undergoing or could even reasonably drum up. Melia Haven. Ash has devoted a plethora of months to this delightful, graceful and arresting woman, as her second, her friend and in some ways, her confidant.

The paladin is positioned on a hill which commands a view of a vast chunk of this stretch within Icecrown’s southern slopes. There, by some of the tents and transient camps midway of the Argent Vanguard and the next battlefield of their organization, Melia is poised in close proximity to some of her other lieutenants and sergeants, because they’re hammering out the details on a practicable strategy for tomorrow’s onset of some form of edifice, which Ash has no longer fixed in her mind. When it surrounds the Captain, Ash simply finds that she falls over stumbling blocks, if she excuses herself to secure a few minutes to merely visually wander along the priestess’ arches. The wonderful curves of her smile, the fashion in which her hair rustles in the wind. Ash can’t differentiate if Melia is literally this dreamy and fair, or if the elf’s own adoring mind is playing tricks on her. Blind infatuation or not, Ash feels both privileged and cursed for sitting at Melia’s side for such a protracted duration.

“You want her, don’t you?”, a voice behind her articulates, though she is not discernibly moved by anything other than the pretention of the question itself.

“I…I don’t know sometimes.”

“Ah, don’t lie. I know you too well. You’ve been spying on this girl every day for the previous two weeks, eyeing her up when she’s not attentive. You recall that kiss you two joined in before? It won’t release you, will it? You hunger to brush those lips of hers, crushing yours again, sanction them to ravish your heart and soul. But you don’t got the brass neck to leap.”

Ash’s ears loll backwards, dismayed. This figure has the right of it, no question. “It’s…it’s hard to handle.”

“Why would it be? It’s just romance, Ash. Just physicality. And isn’t that one field you’re quite an expert in, if times past is anything to go by?”

But Ash flips her head. “Not anymore. I’ve lost it…”
The other woman snorts.  
“What, the talent?”  

Ash vents air from her nose.  
“…don’t be absurd.”  

“Yeah, that was a safe bet. Enough ladies have moaned your name for this to have been the biggest deception in history. And if these facts are straight, then what’s preventing you?”  

“It’s simply…not right. Not fitting. Not since the things I’ve committed…”  

“Close to what you pulled with me?”  

And like that, Ash rouses from her reverie of Melia and twists around, coming face to face with one of the darkest hellscapes, a scenario that she would not dream of ending up in, for she wouldn’t know the first thing of what to do.  
Vestarial. Her twin little sister, in all her demonically-reshaped glory. The crooked horns, the notched shoulders, the edged claws, the blood-tinged blindfold, the whole shebang.  

In the same instant, the environment metamorphoses with them, and all of a sudden, she’s retracted everything to where this led off – the crumbled realm of Outland.  
Well, it would be a return, save that this is not Zangarmarsh. The scorched wastes, the green-stained overhead view, the tainted fumes of fel pools in a dominion of gloom. This is Shadowmoon Valley. For what end would they have been brought here? It doesn’t conscientiously model anything on their last confrontation, which she likely would presume was the intent. The demon hunter is clad in an identical outfit too, exposing her sturdy abs, toned arms, and the somber body tattoos.  
Ash dwells where she is, a storm of nails in her throat, her stomach cramping, and her head being flushed with an absolute slew of self-reproach and unease.  
“Vesta…”  

“You can’t just leave it be, can you? It’s eating at your faculties, at your instincts, like a parasite. Not mortal so far, but it’s sapping everything that sustains you.”  

“No, you…you’re not—…”  
Ash swallows and she needs to veer her sight from her sister.  
“You weren’t…”  

“I wasn’t what? Not what you were wishing for? Not the model of sister that you could accommodate?” The other redhead shrugs in an unperturbed capacity. “Fair enough. Not like I can blame you for giving up, I guess. I was a real bitch.”  

“That’s not what I was saying! It’s never what I strived for…not with you…”  

“Things that go along the course we prefer are few and far between, Ash. That’s life. The invasion oughta have schooled you in this. Our history together should’ve taught you this. Think back to them, to the years in Tranquillien, to rainy autumns.”  

A glimpse of a flashback then strikes Ash, like the sting of a bee in her neck. She flinches, and then out of nowhere, she’s back in her hometown, in southern Quel’Thalas. She’s in the market district, where local farmers, traders and roaming merchants from all across Alliance lands converge and hawk their commodities. Mainly high elves, naturally, but there are a couple of humans and the odd gnome or dwarf too.
And there, in the center of a day midweek, the two redheaded twins – young daughters of hardworking blacksmith Caleron Revenor and administrative assistant Nathea Revenor – rushes forth, crashes into walls and stalls to square off against one another, invoking quite a kerfuffle as they practically box one another black and blue. Only the intervention of Ranger-Private Rivaryn Silvershroud forestalls wholesale cracking of bones.

The worst part of the full story was that she almost comes up empty on remembering what even sparked it. Probably something utterly and demonstrably inane. What the High priest of the chapel was dressed in? The last birthday present which she gave to Vesta? Something Riv uttered and the sisters turned unreservedly exaggerated, as they do ad nauseum? Sounds suitably foolish.

“We’ve carried this on for a great length of time now, haven’t we? Sometimes, I’d just about claim it’s less a random phenomenon and more like a function of physical reality. If we buried the hatchet, would the world crack into a million pieces or the sky turn fel green like Sargeras’ toilet?”

Ash comes across as moderately downcast, but Vesta is prone to being glib. She persistently has, way back into their childhood.

“I don’t enjoy that we must fight and quibble.”

“It’s a twofold conundrum, with both of us owning some culpability.”

Further images and vistas then materialize, as Vesta continues her recitation.

“It’s been you with your incessant conversion attempts and me with my blasphemous disregard of such notions.”

This occasion of blood in the market is then reworked into a late summer afternoon in the living room of their family’s unimpressive house, with a kickup between two teenaged fire-haired elves. Ash cannot perceive the words coming out of their mouths, but it’s trivial. The ice and causticity of those days have not left her. How they used to roar at one another…

Vesta proceeds.

“It was you with your self-righteousness, me with my military bellicosity.”

The scene coming up is in the outskirts of town, adjacent to miss Veilwood’s farm. It’s early in an autumn morning and Ash is standing there, trying to chew her sister out. This was in the period where Ash had braided hair and Vesta had cut hers short – they never sport the same hairstyle, not once.

Ash is plainly galled, fed up with her sister’s behavior as of late and attempts to flash her ‘superior’ morality as a blunt instrument against a bruised Vesta. The day before, outside the bakery in the northeast corner of town, a young human Lordaeronian traveler had been flirting with Vesta’s friend, to the point where it became indecent. Her friend was too shy to speak for herself and reject him outright, not wanting to offend, so Vesta did it for her – with her fists. After a rebuke which he brushed off, she socked him square in the jaw and the two came into a real conflict.

Vesta only stared out across the fields of town, not responding to her sister, not acknowledging if she was bothered by it in the least. And after three minutes of this, Vesta voiced her sole words in the entire conversation, which still clangs vividly in Ash’s head.

“I don’t give a fuck.”

And then she was off. One could claim that Vesta was uncouth here, unkind even, but this would fail to comprehend that Ash was similarly blind to her sister’s concerns and wants. That’s when current Vesta speaks.

“It was you with your aspersions of my character and me holding…well, to be completely honest, relatively unfair manipulations of your heart.”

For this ultimate correlation, the portrait painted is of Ash standing behind an aggregation of
bushes and apple trees, slotted in the area northwest of Tranquillien. Here, she is endowed with a quite advantageous view of an alley approximately twenty meters along to the north. What she spots there is another duo of elven women, and it goes without explaining that one of them is her twin. This more well-built woman is associated with one of the Farstriders, a black-haired lady that is well-trained in her own right, though a leaner example – Rivaryn.

At this moment in time, Ash would theorize that Riv was stamped as an ‘ex’, if nothing else typified by Vesta’s immediacy to the hunter, one hand having their fingers entwined and the other placed firmly onto Riv’s behind. As they slip fully into the alley, the equation progresses in a dash, when Vesta gently tackles Riv into the wall, pins her arms above her, and kisses her passionately. Coincided with this work of yearning is Vesta’s effort to audaciously undress the other woman right there and then, tossing the shirt to the ground.

Real Ash then bars her eyes.

“Yeah, this is…fact, to some extent. We have jointly been stupidly ridiculous, as if consistently pricking ourselves with knives in our own backs. But regardless, none of this compensates for what I took up in Outland.”

She unfurls the lids, laying her vision on Vesta. They’ve found their way to Zangarmarsh, although this time, it’s just them. Vesta’s expression here is ruminant, solemn.

“You aren’t wrong. Our duel out here in the swamp…it sucked. It ached, lacerated me, emotionally and quite physically, in a weird balance. I was torn up by what you spouted at me, and what you achieved. I had a lot of mending to do thereafter.

In spite of this, it was not the wounds, the defeat, nor the close-to-death experience that pained me - it was the realization that I very nearly lost my sister. I had no desire, no appetite for your demise, but you practically did yourself in. The grim, stern, lifeless woman I ran into on Outland, that was not my sister. Not the charmer, not the Light-speaker, not the life-loving woman that I locked horns with once upon a time. It was someone else, the repercussions of the Scourge’s horrors, the misguidance of sorrow. You figured you were driving yourself to be better for the sin’dorei, but were you? Were they? Was a single action of our people, in their desperation and fear for the future, actually what held good? We were pushing a dawn where we might as well end up as cinders, and you followed suit, leaping right into that pit. In a way, it’s debatable that I could be accused of the same, but I was not you. From me, it was expected.”

Imminently, they flicker back to the glaciers and snow-peaked hills of Northrend, as well as the image of Melia. She has not shifted, nor mused upon Ash’s absence, seemingly.

“You like this lady, Ash. Don’t insult me by denying that. And I can see it – she’s funny, she’s brave, she’s kind-hearted, she’s focused on her wishes and principles. And damn gorgeous to boot. I’m aware you’ve stroked your lips every night since that drunken mess and you long intensely for the opportunity to expand that passion.”

Ash’s eyes plunge to the surface at their feet, and she searches her thoughts and emotions. Is there any part of her that could acceptably deride this reflection? She’s been at this discrete deed every night and as she views Melia smiling, her soul fills with envy – she’d like nothing more than being the source of that expression. To be the cause of the priestess’ joy, her comfort. Her…pleasure.

“Your eyes are open to what you regret ahead of anything else, right? That you’ve concluded unequivocally to be incapable of engaging this endeavor, that you’re somehow…undeserving to pursue her. But the truth is, you’re not. You are fit to do it. You can make amends, notwithstanding. No amount of obstacles should keep you from this payoff. But you see what won’t bring you there? If you don’t try to amend yourself. That’s the pathway to atonement and Melia is your fighting chance. It’s right in front of your nose.

I love you, Ash. We’ve fought and bled each other and shouted profanities that stung more than any scars. But I love you. Have since day one and it won’t be flushed away. If this was real, if I
was really here, you believe I’d impose loneliness on you, to stop living your life?”

What Vesta yields to her, it comes across as fully valid, earnest, from the bottom of the heart. Though they scarcely play off with any pronounced success, Ash could swallow this as lines which might pour from Vesta, during a point of sensitive festering. It’s expressly what merits her to be so bowled over by the closing passage of the demon hunter’s half-speech. “What was that? If you were really—oh.” It had seemed so vivid, so conscious. And yet…

Reasonably unanticipated, Ash’s eyes shoot open and she awakens, uncovering herself lying in her personal tent somewhere in Icecrown. Overhead, the roof fluctuates due to the heft of Northrend’s currents.

Chapter End Notes

*I know I used the whole "graphic dream" trope here, but this was both a dream and not. The Light works in mysterious ways*
The united-but-split forces of the Alliance and the Horde have sidestepped the passages which would shuttle them into the center of Icecrown, above all given their measurements. With thousands of soldiers, it would be a titanically unstable and vulnerable march on land, where they could not only be spotted from a mile away, but the undead – who have even the very soil under their spell – could waylay them at literally any leg of the journey. That is why they opted for airships as a substitute.

However, it would not preclude a significantly smaller party from prowling down the barren and snowy thoroughfares, not unlike the one headed up by Rivaryn. The hunter did wish her friends to be forewarned of what this would entail, and thus she recounted the tale which Ash had woven to her. The group, plainly, would not reprobate her in this golden shot at making some sort of peace with her past, one that Riv herself hadn’t envisaged was actually plaguing her anymore. Hadn’t occurred to her that this would spawn in her shadow.

With this in mind, they had asked around for tips and clues to where the Ebon Knights had trekked and upon snatching the scent up, they commenced their pursuit. Riv eventually came upon tracks of what she hypothesized were series of heavily-equipped squads, stepping amidst a path that would point them north to northwest. What the death knights might be after, she didn’t know, but she would keep on them.

For now, they’ve stopped for another night, as they’ve made fairly smooth headway, though Riv continues to believe that they are a couple of days off, at a minimum.
Blaming the northern coordinates of the globe and that it’s late in the year, the hours of sun that they get daily isn’t terribly bountiful nor beneficial for the general number of them, but that is not a complaint levied by Thariss and the nightsabers, seeing as how the sheet of stars and the luster of the moon is what brings them bliss, and they can see flawlessly in the darkness.

As Thariss has gotten into whipping up a soup for dinner, she intermittently spies out along the zone, hoping to descry her future wife. The hunter told them half an hour ago that she would like to study a number of footprints that she thought she’d caught in the verge of her eyes to the west. But as she’s still not present, it’s getting under the warrior’s skin.
Flowing from when she initially spun the explanation, Riv has been half blank, not too responsive and as if her emotions are boiling, but under a lid that won’t catch her out. It could spell disaster at some point, but one she’ll keep to herself.

After requesting that Raxeen cover their dinner for a few minutes, Thariss climbs up and plays catch-up with the blood elf, and if favor smiles on her, she will find the hunter soon enough.
And lo and behold, it’s particularly fortuitous this day, for Thariss doesn’t need to go scrounging for hours or anything. Riv is seated on the rim of a snow-laden range, with her one company being a measure of dead, impoverished trees. Except, in the center of the plain, Thariss also notes how the raptor Razz and her own nightsaber mount Ilca are drifting.

It’s an elementary guess that Thariss floats up to her beloved in a heartbeat, and she can sift out that Riv hears her coming – there’s a faint jiggle of Riv’s ears, which Thariss twigs. They have lived together for a few years now, after all, but even superseding that, there isn’t a whole lot of variance between night elven ear movements and blood elven ones, other than angle. Not invariably identical, but if one is versed in one family of elven ear motions, it’s perfectly plausible to get a grip of others.
As a professional tracker, Riv have also most likely determined who it is that’s arrived by the
sound pressure of her boots, the tempo of the steps, and heading used. Ergo, Thariss is not worried that she’ll alarm the hunter.

Landing at a post adjacent to the short elf, Thariss opens her mouth. “Riv. You okay? Been holding off, but you never came back, so I got itchy.”

“Sorry”, speaks the sin’dorei meekly. “Yes, I’m doing decently. I had a bead on some imprints and got onto investigating them, but then a little while later, I felt like I had to…sit down.”

Sit down? This is what Riv expresses, but the kaldorei would dare to say that there is a whole lot more to it. Has to be.

“I got a soup bubbling in the camp. Rax is stirring it for now. Should be up in like, less than half an hour? Give or take. We could head back.”

But the hunter breathes out from her nose.

“I…don’t really have an appetite.”

The passionlessness of Riv’s intonation and the despondence in her presence leave Thariss bending her ears backwards in light heartbreak, disheartened that her lover would be this affected by what hasn’t yet befallen them. She doesn’t state it, but this is in every likelihood a sign of anxiety piggybacked onto guilt. There’s no way it isn’t, right? Riv must be feeling all the impressions of the invasion yet again.

Trying to tidy herself, Thariss glances down the field. Here, she sees how the nightsaber is lying near to the snow, but she’s not wholly unmoving. Instead, her hindquarters are wiggling slightly and she’s somewhat prone, her eyes presumably dilated as she’s in half-play, half-hunt mode. Her victim? The ostensibly unaware Razz.

“What’re they up to now?”, wonders the warrior.

Riv is comparatively sedated while she observes the animals messing about.

“They’re just playing for the moment. A gut instinct had told me of the suspense in Ilca, that she was sorely discomfited in Icecrown, and I’m certain Razz could detect it too. Raptors are extraordinarily clever animals, more so than the bulk of wild creatures. This led him to construe that he would do well to help allay some of that in Ilca, as her friend. Or that’s what I figure.”

They then discern how Ilca bolts out from her hidey-hole, right at Razz, but the raptor is armed for it and he hops backwards, driving the nightsaber to plunge into the snow, some of it dispersing around her, due to her mass. As soon as she has, Ilca then rolls down on her back, and swats her paws up at the raptor, but she doesn’t work her claws. This is a playful application, something she only does when she’s frolicking. Razz matches her mood and he leans over her, producing some thrilled clicking noises and rubs his nose into her belly, while he nudges her with one of his feet. It can grow reasonably rough even in playing sessions between these two, on account of them being predators, but their bodies are equally dense enough to stand it.

Thariss smiles as she oversees them rolling into the snow, bouncing and knocking themselves out. She groks that this is likely taking a huge load off her precious mount. They’ve been a team for several years now, but even so, Riv and Razz are better acquainted with the nightsaber’s boundaries and setups. That’s damn impressive in Thariss’ eyes. However, standing like this renders her mildly restless.

“Can I sit down?”

Her fiancée dips her head.

“It’s fine.”
The warrior plonks herself down in the snow bereft of concern, for corresponding with Riv, she is not fussied regarding getting her ass on dirt, grass or any other outdoor substance. Furthermore, she’s not adorned in her armor at the moment, but like Riv, she’s vested in thermal clothes. As a couple of seconds elapses in quietude, Thariss gets a fix on Riv, trying to interpret what’s on the otherwise distant elf’s mind. At this point in time, it’s not like this is a complex guessing game, by merit of there existing one single font for Riv’s solemnity.

“You’re still thinking about her.”

It isn’t a suggestion, nor an inquiry, but a stated fact. Riv furthers her main stare to start with, at the frisking beasts, but then her sight collapses to the dirt, her shoulders similarly lowering. She digs her fingers into the whiteness, gloves cutting faintly at the solidified earth.

“Mm.”

Other than this, Riv doesn’t flesh out. And in all fairness, Thariss has a clear idea of why. “I can’t imagine what you’re going through with this. It’s just so...effed up. Really beyond me.”

Riv nods and draws a hand along her ponytail, impelling Thariss to expect that she’s perpending her options.

“Ash related to me that Trienza fits the mold of her old grouchy self, and yet...not. It can’t credibly be that straightforward, but...”

The hunter is having a hard time of it, which awakens Thariss innate sympathy.

“Babe, you have no business answering for all this on your own. No one could’ve foreseen what the future would bring after the Scourge invasion, nor that this...totally crackbrained scenario would crop up. If you had, I woulda been mega carried away by how amazingly you can anticipate stuff like this.”

For a second time, Riv is fairly reticent, not taken with the half-joke.

“Yeah...”

And yes, this was mayhap not the ultimate moment for when she ought to get whimsical.

“So, have you thought on how you’re gonna phrase your first meeting with her? First impressions and all that. Can put quite a heat on.”

But Riv shakes her head.

“Definitely not. Haven’t come that deeply into it. Hell, I haven’t even toyed with how I’ll react when we catch sight of her. I might just...” She shrugs.

“If you recall, I typically refer to her as a mentor. And well, she was, as well as a great one at that. But in truth, she is more or less...you know...”

But Riv can’t get it out. She lays her face in her palm and rubs her temples. Clearly, this isn’t working in the practice which suited more of Riv’s desires.

Thariss’ focus leaves Riv for a short phase, to take in the field. She now gets to behold how the two predators are rushing around, engaged in what she can presume is some form of tag game or improvised and more innocent hunt. Even if the nightsaber holds the speed, the raptor is sufficiently dexterous to press the terrain to his advantage and screw away from her assaults.

Though she views them, Thariss talks it out with Riv.

“Shouldn’t you have asked Ash to join you?”

“That would’ve simply flustered us all, including her. Besides, she now has other obligations, to the Argent Crusade. It would be out of order and I want Ash to get some peace, now that she has, on the face of it, looped back to herself.”
Due to not having her hands on a solution which would see this in a different light, Thariss awkwardly holds her words. This unique affliction they’re faced with is one that has the kaldorei stumbling. Where should she navigate this rickety ship of a conversation? Or better yet, is she in a position where that would be the least bit becoming? They have chatted together concerning topics of their histories, but this case here is so…frail. She almost feels like the wrong step and she’ll snap like a twig in Riv’s mental capacity. But maybe she could…

“For the last several years, I’ve often pondered what I’d say to my mother, if I could get her back. Had I earned just one more day with her or…something.”

In spite of her glum state of mind, Riv glances at her wife-to-be, her personal sun, awaiting what Thariss might bring forth here. But as opposed to letting that cat out, Thariss sits in her dilemma and rolls it around. It takes Riv asking, to reignite her.

“Did you ever find an answer?”

“Nope”, Thariss delivers in defeat. “For such a lengthy time, pretty much going so far as to be my whole life, the two of us could never shake hands on anything. Arguing, being at each other’s throats, she rapping my knuckles and me telling her to get bent. Mother was an asshole, couldn’t comprehend or ask me what I wanted or what I was bothered by and she just…” This is where Thariss traps herself and lifts her shoulders gloomily.

Riv lids her eyes and cocoons herself with her arms.

“Pretty much…”

“Odds are it wouldn’t be that painless anyhow. My mother was never the person to get into the whole…touchy-feely stuff. With the exception of my mom, she was commonly equated to a freaking stone wall. And even with mom, it was mainly in confidential settings.”

“Would you still have liked the chance? If it did surface, that is.”

Thariss ruffles some of her own hair.

“Well…it’d be reliant on the circumstances. There’s a shitload of varieties of that same discussion and every chance that some are less pleasant. But…yeah, maybe. Perhaps so I would be able to just…explain my sentiments and challenges.”

Again, they go on the lookout for what their sweet pets are doing together and they’re quite punctual for an incident where Ilca skips upwards in a startled manner. Her nose wrinkles and soon, a hiss is directed at a bundle of rocks. Razz, the braver of two, heads to them and pushes at the static objects with his claws, to unveil a bunch of seething fist-sized bugs. The raptor growls at them, and kicks up snow to shove and deter them, which severs their numbers and assists in ‘protecting’ his saber friend.

Then, Riv regains some of her fortitude.

“I can still recall the first time that the Captain…well, when it comes down to it, had a change of pace with me.”

“Would you…like to relay it?”

Riv nods curtly.

“It was in the opening years of my training, when I was a ranger recruit in the Farstrider boot camp. I was in the process of nursing a baby lynx which had been deprived of its family to a cast of dragonhawks who got quite territorial. I had sort of wandered into it upon the aftereffects.”

“Aww”, goes Thariss. “Poor cub. Sorry to hear that.”
The hunter isn’t too troubled, though. “It’s an element of the natural cycle in life and I can respect the implacability of it. Despite that, I did recognize that forsaking the cub would’ve condemned it to the afterlife, and I’m not that heartless. And on that note, I brought it in. But my fortune wasn’t great, for animals weren’t held at the training grounds and I failed to discover the answer if it would be permissible. I was afraid that if I became too bold, people would keep their eyes peeled on me too strictly and maybe shoo the young one off, to be rid of the fuss. To ensure this wouldn’t happen, I constructed a pint-sized nest beyond the perimeter of the premises. I went off to it every now and then, to feed and play with the cub, which self-evidently grew our bond. Sadly, one day while I was late for practice, I was caught red-handed by Ranger-Captain Trienza herself.”

“Oops.”

“Yeah. She was picking the environment clean and when she spotted me, she broke right into a string of yelling and keelhauling. She was telling me off for slacking and wondered if I was trying to get myself expelled. Because if I was, then she would be more than happy to sign those marching papers. But this growling was closed down once I levelled a horrified, doe-eyed look at the Captain and receded, to expose the junior lynx staring up bemusedly at her. I practically stammered my crummy case to her, and what basis I had for this truancy. Inside, though, I knew I had well and truly blundered this time. My blood was running more than a little cold and I was on the very edge of just weeping for what the Captain would cook up. And let’s face it – she could arouse such a reaction by her mere aura.”

Some of her hair is now whipping into her eyes, attributed to Icecrown’s incessant wind changes, and she realigns it, giving her a slight pause. “But instead of whacking me, laying me out or sending me to the far reaches of Quel’Thalas, she simply stared, nigh on glared at me, for roughly ten seconds. She folded her arms and shook her head in what I could swear was grafted with a hint of acceptance. Then she went ‘Well, what are you doing sitting out here in the cold with it? It must be nasty for such a small being. Carry it inside, you blasted fool’. Her tone was firm and austere, but the intent of the words was…way more charitable than I had ever characterized her. She swirled back to the barracks, leaving me stone-cold dumbstruck. And it was from that day forward where I viewed the Captain with different, improved eyes. It also turned out to be the first animal stabled at those grounds under Trienza’s rule and my very first pet. Had a wagonful of others in my decades with the Farstriders, even a couple of dragonhawks, ironically.”

Thariss’ face glitters with joy. “That’s super adorable of her.”

“Yeah, the Captain could be-…alright, she would, aptly, set you on her shit list for that remark”, she says and Thariss snickers, “but she could be achingly endearing when she wanted to. She just never made it known. Didn’t dare to, as that would kinda raze her whole image. Not what she fancied, really.”

Then, as her spirits have been slightly heightened, Riv rests herself against Thariss’ chest, with the kaldorei holding her tinier partner close, using her thicker arms. “Take your mind off this stuff, babe. Five gold says she’ll be flying high when she greets you again. Going back, you two couldn’t be tighter, right? It’s gonna solve itself, you’ll see.”

Riv’s emerald greens are abstracted, staring at the animal duo, noting how they’re trying to dig up a hole for prey that are unrealistic to be on hand.
“I don’t know.”
Liberated truth

It’s been a long and strenuous road into the deceptive and limitlessly bitter lands of Icecrown. The average traveler would at this crossing have been set on the shrewder road home, to preserve what energy that makes their body continue to function normally and avert the stark threats which seem to lurk past every hill here.

But the Argent Crusade is not a low-risk prey to frighten and shunt from their ultimate destination. For some of them, there is nothing else – their homes, lives and families were swept away, often perpetrated by the wills and hands of the Scourge. In such a composition, there is merely one concept that eggs them on – the day that the Scourge crumbles at last. The day of reckoning. For there will be one, of this there can be no plausible doubt. The armies of the Lich King have rampaged through the living nations to a fault, to where they’ve now burned all bridges to a safer horizon. This is why thousands upon thousands have sailed here and are now hemming the malicious undead in.

But for Ashindra, her mental spotlight is chiefly pointed in one direction, which is the palpable vicinity of her own squad, as well as every other under the leadership of her CO. Ash and Melia have conversed on more than one occasion since bugging out from the Vanguard and facing north, but by and large, their topics revolve around nothing but war. And in spite of this, what Ash would enjoy running by her is…like as not an ill-timed concern.

As a matter of fact, they haven’t in any way selected to reinvigorate what could be claimed to be hanging over their heads – Ash’s confession vis-à-vis Vestarial, right ahead of their inaugural onset of Icecrown. How would she rightfully get across her reflections on this quagmire, for that matter? It would add up that Melia is staying silent out of courtesy, as she can relate to how straining this must be for Ash, and the paladin won’t deny the veracity.

The irony is that her discretion has descended Ash to an even deeper water. Plus, that dream. The nightly jaunt across multiple timelines, spaces and visuals. It was odd, wasn’t it? Not by merit of what her sister was espousing alone, but the overall presentation. She pegged it as real, but overly vivid. Could any vision of this nature that played by the rules be so essential and orderly? Was it perhaps a wake-up call from the cavities of her consciousness? Or the Light’s radiance charting an unspoiled route for her? Something to outrival either of them?

The uneasy subset of this is that it could absolutely be Icecrown itself getting to her. However, that leaves her with another question sheet – why would a sinister place bestow her with such an auspicious dream, or hope even? No, there’s very little chance of that. And if she cracks this case, so what? It won’t improve or weaken her prerogative.

If she thinks about it, it’s a bit irrational of her to be nervous in such a manner. Hasn’t she charmed and made the heads of women spin with avidity in the past? But maybe that’s the deciding factor – the past. How many years has flowed on in the wake of the change in her existence? They haven’t abounded with freedom for romance. Although now…

As she’s contemplating this, Ash is located in the tent assumed by her Captain, and the two of them are reviewing the procedures for where to continue tomorrow in peace. This morning, they prevailed in a showdown with the Scourge, only a light one. It was a company at best, and it appeared to Ash more akin to a trial of sorts, than a full-on bid to undo them.

Acting as one of the head forces for the Crusade army has been sticky for the troops and their strategy in numerous respects, but somehow, Ash furthermore senses that they are in luck, in light of how profoundly miniscule resistance that the Scourge has sent at them. That is, within reasonable estimations of their legitimate ranks. Sometimes, Ash will grant that this comes off as
unduly expedient. Could the Scourge have something up their sleeve? Are they being suckerized into a form of devastating duplicity?

Either way, while Melia and Ash are positioned near the bed where the Captain sleeps and has laid her map, they debate.

“We can’t deal leniently with this. Highlord Fordring dispatched our top scouts here”, she says and points to a district deeply into the north of their transitory map, one that the very same scouts had drawn up for them.

“We’ve learned of a sector which he’s confident will benefit the Crusade, a wayside which supposedly holds diminished necromantic corruption.”

“Hmm. Is this above board?”

“Well, that’s what we intend to piece together with this initiative. With the duty of being one of the hosts treading up front and with me as one of the primary priest-schooled officers at hand, our objective is to make that place in max a week, so that I can appraise it with my Light-based talents.”

Ash looks at Melia with a gaze that denotes mild surprise.

“They swear by you that adamantly? I realize that they respect you, but I wouldn’t have assumed they would confide a mission of this high value.”

The human offers a faint shrug.

“Seems my mother’s old position carries some esteem here and there, including the brass. At least I hadn’t made this proposition, only followed orders. There is even a risk that some of ‘em are… leaving this to my intuition.”

Ash furrows her brow.

“That’s somewhat unjust towards you, isn’t it? It places immoderate pressure on your shoulders to come through.”

“Eh, not to worry. I’m resilient. I can shake it off.”

The paladin sighs and internally thinks that it’s not Melia’s capability to tolerate it that has her so apprehensive…

“Oh, and I want you to grab the middle shift tonight, if you’re up to the task.”

Ash ponders it for no more than a couple of seconds.

“It’s due to that attack two nights ago, right?”

“Quite right.” Melia strokes the right side of her own neck. “Keep dwelling on that the Scourge could duplicate their earlier advances, which I appreciate wouldn’t be rational, but they’re known to be hardheaded, so it does stack up.”

“I have no qualms with this mandate, and I’m pleased to do my duty.”

Melia flourishes a small smile at her second, likely excited by Ash’s words, for her perennial confidence in the priest. Periodically, it’s unclear if Melia would be so assertive in the absence of Ash’s glowing support. The elf may speculate that she is the sole dependent here, but that does herself an injustice.

“Oh yeah, tomorrow – providing that we cover enough ground – I would ask you to navigate your own squadron and Foghorn’s to a position marginally west of the trail we’re travelling down.”

“West? What’s there?”
“There’s a site that the scouts alerted us to, which was the intel impacted by the Ebon Blade. An unknown blue dragon perished in the frozen wastes reportedly thousands of years ago, but when the Lich King enslaved this land, he reanimated its lingering skeleton, since it was locked in the ice. Private Wynne informed me that she has done research on dragon lore with the Stormwind mages, and specifically the blue dragonflight was a critical theme.”

“Mm. She is patently the most scholarly of us.”

Melia inclines her head with conviction.

“Yup. Wynne’s input could go a long way towards digging up an asset against the Scourge. And what with the blues being ingrained with the arcane, she is the woman for the job.”

Ash folds her arms.

“You regret we didn’t ask lady Nadelgosa to abide with us?”

However, Melia shakes her head relaxedly.

“Nah. Her place is with her friends. And regardless, I trust Wynne.”

“I do too.”

“And I assure you this isn’t intended to be a death trap, though it goes without saying that we must be on our toes. If you do bumble into trouble, you have my full permission to pull out, stat. This isn’t another all-or-nothing run. Okay, miss ‘charge into the Citadel and also desperately attempt to rescue a flipping death knight’? she jokes, and as cherry on top, teasingly bumps Ash’s nose.

At first, the paladin giggles, but then gasps in a melodramatic manner.

“Who, me?! What an accusation! A totally unjustified, and may I say, quite a slanderous one too!”

“You wish!” With a benign laughter of her own, Melia smooths her hand over Ash’s neighboring arm. “Look out for yourself over there. This will lend itself to our purposes, but don’t get foolish about it.”

Ash salutes.

“Acknowledged.”

With this cleared up, Melia begins to wind down, which is something that is engaged with an image of release on Melia’s end, but tacked onto a sigh and a rubbing of her forehead. She looks somewhat beat down and Ash apprehends her own distress pulsing.

“Feeling okay?”

“I…get along well enough. But it’s…the battle fatigue, you know? Been at this for too many months now, and even the Plaguelands ahead of that. Sometimes it’s…heavy. Dunno if I can stand it.”

“Yeah, I feel that. At times needlessly much.”

“Hah, I hear you. A pity there’s no room for vacations up here, eh?”

A vacation? When did Ash last take one of those?

But this gives her a thought.

“This war won’t roll on into eternity. It will lose momentum in due course. Have you ruminated any on what you’ll do should that day arrive? After the war has dropped off.”

Melia glances momentarily at Ash in a vein that would implicate that she is one part a little thrown, one part wrestling with it internally.

“When it’s over? Heh. You know, I hadn’t…imagined a day like that.”
Ash rests her fingers on Melia’s neighboring shoulder.
“You should. Sooner or later, it will come calling.”

The human shrugs, though, looking down at the floor.
“Dunno. Wager I’m gonna remain with the Crusade. What else is there? There are things in spades
to clean off still and Azeroth is presumably gonna clamor for us. And it’s not as if this world is
wanting for world-conquering enemies, right?”

She’s not off course. The Burning Legion, the Scourge, the Void, not to mention internal societies
which can rouse concerns, like the naga, the Scarlet Crusade or the black dragonflight. Will they
see peace in any era, one way or the other?
Ash nods sluggishly.
“It does seem to hold good, as disappointing as that is, of course.”

Melia stares at the ground, with a driblet of a faraway notion.
“And I can’t avow to have a home to go to anymore, so…it is what it is.”

Great. So now Ash dropped her into a bummed-out pit, where she gets to come to terms with the
bleak nature of her life outside of war. That’s not what Ash sought.
The paladin thus clears her throat.
“That’s…accurate. But, erm…have you considered other options? Like travelling?”

The Captain syncs up with Ash’s direction, though she doesn’t signal a mass of rejoicing.
“Where would I head to?”

Ash’s sight leaves her for a short time, as she twiddles with the sleeve of her shirt.
“I could picture a mess of destinations, but…perhaps to uh, Quel’Thalas?”

Her chest flushes with consolation, as Melia’s smile is rejuvenated upon getting a tentative plan
evined.
“Hmm. That would be pretty sweet, I reckon. Haven’t visited that land since I was a kid.”

“I remember. It is a marvelous nation for a wealth of reasons.”

“Mm…the wine was scrummy, last I checked.”

“Heh, you’re not wrong. But there’s also the sights and smells of our woods – barring the
Ghostlands, obviously – the cleansing feel of swimming in our lakes, the far gingerer touch of the
wind, the food…”

With a sly glint in her eyes, Melia tips herself nearer and nudges her shoulder into Ash’s.
“The company?”

To begin with, Ash is bemused by her proposal, for Melia somehow unintentionally beat her to the
punch. But with this effect aligned plainly at her, Ash’s cheeks redden.
“Eh, well…”

“Just saying. Could become exceedingly lonely to coast there all by myself. And I can’t predict
what they’d greet a human with, Alliance or not.”

Ash can’t exactly count this wrinkle out, for her people are not accustomed to attitudes of that
persuasion. No matter that they were allies in the age of the quel’dorei, Quel’Thalas still went with
secluding themselves from the other races, post-Second War. And has there been a singular human
visitor in their lands since? Ash hasn’t inquired to the Royal Foreign Affairs Department of any
specific counts regarding tourists or even prisoners.
“You’re…not far off. But it wouldn’t have to be a lonely trip. Perhaps erm…there might be someone you can associate with inside.”

“Maybe. Got any to hit me up with?”

Ash teeters and glances at the anxious priestess, but the hankering depiction from her drives Ash to shyly wobble over her own words.

“Oh, I…I was thinking…I do have some knowledge of that region, so…”

Melia giggles.

“You do at that. Sure you’re up for conducting a stranger like me into your homeland, then? Maybe I’ll clutter it with my slimy human smell.”

Ash strokes her own neck in a timid capacity. It isn’t groundless per se to make such a contention, for there have been components of her people who have subscribed to hollow notions in this manner.

“Come now…you’re no stranger. You’re…”

That’s right – what is Melia in this tapestry?

She’s not alone in working on this, for Melia intriguingly tilts her head sideways.

“I’m what?”

This is it. The point of no return, where it comes to a stark head. Ash could hazard to seal everything. If she does fail, then no one can argue that she didn’t hunker down on it, nor can she beat herself over the head with anything, as she never gave in. But what if she misinterprets and misuses the opportunity? It’s one thing to be denied, but another to rend her entire friendship with this woman. She can’t allow that to transpire…

Crushing her face into her hands, she groans in irritation and curses in thalassian.

“Stop being a dumb little bitch and just say what you have to say…”

The human erects her eyebrow in a clouded respect.

“What was that?”

And so, she swirls hurriedly at Melia, her fire fluttering for a moment.

“I care for you, Melia. Like…loads. Hugely. Painfully…And I’ve remained like this for…freaking ages.”

Melia’s eyes grow larger, an omen of her excitement and wonderment.

“Ash…”

“I-I don’t know if you’ve caught notice of it, but I’ve glanced at you throughout our journey, and felt as if I could…melt. Not because I…not that I thought—…” She pinches her nose. “You were so amazing. Breathtaking in every variation of that word.

With the culmination of the invasion, my mind was transformed and warped into a storm of differing feelings and voices. I could never embrace a single one, which I’ve made you aware of previously. My sister impacted them, Riv unhinged them and you…” She shuts her eyes and hangs her head. “I couldn’t tell what to do. When you invited me into the Crusade, it seemed like a new dawn had found me, an Argent one. In you, I believed I’d located a friend who would guide me to the right passage in life. To…arguably not who I once was, but to someone who’d suit the new me better. Chances are that it would expand, to surpass the old Ash. I couldn’t have foretold that, but…” She places her hands together and runs the tips of them on the peak of her nose. “But…on the night that you kissed me, it…disrupted things.”

She reopens her vision and lobes it sidewise.
“Speaking of such subjects, truly personal disasters and disputes…I haven’t had anyone I could trust them with after…well, Riv, I guess. She was the solitary person who saw me for more than the veil I had invented for myself. And I…I let her down. Just like I disappointed Vesta. And while I can’t take it back, you’re up-to-date on her now. You have a sense of my misfires and inadequacies, in a way that no one else in this camp has or can.

Further, I…would like to reason that I’ve developed a familiarity with the person you are as well. The stories and nightmares you’ve told me of, has sprouted a respect, my affection and a credit in you. You’re someone I can’t be satisfied by simply sitting in the vicinity of, for you’re…a woman I admire. Possibly…greater than that. For the first time in years, I’ve smiled, a for-real smile. And it was…I’m not sure. Coming close to you, it’s as if…the world isn’t shrouded in a darkened mist that strangles me anymore. And that’s saying a huge amount, when we’re stuck in this Light-forsaken abyss, a monster land of torment, where the Light isn’t typically welcome. You’re a dazzling beacon in the center of this, and I almost get a spirit of…being stronger, to be of reinforced value to the world and to…our team, our organization, whenever you stand beside me. Your presence is my lighthouse in the night. It’s such a…like…” She exhales laboredly and faintly shakes her head. Then at last, she angles herself towards the human once more.

“Do I have a single nugget of a sensible point here, or-“

Melia’s response is not a retort of words, but one of sensuality and somatic contact. She clutches the collar of Ash’s shirt, invades her red hair with one hand and wrenches her into a fiery, blistering kiss, to silence the paladin’s rambling. This is suggestive of the night that they originally meshed in an example of physicality and zest, especially as Ash does not or cannot move herself. Melia is supremely talented at throwing her for a loop.

But Ash can’t abide her own listlessness in this instant, not when she’s spent the former few minutes divulging her innermost urges and confusions. What kind of woman would that make her?
And so, marginally and tenuously, she inclines into the human, her eyes drifting close, while her lips heed the call of Melia’s, a hand shambling down to her waist. They retain this posture and interaction for what they could infer to be hours, seeing as how once they disconnect from one another, to breathe, they’re panting badly.

Their gazes lock into one another, Melia’s acting steadily and Ash’s scrambling from side to side. “Mel…I-“

But the human will not hear more.

“Shut up”, she whispers, but sensitively, and slowly leans herself down into her own bed. Her fingers have seized the front of Ash’s clothes, to drag her down in the process. Ash happily obliges.
At last, Rivaryn has traced the succession of bootprints back to the roots – or more accurately, their destination. These dents in the barren, befouled dirt did not commence from the constructions that she has turned up, but they have surfaced as the product of the journey.

It’s not a pleasant sight which Riv and her companions spread their eyes on either – some classification of tower, lodged into the middle of a niche in the mountains which encompass it, with a single and quite slim road running to its entrance. It’s been built in the signature design of Scourge facilities, riddled with spikes and razor-sharp points, where the very walls come off as columns of blades pinned to one another, which together amass a somewhat coherent form. In this case, it’s a cylinder-esque base, with only one gigantic entrance, fit for giants.

This tower or outpost or whatever the Scourge terms it, is flanked by a duo of further rounded formations, still carrying the notched exterior and layout, but unlike the tower, they appear to be simple raised platforms. It follows that they’re either scouting spaces or elevated defensive posts.

Given the fact that there are plenty of overviews here, Riv has positioned herself and her own team on a hill to the east of the ‘entrance’ to this outpost, which is a set of stairs, fenced by two meter-high walls. The group cannot observe a ‘gate’ anywhere, likely because the Scourge had not assumed this lair would be besieged, but a provisional barricade has been thrown together out of various gear, such as the Scourge’s meat wagons, which has been covered in undead corpses.

Apparently, this section is assaulted quite often, which Riv can attest to, for a hostile undead contingent of a hundred ghouls simply launched themselves at it an hour ago, potentially to test its stability.

Despite sitting a few hundred meters’ distance off the perimeter, Riv can sweep portions of the internal ranks, since the bulwarks of this outpost are by no means tall. On that side of the fence, she can pick out not just the regular archetypes of undead foes they’ve tangled with – ghouls, abominations and geists – but here they’ve chimed in with more ghostly entities to boot, as well as mixtures of quite unbroken humans, elves, tauren and more, the whole lot furnished with heavy plates and dark purple tabards with a black sword. Is this a verification that these souls represent the Ebon Blade then, or a mere ruse? Regardless of their states, though, everyone shares equal patrol duty.

Riv carries an indecisive look on her face, which isn’t a sure sign of fear, but instead something akin to ambivalence. The others prevailingly are on her page, but Raxeen’s brow is fielded with a tempered frown.

“This foothold stinks of putrid necromantic energies. It nearly gnaws at my skin, and the Light wishes to push me into smiting the dwellers.”

Nadel isn’t the type of person who presents herself with dismay either, but in this setting, she leans into Rax, pleading for relief in her. The draenei strokes an arm along the elven-formed drake’s shoulders.

“Mm. It’s…cold.”

Thariss has automatically enlisted the use of her shield and she takes a peek at the blood elf.

“Is this the proper place?”

“The tracks point in that direction anyhow”, Riv notifies her.

“You suppose they’ll be uh…friendly to wanderers like this?”
“Couldn’t tell you. I’m as little versed in these people as you.”

“Yeah. Death knights…don’t eat people, do they?”

Riv blinks bemusedly.
“…what?”

“A couple of rumors back in Kalimdor of the Forsaken…eh, never mind.”

But while they sit there and oscillate on the nature of their possible hosts, a person catches their eyes, who strolls near the pale of the base, seemingly undisturbed by scenes of frozen gore or the chilliness of the air. It’s a troll, though they can’t determine her tribe affiliation. Her long hair is held aloft by a brass ring, her extended ears are pierced, and she walks in about the height of Thariss, though not exactly as broad and muscular. Her eyes flare with an icy blue fire, in common with every participating death knight, while her lavish ivory and slightly yellow tusks stand erect. However, built on the fact that her skin is a shade of moss green, Riv wonders if she could stand to reason that this woman was once Amani, ancient adversaries of the quel’dorei.

But just as soon as she skims down the hillside of their hideout, the troll disengages her run, creases her forehead and flies her nose up, to devote it towards sniffing her surroundings. Then, in shock to the living, she diverges her bearings directly at the hill they’ve covered themselves up behind. She slaps her hands on the axes which droop from her belt. Though she bears them at a downward angle, she does encroach at their terrain.

“Hey, no need ta be shy, fleshlings. I can smell ya blood for miles, even over there. You can dip outta there of your own accord, or I can drop in and drag ya out by the ears. You decide.”

At that point, Riv bails from her cover and lifts her hand into visibility.
“Wait! That’s uncalled for. We will you no harm, I promise.”

“Hop down from there and maybe we can chat, yeah?”

They accommodate her wishes, though Thariss breathes out and grumbles under her breath in Darnassian.
“Slowly, if you would. And put your hands up.”

At her behest, the team hits the breaks and roll in on her with added care, including not forgetting to show their weapons. Once they’re within her grasp, she scrutinizes each of them with her frozen gaze, inspecting their gear as they stand below the wall. Riv would inarguably identify her as Amani now as well, judging from the wilted moss which is implanted in her skin.

“Are you…the Knights of the Ebon Blade?”, she wonders.

“Aye, mon”, the troll answers casually. She then tosses her thumb in the trajectory of a few banners that are swaying ten meters to the left of her, pieces of cloth which parade a matching icon as she’s wearing. “This be the Shadow Vault, earlier a Scourge hub, but now ours. It’s the latest staging ground we furnish to launch attacks on the Scourge.”

“So, the rumors are real?”, Thariss inquires. “You guys are like, Scourge turncoats?”

The Amani cannot be pegged as being at ease with that word, for she glares mildly at Thariss.
“Tsk, I guess, if ya can ever definitively say that being a slave is on a similar level as loyalty.”

Thariss’ ears sink reluctantly.
“Oh, uh…meant nothing by it.”
“When did you get here?”, questions the blood elf.

The troll nonchalantly sways the axes in her hands.
“We snatched it from the Scourge’s claws maybe a week before? Even so, we’re in the process of fitting stuff out.”

“Well, I—erm, hang on, maybe I should… Would you permit me to inquire for your name?”

The troll chortles at the awkward courtesy.
“Sure, mon. It’s Lah’kur.”

“Ah, thank you. Knight Lah’kur, if you don’t mind me asking, is…is Commander Trienza here? We’ve been going after her.”

Lah’kur raises an eyebrow both questioningly and suspiciously.
“Ya wanna see the boss? Who’s asking?”

“Ahem. My name is…Rivaryn. Rivaryn Silvershroud.”

Not solely does Lah’kur marvel at her, she’s practically cast backwards.
“Wait, Riva—did you say Silvershroud?”

“I did.”

“That would make ya—someone told us of you some time ago.”

“Ah. A wild guess, but…was it Ashindra?”

“Hah! Yeah, it was her. How’d you know?”

“She’s an associate of mine and we bumped into each other recently.”

The troll contemplatively fondles her own right tusk.
“At the Vanguard? We picked up on it, but haven’t looked very closely. And you’re not the first to request a talk with the boss. Had some other Silvershroud hitting the Vault yesterday. Teleported right in, with an orc.”

This undoubtedly catches them by surprise.
“Are you serious? It has to be my sister!”

“’Suppose. You do resemble her.” She then follows this by eyeing her friends. “And these people are?”

She lays an accentuation on Thariss, the kaldorei who is verging on her elevation. Riv keeps up with Lah’kur and flashes her hand.
“Ah, they’re my closest friends and allies. This is Thariss, my fiancée, our partner Raxeen, as well as her girlfriend Nadelgosa. She’s a blue dragon, but took an intent stand against Malygos. The animals are my companion Razz, the nightsabers Ilca and Aliix. They’re well-trained and clever.”

Lah’kur examines Razz, the red-scaled raptor whose thin predatory eyes target her warily. She doesn’t fault him. She’s familiar with the stories of the species, but they were never the allies of the forest-dwelling Amani, instead hunting with the jungle trolls of the Gurubashi and the stoneheads of Zandalar.
That’s alright, then. Since you’re keen on seeing the boss, follow me.”

Navigating them up the stairs, they then push ahead at the gigantesque tower, rising a few hundred meters up to the skies. And supposedly, this is outclassed by the Icecrown Citadel, which is a petrifying notion.

Indoors, they distinguish a multitude of additional death knights and free-willed undead troops, of all types, qualities and denominations, and Riv can tally more than a couple of hundred. That they’d number in these grades does come off as unexpected to her. Ash established that there existed roughly two dozen or more during their joint mission. To Riv, from the sound of things, that was no more than a minor unit.

The point which Lah’kur draws them to, in any case, is a stand on the western wing, where an entourage of four people are assembled. Three of them shape up to be elves – a brown-haired uncannily pale high elf, a black-haired fair-skinned blood elf, as well as a kaldorei woman showcasing wilted grey-orchid purple hue. The final member in this party is a fern green orc with a black mohawk hair atop her head and hanging braids on her shoulders.

What their dialogue contains is as of yet unrecognized, but Lah’kur then makes herself heard.

“Yo, boss? More outsiders along to greet you.”

The leader – the undead quel’dorei – blows air from her nose.

“How? This day is-“

But upon transitioning to get a fix on them, she’s rendered flat out stunned, her blue deathly eyes dilating with amazement. Lah’kur did not settle on unearthing her name, likely explicitly to gauge the score by Trienza’s active reception, which certainly cuts the mustard, considering how her superior is all but torn asunder.

But she is not the lone player who’s puzzled. Kassari spreads her hands.

“Riv! What-…now there’s an unpredicted sequence.”

Rax nods.

“We are in a similar space.”

Thariss maps out the kaldorei on the flip side with the quel’dorei, or something along those lines, and this woman is returning the favor. But she will say, there is well something…off, apropos her expression. It’s bordering on hauntingly blank. She doesn’t even blink.

Meanwhile, Trienza and Riv are confined in an unplanned staring contest, emerald green grazing the stringent ice of death. Ashindra had a fair point – Trienza does largely reflect the outlines and shell of her old visage, but the lusterless tissue, the breaches in her skin, the sturdier armor ornamented with skulls, the sapped verve in her sight…

At minimum, she does nonetheless reserve her classic hairband and the strands themselves, though they appear low-key frayed, harboring the contrast of an auburn brown.

Neither woman would kill for making the first move, but someone has to break the ice. This is the reason for Trienza bending her head over.

“Silvershroud.”

Riv surpasses her, and straight up bows hers with honor.

“…Captain.”

Was that the right thing to utter? Trienza’s eyebrows lower a touch.

“Not anymore.”

She veers away and shakes her head discontently. It’s unspecified if she blames her for this.
“Let me guess – Revenor tipped you off? Hmph. Foolish, sentimental paladin…”

“Captain Sah’nir-“

Riv hesitates, but she is shut down in no time, when Trienza turns and practically barrel her gaze at the hunter, but with a style of look which Riv can wholeheartedly recognize anywhere – it is the disciplinary and iron-handed one which she and an abundance of other recruits had to suffer in the Farstriders, a reminder that the succeeding sentence is one that Riv has to heed closely or she’ll be en route towards a pressing consequence.

“Don’t speak that name.”

There is something with Trienza. She’s marginally out of step with the woman in Riv’s memories – a tad further remorseless and uncompromising, though this is first and foremost in tone. The spirit Riv knows and loves shines through.

“It’s Strike-Commander Shadespire. Was Revenor not sharp enough to clue you in on this?”

Riv’s face falls, to not be facing Trienza head on. Though the situation has consciously been modified, and Riv’s existence is only minimally what it once was, this does whip up flashbacks in her. Suddenly, it’s like she’s a young, skittish little teenager all over again, standing on the training square of southern Quel’Thalas.

“Y…yes, Commander.”

Overlapping this, the kaldorei on Trienza’s right flank, sporting a remarkable and fairly short violet-pink hair, checks Riv out. Her stony appearance aside, she is curious.

“Are you Rivaryn?”

“I…yes, that’s me.”

Tienza wedges her echoing voice in.

“Ex-Ranger Sergeant Rivaryn Silvershroud”, she explains in a somewhat hardened language.

“Formerly under my command.”

With regard to the Commander not feeding their identities to her, the kaldorei errs on the side of delving into self-introduction.

“I’m Sydela. This is Lah’kur, if she hasn’t said it already”, she motions at the Amani. “We’re the Commander’s aides in the Ebon Blade.”

In her own incredulity and investment by this, Riv parses the two of them. They’re certainly bigger than she has ever been, in addition to Trienza, but for whatever reason, she detects that the Commander carries a congruous hold on them. She then tilts her head in greeting.

“Oh, I see. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Sydela simulates this to some amount, while Lah’kur sets a hand on her own hip and goes at it with a nod.

“Likewise, mon.”

With a bit of an interval, Kass imminently confers with them.

“How did you reach this place? It’s rather sequestered. Did Ashindra color it in?”

“Uh-huh”, Thariss confirms. “Brought it up in a talk with Riv. Didn’t have a straight route for us, so your sister had to dig up the trail and guide the rest of us to the doorstep of this base.”

At that, Trienza half deviates to her and glances upon the younger woman. It’s grimly bizarre, for Riv can’t perceptively draw out the logic behind the stare which she’s hurled. It commands a peculiar color of…accusation? Why would that be? What could have led to her angering her old
superior so? Was it her actions in the failed defensive of Quel’Thallas? The woman who—never mind.

“What are you doing here, child?”, Trienza wonders potently.

Riv is so caught up in the intensity of running into this woman once more, of the frigid greeting she suffers, that she fumbles.

“I—we—we thought that—maybe—”

She strokes her other arm and bites at her lower lip, the difficulty flourishing in her. And as always, her beloved jumps in to save her.

“Wanted to chat with you”, Thariss tells her.

Now, at last, Trienza angles her stare at Thariss, and though the kaldorei can absolutely detect where Riv’s meager response is derived from, the warrior does not back down.

“Me? Why?”

“Uh, well, I reckon since you were pretty important to her once and she kinda figured you were dead this whole time… I mean, not that you’re resurrected for real, but…it brings up questions.”

Trenza goes on to stare at the kaldorei for nearly fifteen seconds prior to finding her words again.

“And you are?”

The night elf presses her hands securely to her hips.

“Thariss Dusksong. I’m gonna be marrying your girl here.”

Riv twitches, as if she hadn’t prepared for her lover to be so blunt. One of the lengthy eyebrows on the Commander cocks, and she inspects the tall, beefy warrior ahead of her, but not judgmentally.

“Is that so? Hmm. Fine, do as you wish. But I’m busy at the moment.”

“If you have any questions in the span of your visit”, Sydela tells her, “feel free to direct them at us.”

“The boss covers the strategy and decision-making, mostly”, Lah’kur agrees. “Not much spare time for chatter.”

“What’re you two up to?”, Thariss asks Kass and Khroga. “What brought ya to undead town? Oh yeah, this Lah’kur lady claimed you teleported in? How’s that? Didn’t Malygos cut this off?”

Kass brushes some strands from her face.

“Yes, but the war on the blue dragonflight was overcome in the last week.”

This garners Nadel’s interest, and astonishment.

“Malygos…was defeated?”

“Yes. We didn’t partake of it, but I’ve seen the Kirin Tor reports. It pains me to inform you that he was killed. He refused any fancies of surrender, even with Queen Alexstrasza’s presence.”

This does indeed appear to dispirit the dragon, who looks down.

“That’s…” She’s soon embraced by Rax. It’s no stunning effect that though they disagreed with the Spellweaver, his demise was not the will of the Azurewings.

Kass continues.
“In spite of that the leyline network has not been all out patched up, exterior spheres of it was mended to the degree where short-range teleportation spells can be cast, if they’re subsumed in considerable and detailed incantations, which I am schooled in.”

“We’re following up on the investigation of my father”, says Khroga.

“Yes, after a far too extended cycle, we’ve gotten out from under the paperwork of the Kirin Tor’s punitive actions.”

“Caught by word of mouth that the Ebon Blade and the Argent Crusade were ramming their way into Icecrown and we wanted to reach them in time.”

“But it had not been clarified to us who would be, erm…the authority in here.”

Trienza snorts bitterly.
“I am not the taskmaster of this post. That would be Duke Lankral. I lead on the front, hence Strike-Commander.”

Khroga’s countenance then takes on an unnerving air.
“We were made aware just ahead of your group’s arrival that my father is not accounted for in the Ebon Blade’s realm…”

Trienza swirls to her and dips her head in acknowledgement.
“Germark Steelfang. He does ring a bell, throughout my tour up here in Icecrown, for as long as I was the Lich King’s thrall. Last I recall, Germark was one of the figureheads for the enforcers, those knights who rose at the frontline of the Scourge’s actions to subdue Northrend’s native population.
But I fear he was never positioned on Acherus with the branch of death knights who were to be the Lich King’s price for bringing down the Argent Dawn. Thus, he is not an Ebon Knight.”

Khroga looks cast down by this update, lowering her head and slumping her shoulders.
Heartbroken over her lover’s reflex, Kass bands her arms along the orc’s waist and rests her head on the chest.
“Sweetheart, I’m so sorry…”

The shaman is appreciative of her girlfriend’s sensibilities and she embraces the elf tenderly for a brief time, nuzzling into the black hair and Kass leaves her to go for what she has a mind to.
Getting back to it, Khroga stays with one hand down the Arcanist’s back and at the same time addresses Trienza.
“Strike-Commander, I must find him.” With her available fingers, she clenches the weapon locked to her back with a strap and holds it forth. “The weapon I carry is my father’s – Magokash, ‘The Verse of Tears’. The closing one ought to be his.”

The high elf regards the axe, following the fine and fortitudinous artistry, the spiked back, the hefty hilt, the curved edge of the weighty two-handed armament.
“I am not wise to his present whereabouts.” She then glimpses across the orc. “But it’s fair to say I have an inkling where his superior would station him.”

Khroga awakens with intrigue, but it’s Kass who voices the question.
“Could you escort us to this tract?”

“I could be free to undertake precisely that, although I would caution you that it’s a perilous byway, not for the faint of heart. If you’d take some advice, I’ll submit that you stay idle until the Argent Crusade and the Ebon Blade make a move on the Citadel, to facilitate this maneuver.
Plus, I won’t take up this task free of charge – I have a condition.”

“Doesn’t bother me”, utters Khroga. “Ask anything.”

“I am committed to this as well”, Kass assures.

Trienza searches the mage and points at her.

“Silvershroud junior – you know a thing or two on the subjects of magical scrolls and enchantments, if I recall correctly?”

Her assessment isn’t met with unconditional approval, since Kass scowls, all but pouting.

“…it’s Arcanist Silvershroud. And yes, I am an emissary of the Magisters.”

“Then as recompense, you will decipher a scroll in my possession. There is a prospect that I’ll add the provision of martial assistance too, but we can wait and see.”

“Fine, I will take your magical orders. For Khroga’s benefit, I’m yours.”

“If there’s anything other than that”, states Khroga, “you can call on me too. Under the circumstances that you take us to him, I’ll adhere to your script.”

“Then we have a business relationship, shaman Steelfang.”

With a free moment, Riv jacks into the conversation.

“Capt-…Commander. I was…hoping we could have a few words”, she says modestly.

Sadly, the high elf stares at her only briefly, rivaling her preceding mask. Then, she veers north and departs with brisk, snappy footsteps.

“Later.”

Her articulation and bearing makes it perfectly clear that this is final. Riv’s eartips swag in sorrow, now increasingly alarmed that she has in some manner failed her ex-Captain.

Lah’kur scans this makeup from afar, and though they are not familiar with one another, she can commiserate.

“Don’t hold it against her. The past is…a serious bastard for the best of death knights to sort out. Give it time.”

Riv does nothing but stare silently at the steadily fading picture of Trienza, as if someone is mutilating her heart.
The northeastern strips of Icecrown, though usually as ghostly silent and algid as everywhere in this Light-forsaken zone, has for the previous few weeks been crackling with fire and getting rich with lusters of life. Once Crusade-Captain Melia Haven had rated this venue as fit for an outpost, supplemental squads, wagons and hippogryphs had been pouring in. Highlord Fordring were in the market for a larger depot here, a veritable base, the first one to validly be measured as lying inside the margins of Icecrown.

Imperatives have been sent for ships to sail beside the coast, which would carry complemental troops and provisions from the south and insure their gambit against the Scourge.

In the meantime, the soldiers and Argent believers who were deployed here, have already been commanded to safeguard locality for the builders, cooks, stablers and others who’ll be escorted by the added Argent swords, to actually design the facilities, tend to storages and guarantee that they survive the non-combat dangers.

Two of those who keep this charge are Marlyn and Gniklas, the Forsaken and gnome who’ve been locked to Ashindra’s team for months, a couple of those who carry her trust. This afternoon, with the grey and cloudy skies overhead, they’re pacing back to the Argent grounds at the end of their watch, having a little chat in between them.

With the influx of fresh recruits and volunteers in the lead-up to the assault on Icecrown, the group has blossomed, now counting several more dozens of brave souls under Ash’s rule alone. However, the ‘veterans’ as it were, often stick to one another in private, delving into anecdotes of the road here and dreaming of home for those who yet own one. Ash has given her oath that just as soon as the base’s construction is brought to an end, she’ll have Corporal promotions for everyone who’s been with her for a while, along with a Sergeant one for Braktog.

The one flapping his gums the most is Gniklas, flaunting his performance at the former grave of the blue dragon that they sleuthed the other week, the one which Private Wynne had said came under the name ‘Sindragosa’s Fall’ in old-time kaldorei scrolls, for the place which Malygos’ prime consort had succumbed to in the War of the Ancients.

“Ahh, I can’t stop thinking about that shot, Marlyn! Best one I’ve aimed in months!”

Gniklas laughs happily at that.

But shortly thereafter, his big eyes get tied to her hands.

“Are you okay?”, he wonders with a tad of seriousness. “You’ve been touching that arm more than
usual, as of late.”

Marlyn gets an impromptu reminder that Gniklas is the one in the team with a supreme sharp-eyed trait. He lets few things dodge his notice, which has been a benefit to their group. The undead is on the fence for a moment.

“I’m unsure. I took a nasty blow by one of the frozen vrykul when I made an attempt to block. Those men were so gigantic. I overlooked my lessons, and I shouldn’t have withstood it head on. I’m no healer, but I’m scared that something is broken.”

This blatantly jars the gnome too.

“Is there anything we can do to remedy that?”

“That is also undecided. When I was injured last month, V-Vihara cast a spell or prayer or whatever it is she does. It did get me quite far.”

“Well, then she’s bound to succeed again, yes? We have to locate her somewhere!”

His voice is fairly effusive, but Marlyn is timid.

“I concede to that. Where would she be, though?”

“We can ask around. Most often, she goes alone, but someone will have seen her.”

Passing inside the perimeters of the unsettled turf of the Crusade, they peruse the tents and bare ground, which has been shoveled to empty the terrain of snow. Upon a blanket in the fresh air, they heed a cute light-skinned and blonde human dressed in thick robes and furs in their contingent, Wynne from Stormwind. She’s sitting with her knees bent, a bag by her side and books sprawled carelessly in her orbit. Her gaze is fixated on the text she’s reading, her fingers marking her speed. Though it’s freezing as the grave in this province, the human is presumably artificially heated by her spells.

“W-Wynne?”, Marlyn calls out tenderly, but it is not sufficient for tearing her from the papers.

Wynne is a studious and faintly besetting woman. When she gets into a task – specifically reading – she’s hard to disturb. Here, she’s so engrossed by the subject of her mind that she does not overhear the Forsaken speaking her name. This leads to Gniklas chiming in.

“Hey, Wynne!”, he shouts.

The mage is now startled into lifting her blue eyes towards them and drifts at them with a flabbergasted look.

“Wha-…I…I didn’t-…what’s the-… Hello”, she utters, once she’s finished sputtering.

Gniklas smiles and waves in greeting, while Marlyn does merely the latter with her unscathed arm.

“How is it going? What is that?”, wonders the Forsaken.

Wynne blinks half a dozen times, and then she glances down at the book in her fingers, with her mind reasserting itself.

“Oh! It’s something truly and utterly fascinating! I’m rereading some of the old tome excerpts and dissertations I procured back in Stormwind, in the span of my studies. You see, in Sindragosa’s Fall, I believe I caught remnants of primeval arcane magic, trapped in the crypt which the Lich King reanimated the ancient dragon from. The intriguing factor in all this is that they were pulsing with vivid energy, which to the blue dragons is akin to their lifeblood. It is what sustains them. I’m formulating a theory that with the appropriate spellcraft and blue dragonflight magical
efficacy, it could be very likely to craft a piece of sorcery which would unchain every frostwyrm’s mind from the Scourge’s regime. We could free them all and weaken the Scourge’s numbers and defensive measures in the process!”

Naturally, this is a revelation which has both the other youngsters quite excited. “A-amazing!”, blurts Marlyn.

“Indeed!”, Gniklas echoes. “Any progress on that front?”

Wynne puts her mouth ajar to send them a response, which could ideally tell them that they are a step closer to this, but… alas, she soon lets her shoulders slump and she keeps a face of ruefulness.

“Admittedly…not so far. But don’t fret, I’ll get there! I’ve only just begun, and I have plenty of time to… well, some semblance of time, I suppose. I’m confident I can crack this nut. Probably… Anyway, can I help you? Hold up. Did you already complete your guarding? You left five minutes ago.”

Marlyn and Gniklas blinks, share a glance and then stares back at the mage.

“…Wynne, that was four hours ago.”

The young human’s jaw is agape.

“Pardon? You’re joking.” She averts her sight to push it to the skies, and to the camp. It has unmistakably darkened somewhat.

“…you’re not joking. Where in blazes did this day go?”

“We are searching for Vihara”, the Forsaken tells her.

“Marlyn has been hurting”, adds Gniklas. “One of her limbs might be mildly unaligned, following our last battle.”

That is when Wynne gains an anxious visage too.

“That’s not good at all. Vihara would feasibly be the most prudent for your physique, that’s true. I can’t swear that I kept myself updated on where she goes, but I was told by someone that she drifts off to the northern tents. Lieutenant Revenor also cited that the priestess is set on erecting some uh… altar or whatever, to her goddess. I don’t keep track of the exact place, but I can take the time to locate it with you.”

As they walk side by side, Wynne drags on her chatter and reading from her book in one go. Due to not clapping her eyes on the road very often, either of the other two at times are called to pull the mage by the arm or robes, so that she does not stumble into crusaders or rocks or tents. Wynne is an immensely intelligent and studied woman, but she is not terribly attentive.

Along the way, Marlyn and Gniklas observe Lieutenant Foghorn and Braktog standing together by the brim of a slight opening in the tents. They wave at them in passing, but do not stop.

Their target for the day is one they trace out under the protection of a square-shaped tent in the northern verge of the fresh camp, poised in front of a wooden piece. Not much craftsmanship was buried in this, however, for the base is predominantly a branch, where some twigs have been shaved to render a smoother center. It is somewhat bent and curved, though it sits upright, and at the curved top hangs a necklace of iron with a symbol made of mithril portraying another arched mold – a crescent moon.

The kaldorei is on her feet, but her head is descended, and her arms crossed before her chest, hands into fists. She’s wearing light and grey robes, and a scarf.

Wynne speaks up.
“Ah, there you are, Vih-“

But she’s muzzled by a raised finger from the kaldorei, who does not phrase anything for them, but the beckon is a no-brainer. These three then pass the time silently and patiently, for Vihara to attend her prayers and thanks to her goddess of the moon, the one which the kaldorei hold so dear. Half a minute goes by, and when it’s behind them, Vihara’s gaze shoots open. For a brief interval, a vivid white-blue gleam is infused in her lens, but it dissipates swiftly, leaving the sky blue and clear.

She then trends to them, lowers her head marginally and displays a hand.
“The blessing of the goddess upon you.”
Marlyn and Gniklas bow with respect, but Wynne sits it out. She’s often a pinch encumbered in talks of religion, even in the company of the Light priests back home.
Vihara’s long moss-green strands are free of their ponytail today and she has the right side of them around her ear.
“Do you require anything of me?”, she asks in a placid voice.

The Forsaken gives voice to what plagues her, though in her ordinary stammering tone.
“I…y-yes. Not…not require, but…help would be nice.
The battle against the cultists…and the vrykul, it was…hard. I-I think one of the vrykul may have rent something i-in me. My arm has felt…frail since that day.”

The Elune priestess does not sweat fear or disturbance, but leaves her emotional feedback to a faint nod and then strides closer.
“May I?”

The Forsaken holds up her arm for the kaldorei. The priestess is not as slender or chubby as the disciples of the Light which the youthful warrior recalls from her days in living Lordaeron. The majority of Elune priests are tutored in both the arts of worship and war, and Vihara just like them is quite a fit woman. Additionally, she towers above everyone in the team, besides the tauren. Her stretched fingers grope and squeeze the undead’s grey-green almost leathery arm in a mild and mindful manner, raising and lowering it, occasionally asking Marlyn how she feels regarding some move. Not for a second does she shy away concerning the Forsaken’s husk, which for some living is repulsive. Marlyn is an ally, a friend and more than that, a patient.

Before joining the Argent Crusade to get justice for her dead people and family, Marlyn had never encountered or even caught wind of the kaldorei, hidden as they had been in their continent across The Great Sea. But ever since dispersing her months near them, she’s thought they are so…wondrous. As breathtaking as the high-…well, mainly blood elves now, but gigantic like the forest trolls. She wouldn’t have imagined that blend was plausible.

A minute later, the night elf has her assessment.
“I can tap into the range of the Night Warrior, the other shade of Elune, which won’t harm you.”

“O…okay. Whatever you think is best.”

Vihara flickers her hand and a dark blue aura quivers atop it.
“I will examine the extent of the damage to begin with.”
This is not protracted, for less than half a minute later, she resumes.
“A number of bones have been dislocated and they’ve suffered internal damage, some of them splintered. On account of your anatomy, it won’t heal on its own.” Her light blue eyes peer into the yellows. “You should have come sooner.” Her pitch is not admonishing, but disconcerted.

The Forsaken stutters, moderately abashed.
“I…I did not…wish to be a bother.”

“It is never vexing when the wounded seek aid, Marlyn.”

Motioning with her hand, she relocates them outside, to get seated on a couple of boxes stacked on the side of the tent, which is disposed to consist of gear for the raising of this settlement. Vihara and Marlyn lean down and this is where she engages in prayers to mend the busted bones. In the span of this event, Vihara’s eyes absorb a dark blue, practically black flare, substituting the light blue, but Marlyn would not predicate that it’s foreboding. For the others, the temperature close to her grows colder, but not bitingly like the winters of Northrend. No, it is instead reminiscent of an alleviating breeze on an otherwise hot summer night. Marlyn’s eardrums get covered in the whispered words of the night elven tongue, Darnassian. It sounds superficially similar to the thalassian she overheard from high elven citizens in Capital City, she figures? She has no idea, but either way, the utterances to her are sweet as a song.

It is here that Gniklas is now becoming most curious of what the two larger men are cooking and thus he calls them over.

“Lieutenant Foghorn! Corporal Braktog! May we trouble you for a moment?”

Hearing their names, Jolen Foghorn and Braktog trudges to them.

“Sure, what is it?”, asks the orc.

“What’re you whispering of over there?”

He generates a smile out of the Lieutenant and a knowing smirk from the upcoming Sergeant, as the latter folds his arms.

“Ah, we’re just hashing over Captain Haven and LT Revenor’s…affair.”

Gniklas is nonplussed, Wynne arches her eyebrow and tilts her head, whilst Marlyn blinks.

“Affair?”, questions the gnome. “Is there a controversy we’ve missed?”

Jolen chuckles and Braktog shrugs.

“Depends on what you’d position as a controversy.”

“We shouldn’t amplify it”, says the tauren. “It’s just amusing.”

“What is?”, asks Wynne.

Braktog grins.

“Oh, c’mon now, Private. You musta spotted a glimpse of it or two.”

“Have I?”

Jolen shakes his head.

“Not her. She keeps her nose in the books constantly.”

“Ah, that’s right”, yields Braktog.

“Private Gniklas, though. You’re a keen-eyed one.”

The gnome is pretty enthusiastic on this inference.

“I am quite so! But I have no earthly idea what it is you’re suggesting…”

The orc stares at him with misgivings.

“C’mon, I realize you’re kinda young and a mama’s boy, but don’t tell me you haven’t had a taste
of some meat slapping. Or ‘least someone told ya.”

The tauren glances at his companion with a mild lack of confidence.
“That’s…coarse, but the Corporal has somewhat of a fair point. Those two have engaged in such
matters, without a doubt. We’ve both heard and seen the signs.”

Gniklas then widens his browns, aptly staggered, in the same time as Wynne, who’s now coming
with them on this lane, blushes.
“Ah…gosh! This is…I hadn’t spied any of this in the least!”

The one who does not comprehend is Marlyn, as of yet marginally mixed up.
“I-I don’t…follow. Meat?”

They register that Marlyn did not have much experience even in such talks, as she has revealed that
her parents were rather overprotective of her, leaving her a virgin and unschooled in the general
vocabulary which it encompasses. The only thing she would know is the detached
oversimplification of the act itself.
At this step, they effectively conclude that spelling it out for her is the sole way.
“We’re confident that the Captain and the Lieutenant are a romantic couple”, Jolen tells her.

This, reasonably tangible, is a shocker to Marlyn.
“What? That…that cannot be. I-it has to be…a misunderstanding.”

“Does it?”, questions Braktog. “Why couldn’t they be?”

“They’re…they’re working together! Captain Haven is Lieutenant Revenor’s superior! And…and
they…they’ve never shown this type of reaction in earlier days…
…have they?”

Braktog is unperturbed.
“They have. It’s no big deal.”

“I think it’s kinda cute”, Foghorn admits. “They’re tiny, but together, they are a comparatively
adorable pair, from their tone.”

Gniklas shows a troubled profile.
“That’s right that you trust in this, but in my eyes, this is…silly to even picture.”

“I agree, partially”, says Wynne. “Sounds not far from flat speculation.”

But where her spell ends, Vihara rises, her eyes returned to normal.
“I can validate their story. I actively discerned them in one another’s arms, behind two tents to the
east. They took it that no one noticed them, but I did. The Lieutenant was groping below the other
woman’s robes, kissing the giggling Captain’s neck sensually, until the latter moaned and dug her
fingers into the Lieutenant’s fiery locks.”

Wynne’s cheeks flushes even brighter, but she is not alone, for Gniklas joins her. Vihara is not
sensitive to talks of this, likely quite experienced, but if Marlyn had the living’s body heat, her
cheeks would be so ruddy at the mental images.

It’s then that they see for themselves as Ash and Melia encroaches on this spot, apart from a set of
larger tents to the west of this wayside, holding hands and laughing. Ash tilts her head into range of
Melia and kisses her cheek, whilst the human nuzzles against her. Braktog grins triumphant at
this juncture.
“Well well. Told ya.”
It’s during the section where they distinguish they’re being watched that their hands let go, not
itching to indulge in this behavior right in front of their friends.
Ash inclines her head when they get near.
“Why is everyone bunched up here?”

Braktog smirks, his arms still crossed.
“Ah, y’know, we’re just chatting shit.”

Ash’s eyebrow tilts skeptically.
“Uh-huh…”

The five of them – discounting Wynne, attributed to her hands being filled with books – salutes the
duo, but Melia smiles and joggles her hand in the air.
“Hey, none of that. We’re off duty. And at any rate, going back a couple of hours, I’ve learned that
the first barrels of Blackrock ale and caskets of Dalaran red were rolled in. Should we head off and
taste it together?”

Everyone is one in this, quite cheerfully. Marlyn is the person who’s quietest, iffy of how she’s
meant to interpret this news.
Then, she determines what the first thing to do is and steers her face up.
“T-thank you, Vihara. For…for the healing.”

The night elf bows her head.
“Anytime.” She then places a hand at the Forsaken’s back. “Shall we accompany the others?”

Marlyn smiles lightly.
“I…I believe so. Let’s.”
The Shadow Vault offers scant luxuries and pleasantries. This is not solely as a product of the Scourge’s actions, of that they held this post in advance of the Ebon Blade’s rise, but furthermore a clear relation to the death knight’s void necessity of resources, food, sleeping arrangements and safety beyond tight walls and armaments.

It is a sore reminder for the living that the Ebon Blade is in fact *not* like them. Though they are people, with feelings, inconclusions, desires and prayers for the future, they are not bound by the dwindling of the world. Their chests are rotten, their bellies nourished through magical agents and their hearts ablaze with vengeance. It is as such that the Ebon Knights have not jumped through hoops to flavor the floor and walls with materials of ease and convenience which the living might find near and dear, for the reason that it is without merit for them. The Knights are along for this ride to win a war and they will tear the Lich King from his stolen throne and gut him for the lives he robbed, for the dreams he mutilated, for the gardens he plundered and conflagrated and brought lifelessness to. This is their principle, their axis.

Rivaryn had not made any bets, not divined what it is that she and her friends could be received by in the act of frequenting the shallow north, which is why she recommended that they pack and bring every scrap of supplies and dried food they could muster. She is beholden to herself for this planning, for not trusting Icecrown.

But providence in oversight of rations is not nearly one-to-one with strapping oneself in for the reception which she and her crew were to be beneficiaries of. Trienza’s demeanor and brusqueness yet puzzles the hunter, though not simply because of an innate obliviousness. She has some internal imagery of what could fuel such dismissal, but she requires substantiation and from its wellspring too.

The Commander had not been easy to hound. Even if they are invitees of the Ebon Knights, and welcome ones at that, they are not given space to step foot onto every socket in the Vault. Some are better sealed for animated eyes, for their own safety and sanity, or so the Knights insist. And it is in those which Trienza slips off to. Riv has had her hands tied in determining if this is an exercise in being concealed explicitly from her or if the undead quel’dorei simply puts that much on her plate. So far, she’s undecided.

But on the sunrise of this day – notwithstanding the scarcity of sunlight here in the first place – with two full days behind them inside the walls of the tower, Riv ascertains the Commander treading out onto the courtyard early in the morning. This is her break, her waning event to confront Trienza for the truth. She won’t let it slip. She sprints after her, ponytail flapping behind her and the warm clothes stiff onto her body. She will have her answers, or she will exit this area tomorrow, simple as that.

“Commander!”, she shouts. Trienza’s pace falters for a second to glance behind her and characterize her pursuer. Riv can only speculate whether she frowns at the hunter or not. Trienza sticks with her anterior taps and when it comes down to it, tunes Riv’s intonation out. The hunter won’t let her run.

“Commander, wait! I want to speak with you!”, she says in thalassian. “I have to!”

“I’m busy”, asserts Trienza, but her ambition is unmarked. She is tuned to the road outside of the tower, though, perhaps to converse with the guards at the entrance.

“This can’t wait!”
“If you crave anything, chat with my aides.”

“They don’t carry the answers I’m after.”

“They’re equipped with every specification it takes to command this outpost. They’re filled in on matters that pertain to my position here.”

Riv sighs.
“I can take or leave that. Are they qualified to refer me to what you have on your mind? What road your gut-reactions set you on, or what ails and angers you?”

Spontaneously, Trienza is locked in place, her feet regulating her acceleration instantly. Riv follows suit and stares into the armored back of the old Captain. In a standstill, the icy wind whips about them, coaxing the far-reaching auburn and upheld black to dance to its whims.
“At times, yes”, Trienza says quietly. “You know they are.”

Riv clenches her eyelids, her shoulders easing up with sorrow. She recollects the happier, suppressed days as Trienza’s aide, but she exceeded that title – she was the Captain’s closest guard, her confidante, receiving and bulwarking her stances, reading and editing her letters, snapping up and burying her secrets. Eternally the first bow at her directive.

For a few deadened moments, it is muffled in this place, as neither speaks. But Riv cannot keep her silence.
“Commander…”, she utters reservedly. But how can she phrase it? What could she say that would sell Trienza on surfacing her innermost rationales, as she did in disused days?

Trienza exudes a breath and speaks softly, vigilantly.
“You shouldn’t have come here, dorei’nan. It has no worth for either of us. It can only shatter, enervate. You would cry, I would crack, like ice under overblown mass.”
Dorei’nan, a thalassian-specific term which roughly translates to ‘child of my heart’. It is directed to both trueborn and adopted kids, acting as more of a phrase of endearment. It’s not the first hour which Trienza has named her that. Now, however, it strikes her, unbridledly.

But Riv is incapable of unhanding the line of reasoning which leaches within her veins, the riddle on her lips squeezing and biting her with its frenzy to obtain credibility.
“Captain…do you hate me?”

It racks her to go so far as to express it, and not centralized to the misery she may cause Trienza. This is mainly for her own sake, and still she panics at the reply. Trienza does not prove it painless for her either, for she looms ghoulishly laconic, longer than Riv can brave. Ten seconds floats past, and the hunter is by then at the point where she is half cooked to beg for death. Please, just…say it. The knight braids her arms, but only the undead at the road catches her eyes.
“No”, she loosens clemently.

“Do you…do you condemn me?”

“For this? For what I was twisted into? I do not. I’m the one who sued for this. I endangered my own being, on behalf of the land, the King, you…and her.”

“Then…then why…?”

Why would she chasten Riv for a misdeed she never completed? She is invested in saying it was imbalanced, doing her a disservice for untraveled actions…but she sticks her tongue in her mouth, for the time being.
Then, the Commander dredges it up.
“The Trienza you were acquainted with is no more, Rivaryn.”

“I refuse to accept that.”

“Your wish is meaningless. The actuality of what we swallowed resides. The Scourge raided everything I loved – my dreams, my life, my home, my family. Everything I’ve ever known is gone. Everything I’ve ever cared for is gone. Trienza scorched in a matching blaze. I’ve shouldered this result for what it is. Now, I can only make the most of the fury, before it too subsides.”

Her family? Riv considers it. Does that entwine Efaria as well? That’d be a real kicker for her. Has Trienza ventured to Silvermoon and cross-questioned the authorities there? She chooses not to go into these musings, as she’s fearful that Trienza might explode once more. Mentioning her former surname was out of bounds, so this has got to be lower on the list.

But then she wonders, is this what provoked the Commander to not look Riv in the eyes? Is it what produces that wracked frown whenever she does? If only she heard where the accuracy lies…

“…I’m still here”, she says, barely beyond a whisper.

Here, Trienza soon manifests as conspicuously stumped, broken to self-censorship, not knowing what to say or where to put it. It is faultless, isn’t it? Could this be what leaves this so harrowing for her? She presumed her world was gone, torn from her fingers, but someone is yet alive, left to haunt her.

Trailing half a minute of dead air, Trienza tells her more.
“Your friend, Revenor, informed me that you were wandering Northrend. Can you guess why I did not pay a call to you?”

“I…”

The ex-Captain then swirls with brevity and approaches her, an unhidden aggressiveness to her step that shakes Riv to the point where she in turn backs off. In her shyness, her sight is thrown down, but Trienza halts and speaks peakedly.
“Look at me.” Riv has no choice but to obey her. It is what she does. “Tell me, what stands before you?”

Swallowing, Riv scavenges the superficies of her old chief, scanning the pallid hide, the coarseness of her skin to the effect of even cracking, some of the wiltedness of her strands, the scars at her neck, cheek and forehead.
“It’s…it’s you. I see you.”
Trieza is not best pleased with this statement, leaving a helluva lot to be desired. She tilts her head closer, meaningfully. Riv trembles.
“You…you’re a shade paler and…bruised and stuff, but you haven’t changed. Not to me. Trienza persists.”

The Commander huffs at her and channels her gaze elsewhere.
“So immature.” She cools her heels for another half a minute or so, gathering herself and her interior designs for how to contradict the younger woman’s ill-advised longing.
“Nothing could be further from the truth, younger. If you pore over my face and level with me, what you identify in my eyes is death. Not the plain matter of consciousness shriveling from a corpse, but numbness. Callousness. Apathy. Has anyone enumerated to you what the Lich King put us through? What manner of pressure he placed us under?”

Riv’s lips are quivering faintly now, a sense of peril to her, but not for herself.
“Not…squarely, no.”
She does not clear up the fact that she has not had a single piece of news on what affronts were enacted upon the poor souls.

“I am not the mentor you were introduced to in the long-past decades.” Putting her crosshairs to her own fragmented hands, she clenches them nominally. “By dragging me into this…mockery of life, the Lich King could suck every little morsel of identity out of my soul, for I emerged as his, through and through. His minion, his…toy. My history, my wishes, my accomplishments – he could choke each minutia, the entire of my structure at a fractional plane, from my lips. I did not even claim the fundamental coherence to rebel.

When he discovered that I was at one point empowered to instruct the recruits of the southern Farstrider army for centuries, beyond the age that he or his father or his grandfather or great great great great grandfather lived, he found a new use for me. Who better to bestow the obligation of drilling his new death knights?”

Riv’s eyes flash with comprehension, but also an undisputed shaving of apprehension.
“Such as…you were in Quel’Thalas.”

But Trienza scoffs disenchantedly.
“Professing that would be an insult to my former line of work and every legitimate tutor in our nation’s history. Tell me, child, would you consider me a harsh trainer?”

A vastly up front and temperately teeth-rattling question, which has Riv swallowing and squirming.
“Um…”

However, Trienza can’t bear such indecision here.
“Be open, Silvershroud. I asked for this, so do not dampen it.”

Well, if this is what she’s raptured for…
“Some would erm…allege that you had that tendency, yes.”

“And you know what? They would receive no argument from me, for it is justified. In my eclectic experience, it was integral to employ such methods, in order to capacitate you for the commitment of defending Quel’Thalas from its enemies and the fires of war. With an inordinately docile attitude, you would have grown up to be soft and feeble. Your reflexes, your fear-resistance, aim, concealment – none of it would’ve had its edge. For my part, that is what I put my faith in and it paid off, more than once.
But would you summarize me as cruel? Brutal? Downright vicious?”

The younger woman shakes her head ardently.
“No…no, you never were, Captain.”

“Did I ever strike you or the other recruits? Did I whip you? Did I plant your face into the steel walls of our training grounds? Did I stomp you to the floor, trample on your body and borderline crush your windpipe beneath the heel of my boot?”

Riv recoils at the wording, nigh on outraged at the notion.
“N…no! You never would in a million years.”

“Precisely. Trienza Sah’nir was not a woman who added weight to the supposed ascendancy of mercilessness or brutalization. Strictness, imposing obedience and duty, and confiding in loyalty – these are the tenets she stood for, and the cornerstones she would’ve died for. In some respects…I suppose she did. And happily so.
Trienza Shadespire, by contrast…” The high elf’s sight tailspins to the floor and her ears sport
chills, her voice flat. “I was his thrall for four years, Rivaryn. He extracted a great deal of my entity. Though I’ve tried to reclaim and regenerate who I once was, he ground and burnt and severed the virtues which I would accredit to Sah’nir. To the mentor you loved and respected. He took pains to root out and execute her, so she wouldn’t and couldn’t envision a rekindling of that preceding heart…and he hit home.”

Come the next glimpse she collects from her teacher, Riv can now spot the defeat in her from a mile away. Her sound has softened.

“You are the last of what I have left, Rivaryn. The sole aspect of my past, of what I…prided myself on having cultivated, that endures. I couldn’t bear…letting you face me like this. This…shell. Do you see where I’m coming from, dorei’nan?”

Without warning, it does indeed take for Riv and henceforth, she shudders. It denotes to her that Trienza is not enraged at all, not fuming at Riv’s temerity for sticking her nose into the business of the Ebon Blade. In lieu of any blood boiling, it tells her how critical Riv is to Trienza’s subsistence – she is ashamed, gutted.

What would be a good fit here is to express a mood which could lighten this interior load that scratches at Trienza’s spirit, scraping the last remnants of it off and loses her to the abyss. If she does hoist the proverbial white flag, it would be at the expense of the hunter’s relationship with this woman. Riv is pushed to the wall to hatch a solution which thwarts such a heinous stage. But what? What description of assurance could settle Trienza’s tribulations and spread her arms for Riv from this day onwards? It needs to be cut from a penetrating enough cloth that Trienza is left high and dry to spurn it.

That’s when it clicks for her, what can accrue the chance to finish in front, but the drawback it presents is in its double-edged disposition. Is her mental pain threshold at the height where she can push past it?

“Has any…echo of our final conversation prior to your abrupt funeral survived?”

However boggled she reads as, by merit of this inquiry, Trienza does counter it with some consistency.

“It did.” Her accentuation is fairly perceivably haggard in this moment. “A dour day, to filter the hour which was my last. Or destined to be, by the universe.”

“How did you manage to scout for who the perpetrators were, ahead of your misfortune?”

Trienza appears unmindful of Riv’s basis for this grilling, but she weighs the parameters of what memories that holds.

“There was a wind coasting to us of some…magisters or other, that were in the picture. A name I learned of in the aftermath which circulated was ‘Dar’Khan’, but it says little to me. Besides my mother, I was not affiliated with anyone from the Magisters. That lot were too heavily up their own asses.”

Hmm. Riv reminisces of Lady Anisra, or Magister Anisra, matriarch of House Sah’nir, and one of the top lynxes of the Magisters, as well as familiar with the previous Grand Magister, Belo’vir Salonar. In contradiction with Trienza’s amusing little brother, she crossed Anisra only twice. She can’t tag the age of her – though she’s inclined to have been centuries Trienza’s senior – but departing from her daughter, she was granted lilac eyes and dark fire red hair, as the brown had been inherited from her father, Selmin. Moreover, Riv had comfortably spotted the strips of age along Anisra’s lean face and even in her hair. Compared to Trienza’s well-built figure, Anisra was lithe, albeit almost ten centimeters shorter.

She knows for a fact that it was Anisra who officially admitted Kassari into the Magisters, when the Silvershrouds had merely been afforded sparse spots in light of their past, but Riv was consistently convinced that Trienza had worked her mother over. Sadly, she had not fled with much
of the citizenry, but remained behind to shield Silvermoon during its evacuation. This was one trait she and her daughter had in accord – duty to their homeland, which spelled their deaths.

With a heavy heart, Riv flips her head side to side.
“It was not a one-man conspiracy. Dar’Khan had a cell of rogue mages which operated below him, and followed his commands. Facing forward from your downfall, and with the orders I had been bestowed to go on the defensive, I scrambled up towards Silvermoon. But a couple of miles later, I converged on a number of our scouts who relayed to me the dire evidence they’d come upon.”

Trierza’s eyes inflame and she is now more appealed than ever.
“You found the traitors?”

Riv nods grimly.
“We managed to corner a big chunk of identities locked inside a manse to the east.” Her emerald greens stare straight into Trierza’s. “My parents were among them, beyond several retainers of the Silvershroud family. They had rallied behind Dar’Khan and collaborated to fell Ban’dinoriel…and doom our people.”

The icy flames of Trierza’s gaze broadens and she stares at Riv in flagrant disbelief.
“Your-…but…why…”

She’s paralyzed to put paid to her question, and thereby, Riv marches it on for her.
“You know why. You haven’t forgotten.”

Indeed, she has not. Riv can demarcate it on her, when Trierza’s focus grows astray, sideways. It was a reputation which riddled Quel’Thalas – the former noble House of Silvershroud, the grey clouds of the quel’dorei, the stock of traitors and occultists and tricksters. As they dabbled in forbidden magics millennia ago, they were branded as outsiders and expelled from nobility.
“But…I’m versed in that they had it out for the Sunstriders, but this…”

“It would seem…we had it all ass-backwards. They deplored the entirety of Quel’Thalas…and quel’dorei teachings. Everything that we exemplified. It rotted in their hearts and choked their throats. Obviously, they had other plans than Dar’Khan, but it doesn’t alter the facts. I…saw no alternative, Captain. I was a Farstrider and the one person with the highest rank present, in the desolation of our numbers. It was my duty to eliminate their threat…and I did.”

Trierza is undoubtedly struck, like Ashindra was. Like Thariss and previously Kassari besides, though she does not sizzle with the indignation of Riv’s sister.

A vision pops into the Commander’s mind from decades before, a day where she had unraveled a decision to her subordinate at the time, Ranger-Lieutenant Lethrin Annelon – pale-skinned and short black-haired man with rounder facial features, at equal height but somewhat slimmer - who had sneered at her, virtually appalled.
“Her? Captain, she…she’s one of the Silvershrouds.”

Trierza had stood at the side of her desk in the office of the training grounds, arms folded.
“So?”

“I…you can’t-…” He had exhaled. “Employ her in the Farstriders, profit from her skills against the Amani, hone her abilities if you must, but…you know full well what they are, don’t you? And what it would entail to foster one, if the Magisters find out…”

Trierza had snapped around, hair flicking behind her, as she seized his shoulder in an inflexible grip.
“Are we magisters, Lieutenant? Do we take orders from them?”

He was tense at her head-on approach, balking.
“N…no, Captain. But-“

“Are we servants of the High Towers? Do you wish to kneel to them and kiss their soft slippers?”

“I never said-“

“Do you think I care what satisfies the Magisters, boy?! Damn them, and damn their fickle nonsense. I’ve chosen and I will have her as my aide!”

For a change, Trienza is out of her league to find the right words, the words that soothe and assure and pledge that everything will be alright. For can she cross her heart and speak to that it will? “I…I’m sorry, dorei’n…”

Their shoulders collapse on either side and they are filled with a sense of devitalization, of something that wears on their nerves.
“I have nowhere else to go, but I’d ask permission to assist. Not just you, Captain, but my sister and Khroga. I want to remain and tackle whatever assignment it is you have in store for Kass. I am due that, if nothing else. Please…”

With this pleading, Trienza looks at her and all resistance is lost. She sighs, resigned.
“Very well.”
A few weeks of peace. It wasn’t actively what the Argent Crusade had beseeched anyone for, expressly seeing as how they doubted this could rationally be granted. But though they have faced opposition from scattered units of the Cult of the Damned and undead slaves, their lines have not been whacked and grated to debris. Either the Lich King is not as positive of his predominance in this foothold above his adversaries or there’s something else going on.

As engrossing and substantial as that may be to investigate, the Crusade has taken the cautious approach, to shore up their armors, put together their buildings and collect a steady mounting of rations. The northeastern block of Icecrown has now, weeks on, transformed from its early camp-variety stocked with tents and boxes to being interspersed with genuine wooden buildings, stone barricades, and magical securities which can reflect more attacks than exclusively the physical. The ‘Heat of Dawn’ some have taken to calling it, in adverse to Icecrown’s night, albeit with protests from some, such as the kaldorei.

The intent is to gather and pile their strength up, to the stage where they can present and barrel a united offensive, like a beam of light through the darkness. Whether this is feasible or even logical is so far up for debate, but some of those nesting inside of this outpost are not up for griping, since they’ve been handed a golden chance to rest. War has drawn much energy and positivity out of those who have withstood its violence, so it felt like common sense to snatch that interval of respite while it’s just lying there for the taking.

Most regular troops sleep in big joint tents or long halls, but Melia has retained her own small private shelter, with a bed inside. She’s solicited a warmth enchantment from Wynne, to insulate her from the nasty and frigid winds that sweep by.

During a common day, Melia is tracked either to one of the grander facilities where she negotiates with her fellow officers and upper tier of the Crusade for how to act next, with her squads in one of the barracks, out on the perimeter to establish their defenses or in her tent, frequently in the endearing company of a set blood elf.

Today, the last option stands true, for the human is sitting by her bed and keeps Ashindra near to herself. By merit of the heated enchantment, it enables them both to be intimate, but exclude scarfs, furs and blankets. Melia’s body is therefore embraced by a more casual navy blue robes, with long sleeves, as well as lines of grey and red. Ash’s lower half is hugged by a pair of burgundy red pants, while a juniper green shirt carrying pulled-up sleeves decorates her torso, and her red hair is sprawled out on her right shoulder.

In between them, they’ve tucked a wooden bowl containing some freshly delivered treasures from the ships that have sailed this way – a couple of slices of cheese, a bundle of green grapes, half a loaf of soft bread and half a dozen of round and sweet cookies. Balanced upon the ground is a glass bottle of wine, one which is scented with a wisp of arcane residue.

Bearing a tiny knife, Melia cuts a small sliver of the cheese and stuffs it in her mouth, her face practically glittering as she savors the taste – strong, but soft in texture, like it wishes to melt right there on her tongue. The Captain giggles sweetly, too glad for words at this. Ash experiences a coincided thrill, but hers is a result of viewing her beloved with such a joyous display.

“Where did you get all this?”, wonders Melia, when her mouth isn’t weighted anymore.

Ash wriggles her protracted eyebrows.
“I have a little friend in Dalaran who’s a member of the Silvermoon Magisters – Kassari, Rivaryn’s little sister.”

This illumines Melia’s expression.
“Ah, yes, I recall her now. From the Plaguelands, right? Mage in red, tied-up hair, very cute face, with a hunky shaman girlfriend?”

There’s a faint edge to Ash’s smile as she grabs and wags Melia’s chin in a playful capacity.
“Hey now…don’t let Riv hear you say that.”

But Melia is lost in light laughter and tickles her paladin to wrest free.
“Lucky me she’s a couple of miles off then, huh?”

“I might squeal.”

“And hurt my feelings? Mm, unlikely.”

“I could.”

“Nah. You’re as loyal as Creston ever was to me.”

“You don’t-…” Ash blinks, mussed. “…Creston?”

Melia leans her head mischievously to the side.
“My family’s Stromgardian shepherd dog.”

Ash gasps in an act of showy shock.
“…did you just compare me to a dog?!”

The human’s laugh increases in strength.
“Like a puppy, remember?”

Whilst the elf sighs her complaints away, Melia sniggers, smooches her cheek and then grabs one of the cookies to take a bite of. She bides until it’s swallowed, prior to regaining her progress of the conversation.
“How did miss Kassari help you out?”

“I sent her a message with one of the birds that we were sorted and held my breath that Kass could work her magic. The uh, political one, not the literal. She conducted a couple of calls, dispatched some letters with teleportation resuming off the back of Malygos tapping out, especially in the confines of Dalaran. The wine and grapes were shipped from Quel’Thalas, though it’s not the deluxe stuff. The cheese is Dalaran stock, whereas the bread and cookies come from Westfall through Stormwind.”

“Heh, well, I’m really satisfied either way that you could reach out. This is a delicious treat. Couldn’t have asked for a more pleasing surprise tonight.”

Melia sets her hand on Ash’s, boosts herself and plants a caring, gentle kiss against Ash’s right cheek, one that jets elation and exuberance into her chest and gut.

Observing the human noming a grape or two as well, Ash senses how her own fingers tingle and her ears perk with friskiness, which won’t be washed away by a single peck. She lays one hand on the bed behind the human, angles closer and wraps her other along Melia’s cheek and chin, to tip it upwards. Widening her eyes somewhat, Melia’s meet with Ash’s, and she comes upon a semblance of that glamour and sensuality which the elf had likely exhibited earlier in her life. Here, the sin’dorei crafts it into something more romantic and charged, driving her lips into Melia’s for a full kiss. The Captain obliges with a heartfelt reply and eyes shut, sliding her arms over Ash’s
shoulders, giving leave for the elf to lead. Though Ash was fairly uncertain and introverted in these enterprises when they initiated this relationship, once she realized what would please her, Ash has often taken a stronger and more giving role. And she is quite the expert at that part – her tongue can commit things Melia had never gotten from another woman before.

Their interlocked bodies linger in this vein for another minute or two, but then they go back on the track of munching on what Ash brought in, so it doesn’t go to waste. In that procedure, Ash wonders.

“How is the project you’re hammering at working out?”

“The one in the central complex? We’re essentially trying to construct a fount of various spiritual powers – the Light, Elune’s moonlight, elemental energies and the like. The Highlord’s plan is that it’ll harden our own competency out here and sap necromantic properties and strength from the battle at the Citadel.”

“You believe it will accomplish this?”

Melia shrugs.

“Who can say? This is uncharted waters. Regardless, we must take our chances. Additionally, we got a route to the Ebon Blade, who’ve planted a base of their own – or better yet, stolen one, to the west.”

“Stolen?”

“Yeah, they sieged and ripped away some kind of outpost from the Scourge. Lich King’s forces hadn’t conceived of that they’d be engaged by a group who were privy to their tactics and defenses. The Ebon Blade was enslaved in the past, sure, but they still lived and trained here for several years, and those memories were preserved. Arthas made a dire mistake when he thought to cast them aside. The Knights conveyed that they’ll be up for marching once the Crusade is. Then again, that host needs way less groundwork. They don’t require food or water or sleep, don’t take ill or get injured to a degree where they might be indisposed for weeks. They suffer in their own fashion, of course, but relative to war, they don’t incur as many of the…downsides.”

Ash nods gravely.

“They were…synthesized for war, I guess.”

“Pretty much.” But Melia rattles her head and sloughs off this miserable ethos. “We shouldn’t chat about this, not now. This right now is for us and no one else, isn’t it?”

She then glides into Ash’s region of the bed, with the bowl squished in their center and caresses the elf’s cheek, up towards her ear. During the preceding number of weeks, she’s been taught some of how curious, flexible and…affective blood elven ears can be. It’s a sort of secondary social method to express oneself, a body language in an estimation of eyebrows, hands or otherwise, though Melia herself can still only catch those of the more transparent ones, such as when Ash is sad, irate or overjoyed. However, she’s also frightfully aware of how sensitive they are to stimulus – Ash’s are, if nothing else. She runs a finger on the edge of it, downwards, and then rubs two on the lower half, just above the spot which can stoke a flame in the paladin. Ash’s eyes bar themselves and she exhales contently.

One of the sin’dorei’s hands roam to the human’s left thigh and squeezes it. Melia bites her lower and now perked lip.

“Mmm, you…you raise a decent point”, utters Ash shakily. “What did you have in mind?”
She continues by sloping in and putting her cushy full lips by Ash’s neck, kissing it down for a couple of seconds and then props her head against Ash’s enduring shoulder.

“Thought we might wanna dream ourselves away for a moment and go over our trip to Quel’Thallas. Provided there’s still gonna be one and I haven’t scared you off.”

Ash chuckles and then circles her neck to tenderly buss Melia’s forehead.

“Don’t be a fool. I’m beyond excited for that, to have some time off with you.”

“You believe you can take us far? I wouldn’t seek to intrude on anyone. ‘specially when I’m aimed to be a guest.”

“Well, yes. I thought it over and my own road map for the time being is to guide you up to Silvermoon. It does hinge on which heading we go in – from the Plaguelands, we’d have to travel along the road to the north, but if we split off from the Crusade fleet when we disengage out of Northrend, we could sail into the city docks outright.”

Melia grins at that, looking exhilarated.

“You remember what I said of not having gone there, right? To be completely honest, I’ve at best spied the edges of Eversong, nothing else.”

Ash nods curtly.

“Just to Tranquillien, correct?”

“Well, not solely, no. We sojourned from town to town in the south, or what passes for ‘em down there. We stopped at a couple of farms, a noble house or two, as well as a fishing town in the southwest. Outside of Tranquillien, though, there weren’t a ton of devout people. Most showcased more local customs. They didn’t…pray, I guess?”

The paladin picks up her glass and sips a tinge of wine.

“Hmm. Some did, but it couldn’t be condensed to gods or the Holy Light. The mass of quel’dorei gave their thanks to the light of the Eternal Sun and to the grace of the Sunstriders. Our royal family were ever seen as protectors and conductors of prosperity, even though it was mainly for our race and outsiders were spurned. No one worshipped them, by that nature, but King Dath’Remar had steered our ancestors into safety and each Sunstrider ruled for centuries, sometimes millennia. People showed their appreciation to them.”

“Well, that’s on point. It was mine and my mother’s experience too.”

Ash stares down, faded.

“In many ways, our people broke when Anasterian died. He had been our ruler for a couple of thousand years, beyond the normal age of quel’dorei, as our monarchs had to be immediately linked to the Sunwell, become its keeper, which furnished them with an uncanny lifespan. And then Kael’thas’ betrayal was…”

Ash shakes her head, preferring not to dwell on it.

Melia nods faintly, and scrutinizes this quagmire.

“There are no other Sunstriders then?”

“I don’t know. I have caught wind of cousins and distant relatives. But could they ever be like Anasterian, his mother or the other sovereigns? It’s hard to say.”

The priestess chews on her lip for a moment, previous to getting a different line.

“What’s Silvermoon like?”, she wonders to partially transfer the topic out of the gloom. “I’ve heard that it has a…magical quality?”
This does revive Ash somewhat.
“Hah. That’s true, if one compares it to Stratholme or Lordaeron City.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have marked Tranquillien as super flashy either. Although they did have some weird…blob-like guards, I seem to recall.”

Ash is confounded at first, until she leans her head sideways and chortles.
“Oh yeah, the arcane constructs. Some people employed such creatures, yes. Uh, the Magisters and their agents did, at all events. They’ve replaced some of them with the new mechanical ‘arcane guardians’ now.
However, it’s come to my attention that Dalaran isn’t at much variance with Silvermoon, merely holds its own sheen, spells, cultural icons and customs.”

“Mm, that’s probably fair, but I’ve never visited that city either. Wasn’t within my mother’s routine tour. Although it is true that it’s quite a pretty star in the sky. One day, if – or when – we triumph in knocking the Scourge back into their holes, we could drop in on Dalaran first.”
Absentmindedly running a hand down Ash’s arm, in a few seconds, she smiles. “What schemes do you have for me there, hmm?”, she wonders jokingly. “Perhaps spirit me inside and garb me in a pile of luxurious sin’dorei-esque gowns?”

Supposedly, Ash ponders it momentarily.
“That would be…”, she goes and then eyes her lover. Those plump thighs, her fine hips, curved chest and generous belly, not to forget her arched feet and cute toes. Suddenly, Ash’s cheeks flush and her ears bob in that shy manner they do sometimes.

Melia giggles and taps her shoulder.
“Hey, what’s that? Got some naughty ideas, did ya?”

Ash clears her throat and lights up, scuffing her own arm.
“Some of them…would be quite exquisite on you. And more than that, the idea of you in one of our red ones…I imagine that’s a good color for you.”

“Is that your fave?”

“You might say. I’d go for purple or bronze too, but red and its various tints is the national color of Quel’Thalahs, to all intents and purposes. It’s oftentimes supplemented by gold and on occasion green – not fel green, but summer grass green. Even so, to be fair, the last is more of a modern attachment.”

“Huh. So, Silvermoon is reigned by red?”

“No, not the entirety of it, but its primary monuments, banners and such. The standard of the Sunstriders is red, with a golden phoenix flapping its wings on top.
Red for the sin’dorei implicates a range of perceptions – nobility, joy, strength, the royal house, unity etc. This is determined by the fact that it represents the Eternal Sun and daylight. Although this is heavily contingent on the shade, as ‘red’ is not a steadily descriptive word. Crimson is for the Sunstriders, fire red is for the Eternal Sun, apple red can denote the warmth of summer, ruby is for the bounty of harvest days or big fishing hauls, garnet is for…uh, nightly activities. Procreation, and stuff in that flavor.
Clearly, the whole country does not abide by these strict concerns, as cities and towns generally have separate traditions – in Fairbreeze, I believe rusted gold is for the harvest. But these aforementioned ones are established in Tranquillien.”

Melia lingers on some of these images in her mind, the multitude variants of red swirling and
folding and circling into a mess that might become indistinguishable for the uninitiated. Then, she smirks, slants herself in and draws her lips over Ash’s cheek near her ear. “Maybe I’ll have to track down a garnet one, then. For when we can be alone…”

She shortly slips into Ash’s lap, wraps her arms across the back of her neck and pins a kiss against the paladin, who repays this by setting her hands on top of Melia’s rear, fondling her. In the stirring of the passion, Melia breaches the fire red hair, and tugs at it with bland hands, not hurting but making no mistake that it’s felt and inciting a torrent of animation in Ash’s body. At this cycle, Ash could almost screw the rest of the talk and just take her here.

A minute or so after playing some more, they break it up loosely, but unconcerned with it, Melia retains her seat on Ash’s legs. “So, the question now is, do we land in Tranquillien itself or not? Not a great topic, I know, but it’s to the point.”

Ash is ambivalent at this, nibbling at her own lower lip and diverts her gaze. “Is that what would suit you? It’s not…pretty.”

“I wouldn’t care what’s struck it or how it looks, you know that. I’d care to be taken through your backstory, your life. I’d do the same for you, I can promise that. But…well, that’s not to say we can’t later, but much of my home is ashes now, without even the smoke left on top. Big districts of the town were put to the torch when the second wave of undead burst through there a couple of years ago.”

Ash blows air out from her nose. “I…alright, I can present it to you, if you have that mind, but frankly, it is less of a town than a military outpost now. There are…enterprises to rebuild it, but at the least, they’d demand dozens of years or decades to cleanse the taint.”

The reminder of her hometown brings with it the image of Vestarial to her. “I…reflected on my sister again last night.”

“Oh?”

“I remember catching the news of that she was pulled to some order of…Warden facility, kaldorei-commanded. If the sun smiled on me, I’d get to see her once more, to…beg her forgiveness. Perhaps find a manner to pardon her. But alas…”

Melia stares with compassion and heartbreak at her beloved, as her ears droop at the imagery. “It could be a worthy cause to fight for.”

“It is ripe to be, but I have no ear for how or when. Don’t have the first clue of where it’s placed and the one way to request a trip is to journey to their Darnassus office. They would at no point welcome a sin’dorei there, no ma’am. There is no love lost from the kaldorei to us, and back.”

“Hmm”, says Melia and rubs her chin. “That’s not wrong, maybe, but there are options. We wouldn’t have to leave for it as Horde members, which we’re not – it’s in our power to reach out as envoys of the Argent Crusade.”

Ash is not wholly convinced. “A decent proposition, but they may not be overjoyed, no matter what angle we take. It’s more of a…racial and cultural issue than a factional one. They’re not all in the same boat as Vihara or our other kaldorei. A blood elf with a golden hand on her chest is still a blood elf.”

“But I’m no blood elf. Never been to Kalimdor, and I’m born and bred in Lordaeron, but other
humans to the south are allies to the night elves. They could set up a journey and an audience for a pair of Crusaders, I’m sure of it.”

“Well…I’d take that for a good alternative, but I can’t get it straight whether it’ll have any measure of success.”

“We’ll have a pass at it, then. Go off the cuff. I could think of worse approaches.”

Ash’s arm climbs and scratches her neck.

“Yeah, perhaps…”

As a cloud of gloominess comes over Ash’s skies once more, Melia levels her lips on the bottom half of the elf’s face, skimming it softly, assuagingly, and throughout, burrowing under Ash’s shirt, to knead her toned stomach, wheedling her into requiting the act of charming.

And as per usual, Ash cannot foil her, by and by forgetting the terms of her perturbation. A smile crops up and Melia rivals it. The priestess just has that effect on Ash, where she can’t stay dolorous for long if she has no cause.

With the facility for it, Melia sets aside their snacks and drinks, poses her hands on Ash’s shoulders, shoves the elf onto the pillow and then goes astride Ash’s lap. Sitting on top, she smoothly caresses up the paladin’s sides, while detecting hands snaking to her own hips, squeezing and yearning for her.

Melia tilts herself down, into range, and drives her lips assentingly into Ash’s, letting both them and their tongues have a session of interplay, propelling the racket of talking and laughing out from the tent, to be substituted for rustling of clothes and intertwining physiques. The human notes her lover’s vim for this when her robes start to open, disentangled by a set of zealous hands. She retracts her body a pinch, so that she’s upright once more. With a faint smirk, she parts the top of her apparel, revealing her shoulders, white bra beneath and the ample shape of her upper torso. She herself is pleased by half when Ash’s fingers find her belly, squeezing and travelling upwards.

In a moment of mischief, Melia stares into the bright greens that are now teeming with desire.

“You have a thing for priestesses, don’t you?”

“Mm. I have a thing for one in particular…”

“You say that, but…your ex told me a funny bit of gossip when we were squatting in Wyrmrest. Something ‘bout a…senior priestess Lenore?”

Ash widens her eyes unceremoniously, her passion detoured in an instant, flashes of untimely memories spinning in her mind.

“What? But…” Didn’t she suspend that talk? Oh, right, they spoke more than once. She then blushes, groans and drops a hand over her own face.

“…damn you, Silvershroud…”

Chapter End Notes

The 'Heat of Dawn' area is located where the Argent Tournament Grounds are in the game, but they don’t have a tournament. Because, you know, it’s not a huge point in anyone’s favor to hold that within an actual warzone.

By 'Stromgardian shepherd dog', I of course meant the one we know as the German shepherd dog. But this isn’t Earth, so...had to replace it. Could’ve called it just a
'shepherd dog' I guess, but this felt more suitable. And funny. And yes, obviously Melia is a dog person.
“It’s a necromantic ritual.”

Kass’ voice had rung inside the hall of the Shadow Vault, or one corner of the former Scourge foothold, the weight of the words hammering off the skull-ornamented rocks below their feet, the runes on the pillars and foundation, as well as the various skeletal-forged items and torch holders pinned to the walls. She stood at the curb of a steel table, the worn scroll she had been commanded to decipher unfurled above. Strike-Commander Trienza was there, along with her two aides Sydela and Lah’kur, besides Khroga, Raxeen, Nadelgosa, Rivaryn and Thariss.

“It took a few days to unseal and annul the ornate defensive components and the concealed glamors on its sheet”, she had informed them. “What we’re working with here is archaistic magic, sorcery that may be older than…well, Quel’Thalas itself, but I have no doubt that it is necromancy which stands as its cradle. I do not relish associating with such dark magic, but there it is.”

Trienda waved her hand.
“It does not concern you at any rate, mage. Only its translation”, she uttered brusquely.

Kass glared at the Commander for this and folded her arms, a sullen display Rivaryn had witnessed in abundance back home, but this day, she had stayed reticent.
“You’ve been going at this for days?”, wondered Thariss. “That musta been one elaborate ass magical text.”

“Yes, it was”, admitted Kass. “Well…it was also written in ancient Zandali, and I can speak or read neither the modern or the obsolete version. With some incantations I can parse spoken Zandali, but these characters meant nothing to me. I had to requisition a tome on this subject from the Magisters’ sealed archives in Silvermoon, but it was penned in current Zandali, so I asked for miss Lah’kur as my assistant.”

Thariss shot a glance at Trienza.
“Where’d you pick this shit up?”

The Commander reacted with a related, although unblinking stare.
“From a Zandalari, one of their scholars that we partnered with. It was…a feature of our deal.”

Kass stroked her lips in contemplation.
“Ah, this brings it into the daylight. Zandalar is bound to be home to richer and older scholarly tales than anywhere, even kaldorei lands.”

Lah’kur nodded.
“The stoneheads are crafty bastards, I’ll give ‘em that.”

Quite gripped by this in her own way, Rax pointed herself at the Commander.
“I have received lines in the past of that death knights are hardwired with necromantic powers.”

Trienda regarded the paladin with thinly concealed suspicion and then dipped her head.
“I won’t dispute that, but this is on an atypical level, casting a shadow even over what we’re capable of and what the Lich King would bestow his underlings. This is not a pacification spell.”

“And so it isn’t”, said Kass. “What you see scrawled on the parchment is a ritual of inverse traits, one that can unchain necromantic minions from the Scourge.”
These quarters were then clammed up, with everyone intrigued and awestruck. This was a big deal, a paper that held the secrets of the Lich King’s domination. Nadel ponderingly brushed some fingers by the scales near her neck. “Unchain? You’re saying in good faith that it can...liberate undead?”

“That is what I stated, and I am not wont to repeat myself. But to set the record straight, there are caveats. This is limited use. It might be one or a couple, miss Lah’kur and I aren’t decided on a fragment of these final letters at row 64…”

“What subdivision of undead can it unfetter?”, asked Nadel.

“All. It is limited use, but not limited range. It is the magic which the scroll targets, unchecked by size and advancement.”

A slim deficit, to be sure, but the intimations were still boundless, and everyone took a few instants to process it. Then, Riv had combed her former Captain for clues. “What are we freeing?”

Trienza had met her gaze staunchly and then nodded. “Come with me.”

Grey skies flecked with black, together with a soil as gravel-colored and infertile or slick with ice. The howling wind licking every inch of their exposed skins and pulling at their hairs. There are no roads here, and few testaments to remnant civilizations beyond the sword-like architecture of the walls and ramparts composed by the Scourge, to entrench their various safeguards against their enemies or otherwise. The skyline is a dismal face too, with the spiky crests of mountains poking up like fangs of the world, fatal and uninviting.

Even if there are no palpable routes to pursue, for the practiced mind, there are indentations in the earth and scraps of death magic that can draw one towards whatever destination they fancy. This is how Trienza has oriented the group towards the east, out of the Shadow Vault, out of safety and the wards from the cold, to an area with a singular purpose. To reach this place, Trienza had forbid the usage of teleportations and other conjurations. She warned Kassari that their people can scent the arcane like mana wyrms.

Where they halt is by a cluster of rocks, which does also grant them a brilliant overview of the surroundings, to stage their strategic designs from and consider the crossroads.

The location they’ve been guided to is below a steep cliff, a sort of overlooking platform which rises above a space filled with actual engineered items. It’s a steelworks deposited inside a lowered pocket within spitting distance of a mountain. It comes complete with metal flooring, tables, forges, chains, racks and more.

Rivaryn is not too unfamiliar with the sight, having had eyefuls of this sort in dwarven lands, which renders the smoke billowing up, the building heat and dust tapping into their noses as elements which resonate with her. Disregarding her knowledge, though, these steel grids are not staffed by her people’s former allies, but dead beings – skeletons, ghouls, gargoyles and all the rest.

“What is this?”, wonders Thariss.

Trienza has kneeled onto the ground, one forearm above her leg. “They call this ‘Ghoststeel Pit 1’. It’s one of several steelworks sported in the Scourge’s domain. It is here the raised spirits of blacksmiths, locksmiths, armorsmiths and so on drudge, day and night,
never resting, never losing speed. It’s a spot for our enemy to produce a plurality of their saronite gear transferred out to a diversity of regions.”

Rax furrows her brow.
“The Scourge actively operates with saronite?”

“Absolutely. Even much of the gear we wear are of the stuff. Old ‘presents’ from the Lich King.”

The draenei eyes the trio of death knights with unquestionable disturbance.
“That is madness. No matter how you mold it and shield yourselves, the effects of exposure to vhij nex’en cuts deep.”

“Influence of the old gods cannot supersede that of the Lich King.”

“But you are his chattel no longer. A mind cannot be subject to this distortion in any exhaustive periods.”

“A living mind. We are no more than shards of people, kept to this world by sorcery. The shadow will find no traction with us.” When the draenei has no peripheral complaints, Trienza continues ahead.
“This locale is under the jurisdiction of Marval Breakshield, human and former ‘brother’ to me and the others, as it were.”

Thariss idly lays a hand on the hilt of her blade.
“A death knight?”

“Yes, but not an Ebon Knight.”

“We’re freeing a death knight?”

Trientza shakes her head calmly.
“No, there is nothing remarkable about him and I wouldn’t wish to squander this magic on a man of this breed. Even in the Scourge’s ranks, he is contemptible. He’s the stuff of ‘strongmen’ – petty overseers who derive pleasure from agonizing those a step under them. I behaved similarly, but the least I did was conditioning poor souls to come out stronger. Breakshield feeds on their violation. Rather, I’m pushing for what he rides.”

Rax seems mildly out of it.
“We are conducting this malignant mission for a mount?”

“No mere mount, paladin. You’ll see.”

And in a minute or two, they do indeed get a sense of the subtext to Trienza’s goal, when the air of Icecrown is pierced by a roar, an arriving alert to the workers and servants of the Scourge. However, extraordinarily, it is not locked to the loam on which they’re placed, but up above. From their hidey-hole, Trienza points upwards and they pursue her finger. Far over the ground soars a monster, possibly a hundred meters from nose to tail, with wings of equal remove, and conceivably four or five meters in height. It is a serrated and barbed beast, with curved horns and terribly frayed hide. Once, it may have been adorned with majestic scales that would luster with the resplendence of the arcane, but these days, it’s all grey bones and decomposed flesh, with a stare, maw and belly that gleams in winter white-blue – the winter white-blue of death and death knights. As dignified as it is terror-grating.

Riv extends her eyes and the other living hinges onto this sensation.
“A…a dragon?”
Trienza and her aides are impassive at the arrangement. “Frost wyrms, they call them.”

At the cusp of her vision, Rax can descry how Nadel’s brow hardens amid watching the skeleton of her kin. “I despise that term”, she says, voice thick with precisely this chord. “They were blue dragons at one time. Now it’s…a glorified ghost with wings.”

Sydela then cuts in. “And we were kaldorei, quel’dorei and Amani. We have more in common than you think.” This silences the drake, but doesn’t settle her. Rax sympathetically takes Nadel’s hand. “It’s…a big one”, comments Thariss.

“Yes, it is”, Trienza agrees. “An exceptional specimen of wyrms that was previously a fully grown dragon. It is not the size of the esteemed Sindragosa, Queen of the Frostbrood, but it’s a juggernaut alright. Our ambition is to break it away from Breakshield’s hold and if we’re fortunate, ask if we can bring it to our side.”

Khroga views them with a mite of an astounded expression. “Ask? I’m not in favor of it, but doesn’t the Ebon Blade got its mitts on…uh, the ability to shackle other undead creatures?”

Trienza tilts to Sydela and nudges her head in that path, as the kaldorei is more skillful in that side of their techniques. “Yes, that’s within our control, easily”, she verifies. “But dragons are another story. Their intellects are vast, and gritted, more independent. If you wish to quash one, you have to get fitted with elaborate rites and serious enchantments.”

“This one’s slave name is Terrors spine”, Trienza points out. “Horribly unimaginative, if you ask me. She was a ‘gift’ from the Lich King, for the overseer of this present tract, to gain absolute control against his enemies and plausible internal sabotage.”

“Uh, did you say internal?”, wonders Thariss. “Would that ever go down?”

“Not impossible. Despite being mind-controlled, their personalities are not all the same. They retain a ghost of their old selves. Some are ‘lazy’ and a couple are…self-asserting. They are driven to rise in the ranks and outclass their peers. The Lich King does not tolerate this, unless you actually beat your opposition before he puts a stop to it. He deplores rebellion, but endorses beneficial competition.”

Nadel opts to interject. “It would be more of a kindness to put this one to rest.”

This shocks some of her companions. It’s not that she has never been hard or dour, but they hadn’t prepared for a slash like this. Saying that, they can glom onto that she is not a fan of undead, nor of the degrading of her people, a people that struggle. “Some might disagree”, says Trienza. “We are as dead as it is.”

“There’s no denying that, but you don’t see it with the right eyes – dragons do not exist like mortals do. Besides the Aspects, we are not genuinely immortal, that is clear, but any and all have a special chemistry with our element. Blue dragons literally bleed the arcane, magic currents. Twist us into these ‘frost wyrms’ and it is…I can’t even fathom how aching its ‘life’ must be. This is no
elementary discarding of emotions and desensitization – it’s like your heart being plucked and then dropped in acid, and you feeling every traumatic second of it.”

Even though she is being…extravagant and she can’t factually know this, Trienza doesn’t go hostile.
“I won’t argue with you, but our urgency must come first for us. The Ebon Blade has acquired woefully few dragons, and grown ones have been out of the question. This one is tremendous, and it’s confrontational. This could help turn things to our side by some margin. And notwithstanding the melancholy, this is a condition for us to oblige you with Germark – help my team extricate this dragon and we’ll fulfill our part.”

Nadel’s disapproval or no, the group dip their heads in reconciliation.
“Okay”, utters Khroga, “if my father’s end is resting on this, I won’t quibble.”

“Our squad will lighten your load too”, reveals Riv.

Trienda nods with approval.
“Good. To mount that cliff, we’ll have to take on the watchmen and then the reinforcements which are guaranteed to roll in. Personally, I cannot consider a better opening for me to rush Marval within that time limit. Short of his demise, Terrorspine can’t gain its freedom, so he must be neutralized.”

Riv is the one dismayed as it stands.
“You’re proceeding up there unattended? You’ll be gambling with your own life that way.”

But the Commander shoots back, albeit softly.
“You shouldn’t undersell a death knight.” She swaps to thalassian. “I am not the woman of yesteryear, dorei’nan. In the field of death knight competency, my power is…unnatural. It excels standard mortal capacity. Just watch.”

Half an hour passes in peace for the steelworks, with the air keeping full of hammering and grinding and sizzling from the laborers locked in their practices, with no end in sight. Marval Breakshield, the overseer of this portion of the landscape, is fixed up on his overlook, sweeping his assigned territory with a noncommittal look beneath the armor of his horned helmet. Simulating a vast amount of his peers, he is clad in dark grey armor, forged in Icecrown and constructed from saronite with steel components as support. He wears a dilated black two-handed blade, runes speckled over its length in ocean blue, this gear incasing a pale and scarred body from the battles he’s fought and was slain in.

Marval is not the most dedicated man, technologically speaking. He sees no difference in the semantics of the smithing and chores attended to by his servants, as long as the quotas are met and there is no one straying from their posts. He holds quite a firm grip over potential renegades too, for at the snap of a finger, he can evoke the mighty Terrorspine and rain death on his detractors. Which he does too, whenever called for.

But with the droning of the tools going forth undaunted, he turns and gravitates to his quarters, which aren’t exactly luxurious either. A death knight requires no rest or sustenance beyond wreaking suffering. Therefore in his overlook, he’s stashed no more than some tables, boxes with various alchemical solutions, tucked-away old orders, maps and schematics, as well as a whetstone for his own sword.
He seats himself by it, intending to sharpen its edge for the encouraging prospect that he may
receive more intrusions soon. He’s heard that mortals who’ve flown in from the south have been sighted in the boundaries of their turf, apparently members of the Horde. He has no humanity now to speak of, and therefore bears no loyalty to the Alliance, but the notion of carving the body parts off a few orcs or trolls does steep him with a gleeful impression, and probably an innate one.

However, his nerves are tested earlier than he had prospected. A bout of commotion is overheard abruptly, just down his terrace, which sounds awfully identical to gunfire, swords interlocking, and guts being severed. Another encounter so recent following the fires he put out just an hour ago, when his co-taskmasters bespoke for assistance with some wayward wretches from the south. Well, if it’s carnage they’re after…

He mounts his sword on his plated shoulder, hand on hilt, along the way to the line and precipice of his mountainside and stares down. But this day is full of surprises – battering and tearing up his elected watchdogs at the foot of his overlook in his range of vision is not a pack of red-clad savages, as he would envision them, but an odd accumulation of beings. Night elves, blood elves, draenei, even an orc and a troll. What is this? Have the Horde and Alliance made common cause? And if so, why propel their efforts in such a pathetically small-scale contingent? This isn’t even a dozen, though they do have some fighting moves, he will own up.

But if these misbehaving outsiders thirst for violence, and to challenge his rule, he shall serve them some of their own guts.

“Terrorspine!”, he calls, the sound echoing to the mountains beyond him.

A guttural, spine-tingling roar is loosened, originated of the ascents of the ridges which rim the steelworks, and beating her wings, the frost wyrm takes flight, just prior to plunging towards where he is, expecting to settle adjacent to his position. The death knight does not even lend her a glimmer of his optics, for he scowls at how the interlopers are ridding him of his infantry and then for some reason make it seem as if they’re shoring up to tackle the auxiliaries. Are they not looking out for his coming, or does he not matter for their outlines?

“Insolent mortals”, he mutters, as his mount makes the earth tremble, lumbering to him. “You’ve come to lie on your own frozen pyre. What a waste of space and my time.”

But at the moment where he fetches the chains which pour down from the ‘reins’ which he’s strapped onto his dragon, he listens to a separate voice, flowing from a frontier a breath away from his own.

“How about you cut off this asinine conceit of trifling with those of lesser stature who gush with viscera, and instead address one with ice in her veins?”

The articulation is mordant and inexorable, affording no recourse of that it commands his attention right this instant. Pulling at the chains, the dragon swings around and he receives eye contact with his objective, but his mind is somewhat bent at the discovery. He recognizes the scarlet-lined obsidian saronite armor, replete with skulls and festooned by demonic horns. It could be lumped in with the ranks of the Scourge, not counting theirs are popularly black or a measure of dark blue. But the auburn hair, the hairband, elongated ears, unearthly lusterless skin and the blue-combusting irises identifies her to him like no other fabrics of this world.

“You”, he states. “Shadespire”. He nothing short of spits out her name with revulsion. “A traitor coming back home, is it? You ought to be on your knees, worm.”

On the surface of it, Marval can only speculate that she clambered up here, as she’s on the conflicting side of the platform of the other invaders.

“No. A free woman bursting in to slay her former dictator. But I’ll start with you.”
Pulling at the chains, Marval hops up on his wyrm, leading its maw in a trend at her, but he holds his locus for now and draws his steel from the aft.

“It was a great misfire to bring yourself forth here in Icecrown, you little snake. It will be your second grave.”

She snorts and extends Viri’valheen into her own handle.

“You are a sorry lout, Breakshield, as you’ve been from the start. Unfailingly stuck here, at a safe distance from battle, from peril and the tune of true death, snug like a little rat. You’re a craven, Breakshield, and you’ll die like one. I’ll see to it personally, and it will be my delight to feast on your fall. After that, the fair beast you’re fondling will be mine.”

It is nothing but a bite of derision, but it’s made worthwhile, for Marval grimaces below his helmet and collides his feet with the bones of the wyrm, arousing its itch for bloodshed – or the splitting of limbs, if anything.

From the ground, Terrorspine barrels her claws forward and double-times it to the elf, fangs bared. With the charge, Trienza steps obliquely, to duck from the natural weapons and ideally get a slash on the rider. However, she soon puts him down as a man who had a correlating layout, if his angled blade is anything to go by. Together with her own onslaught at his flank, he pitches his sword at her and sparks burst when the runeblades brush one another’s bodies, developed from the magical inscriptions.

Though the dragon has a shot at whipping her with its tail, Trienza rolls and narrowly avoids this fate as well, until she’s out on the other end and the dragon skips up, to veer back.

Marval drives her into a second onset, albeit in this episode, a gout of fire leaves the wyrm’s maw, blue rime that steams at the quel’dorei, nevertheless with small purchase, for she spins aside of the key spray, and then augments her constitution with a spell shield, so that the fringes of the particles do not char her. Marval’s sword does reach for her, but she bangs it astray and once more, they’ve traded places, with Trienza winding up where she got this duel underway. Next time, she can make a dead reckoning that the wyrm won’t commit another great mishit. Third time will be the charm for her too, though. This back and forth does not serve her, nor is it what she engineered. She favored that he would come to trust he was having the upper hand and in this existent state, he does.

But when they pass each other for a third occasion, sparsely outrunning the dragon’s muzzle, she shears the gap to Terrorspine’s flank and erects a hand. With its incomparable pace, her gauntlet bounces over and over onto the bones, before she at least slides her fingers around a rib. Trienza’s strength cannot counterbalance a real and monstrous beast of this degree, and so she’s tossed like a small ragdoll when she holds on, smacking into its shell. In time, though, she works out how to heave herself up and as Terrorspine screeches, rearing itself up to the skies with the sprawling wings, she touches down over its dorsal bones, sword at the ready.

Initially, Marval is nonplussed, not having unraveled what resulted from this final scrabble, but then he sweeps the field with his interior essence-finding talents. Pending a second to swerve and lay his boots on the bones, he’s guided straight at her, the two of them balancing midflight, cloaks wiggling in the breakneck wind and blades spangling in their pining for carnage.

“You’ve got some nerve, treading on my wyrm like this”, he tells her. “But this was unwise, old-timer. When I’ve knocked you on your ass off this ride, I’ll advise the King to reanimate you a second time, so you can be worked to lick the muck from the floor of the Citadel.”

She steadies her blade in her hands, directed at him.

“Running away with the notion that you’ll come out of this a victor, are you? Cute.”

She takes a step forward and initiates this sky duel, swiping her weapon high in hopes of
destabilizing his foothold to a certain degree, and though he screens it, this move provides her with a running start. She slaps his sword twice more, kicks at his arm, and pirouettes to jolt his structure through his armor, but he doesn’t cling to an unmoving position. Endeavoring to issue a portion of what he’s gotten, he infuses his intestines with an aura that stews his blood and buttresses his muscles by a few notches. Harnessing this invigoration, he tackles her chest, knocking her on the back foot, strikes at her thrice and then lifts his gauntlet to fire a bolt of crimson necromantic vitality.

Luckily, Trienza eschews it by floating to the right, though she comes powerfully imminent to tripping over and plummeting to her aerial deathbed. To extinguish this harmful solution, she stakes her blade between the bones of Terrorspine, to use as a prop and cradles it for dear life. This proves to be an emphatically fortuitous stunt, since the dragon cries out in pain and squirms around in its flight, leaving no choice for Marval but to backtrack and get a hold on the wyrm of his own.

Pulling her steel from the skeletal pit, Trienza allows him a chance to regain his basis before she shoots at him, swords clashing and clattering with fervor. She does not repeat the bungle of misjudging his abilities a second time either, which is why his spells and thrashing persists in going unduly wide and Trienza even flouts more than one chance to finish him off. At one point, she practically disarms him, but he grasps the hilt anew at the last second, meanwhile opening himself so much that she have only to thrust the blade into his neck if she so wished, but she holds back.

“I have tutored students for centuries, from the bow, to the sword, to the dagger, to the axe, and so much more. You are above and beyond one of the sloppiest. Your King would’ve done well to maintain a tighter leash on my neck, so that I could lecture you not to embarrass yourself and your Order in this fashion.”

He growls.
“Fuck off, you washed-up elf cunt!”

She hadn’t fished for a productive provocation, but it would appear she pinpointed one in no time at all. Nor is there any discrepancy to her label, for he soon determines perhaps the utmost of sloppy performances by sacrificing his own foundation solely to unsettle her. He loads another charge of the death knightly gifts into his foot, hoists it and then stomps the dragon underneath. Granting that it doesn’t physically harm her, Terrorspine does scream in agony and buck marginally, temporarily pulling the base out from under their feet. This is a sincerely hazardous exploit during this period, when he can’t vouch for his own conquest in this contest, but he is confident – and not to forget, enraged – enough to gamble with his own unlife, if but to put this elf in her place for a second.

It’s a crying shame, for the folly of underrating one’s rival is his, in case he estimates that she’ll loiter and warrant him to overwhelm her. In place of losing her balance, Trienza foresees the product of his tactic, bends her legs, lunges forth and catapults into him. She kicks at his chest while staggers, compelling him back, headlong at the tail. When she docks down on the wyrm, he hasn’t recovered from her offense, and consequently she has full autonomy to circle her blade and mash it into his.

His sword detaches from him in a split-second, but it does not descend to the terrain hundreds of meters down before she snatches her victory. With his lenses distracted by the terrifying view of the runesword vanishing, she presses her feet into the skeleton of the wyrm, makes strides towards him, levels her blade at a horizontal angle, and stabs it into the waist gap of his armor. Vigilant of that this does not cut it to drop one of her kind, she plants a hand on the flat of her weapon,
channels her magical efforts and endues the runes with some of her power. The five of them promptly commences a glowing display and in turn, the edge is riddled with a layer of toothed ice. With an intensified tug, she cleaves his torso, dividing him into two, amidst concurrently employing her blade’s congenital ability to leech his spirit into its ethereal cache. She does not share the same courtesy which she granted the dead san’layn with this misbegotten man, though, for she pushes her foot into his chestplate, punting his body apart.

On the other end, his crash and oncoming demise ignites a reaction in the dragon, and Terrorspine’s veins launch into a tremor of strain and amok which affects Trienza’s current insertion. Where the wyrm struggles with its ‘master’s’ disappearance, she bolts up to the chains, grabs them and wrings them to ride Terrorspine downwards, returning to the overview where Marval was based. Upon nearing it, she angles Viri’valheen to the chains, burrows it below and shreds them, to break the dragon from the hold. Trienza jumps in the middle of the plunge, sets down and tumbles once, prior to regaining her feet. But the frost wyrm is decidedly not finished with the death knight, considering the Lich King’s dominion of her cerebral functions are decreeing that all hostiles of his authority must be reduced to piles of dust or frozen monuments to his tyranny.

Thankfully, the Commander has already proceeded to step three of this procedure. She nabs the scroll from one of the cavities in her armor, unfolds and stretches it upon the ice. Conjuring up the debrief dispensed by Kassari, she fuels her fingertips with some of her own internal energy and then draws them across the selection of emblems and glyphs at the parchment, activating them. Just as the dragon swoops down for a final breath of icy flames, Trienza rises, smashes her sabaton into scroll and a cone of light besets her. Debating with herself if Kassari had made some imprecise approximations for a second, in the short run, these doubts are unconditionally exorcised when the cone inverts its vector and blasts the dragon with a lengthy black-green serpentine string, incising her rib cage with some manner of foul, but thoroughly potent pulse.

At first, the air and valleys in this region are overfilled with a shout of agony, of deep and instinctive abuse which spills out into a flood of seething tempers and a red mist swarming the wyrm, awash in harmful sensations, that this power salivates to crack its bones and blow away the soul which fuels it. Or so she primarily assumes, preceding a revelation for all to behold – a set of sheer and white chains, nonphysical and otherworldly, fragments and crumbles.

The grievous roar then transforms hastily to one of triumph, of such exultation which can hardly be expressed with the crude words of the mortal tongues, and yet she does. “FREEDOM!”’, the dragon unleashes with such dynamism that it actually jams fear into some of the Scourge army’s chests and they flee rather than toughing it out against the living. “I am free!”’, the frost wyrm repeats and goes aloft, being able to flesh this out in no other fashion than abiding her wings a session of unhindered flight.

Within a minute or so, she dives once more nearer to the ground, and Trienza, as it behooves her, rolls down to one knee, to sport her respect for the being. The mighty frost wyrm lands at the overlook, right before the elf, the subjacent rocks quaking due to the veritable weight and immensity of this creature.

“You!”, she produces from her skeletal form. “You delivered me from my chains to that abhorrent brute who had the gall to deem himself ‘King’ of this land, the land of the dead and scorned. Who are you?”

Trenza lowers her head and stabs the sword into the ice. She understands how dragons may wish to be addressed.
“Strike-Commander Trienza Shadespire of the Knights of the Ebon Blade, free death knight of Azeroth, my lady.”

“Free? You do not answer to that monster?”

“We don’t. He meant to offer us to fate’s insatiable jaws, so that he could best the Argent Dawn, but he dropped the torch. Now, we serve our own cause. And you, my lady? Do you have a name?”

“Do I have a name?”, she responds fiercely, partially in faint disbelief and with an ounce of possibly having been insulted. “I am a dragon, quel’dorei – our names are more than plain letters on a sheet of paper. They are etched into our very bones and souls, scrawled in the flurry of the arcane. I am called Ryanegosa, daughter of Azuregos and Malemirgosa. I fought in what you characterize as the ‘War of the Ancients’, before the evolution of your race, and I’ve put up with others since then. Although it has been almost a thousand years since my bones wore living scales, during the war against the qiraji, where my deathblow was dealt, and my brood carried me to the north. I rested peacefully in my tomb until that sordid creature dared to defile it. No people outside of ours may wander our hallowed wastes without our permission, and he brought his filth to it!”

She roars and stomps her claws into the corrupt soil, before she settles down.

“But I have not forgotten that you erased my chains, set me free from my torment’s reign, mortal. For that, I will spare you.”

“I am no mortal, as I’ve already said. And my assignment had a further crux – I bring a proposition for you, oh great Ryanegosa.”

“And what persuasion of suggestion is that, death knight?”

Trienza is now staring full-on into the equally-shaded eye sockets of the frost wyrm.

“I know your pain and I know your…humiliation, my lady. The Ebon Blade are death knights and other undead, former slaves of the Lich King and he was no less heartless with us than you. But we don’t submit to his rule anymore. We’re locked in a struggle with him, contending to topple and cut him down once and for all. The Ebon Blade does not enslave intelligent undead souls, nor do we manufacture new ones, but there’s small harm in recruiting those who find themselves lost in their fresh emancipation. This is the reason for why I offer you membership – enlist with us, lady Ryanegosa, battle with us against the Lich King, allow me to accompany you in the skies, and I swear that you will have vengeance, and perhaps a worthy home in this rather hollow semblance of life.”

The frost wyrm’s implacable and frozen stare impales her, conceivably rating and classifying her, seeing through her speech for lies.

“You wish to ride me, little death knight?”

“Only with your permission, my lady. In the Ebon Blade, we yield to ranks and a hierarchy, but it’s a choice whether to take a stand with us. You get to choose your battles, or if to elude them, here and now.”

The wyrm indulges this some more, her tail dangling from edge to edge. She then stares out beyond the scarred land of Icecrown, the glaciers and the impoverished dirt, which has been correspondently pillaged for what lifeblood it once had.

“Hmm. A true death might be preferable. Might be…safer. Cleaner. A part of my spirit tells me that I would rest easier down that road, petitions me to neglect the excess. Revert to the lands long away, where I slumbered.”

She then grits her fangs and growls.

“But my inner fire hungered for revenge. I’ll have it, with everything I can muster.
Nonetheless, I won’t be welcomed back by my living siblings.”

“Nor are any of us. That is why we stick together. Trust none above ourselves.”

Ryanegosa drives her focus into Trienza, who has the courage to stay sharp in matched veracity, excepting the immense size disparity. She may realize there’s a fine line between them, but scant else.

“Very well, Trienza Shadespire – you may have my fealty. United, we shall lay the lich insect low.”
The Ashen Verdict. The transitory union of the living Argent Crusade and undead Ebon Blade needed a name, and this is what they came up with. A proposed solution to the Scourge.

As of yet, they’ve arrayed a modicum of positive results too. Weeks have gone past since they kicked up their onslaught of Scourge terrain and quarters, squeezing into the southwest of Icecrown, where the grandest spire ever built stands, the Icecrown Citadel, throne of the Lich King. It wasn’t a Sunday stroll down the main street of Capital City either – hundreds, or more appropriately, thousands of souls have ended, finding themselves in the cold wake of death, a percentage of them reawakened into the undead service of the masters of this realm. However, many more thousands have joined up with the Ashen Verdict, volunteers and lost birds who strove for a fresh future. And the Scourge did not possess the manpower to hold them from the crown halls.

Down the stairs of the Citadel, right past its initial gigantic wall, is an army of tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands, here to push the gates of their oppressor down after too long a period. Within this configuration is the army of the Light, the Ebon Knights, as well as additions from the Horde and the Alliance. Prestigious people, but not the ultimate ones, not the Warchief or High King.

At the middle of the two first sections, one can discern a discussion occurring between a duo of Highlords – Darion Mograine of the Ebon Blade and Tirion Fordring of the Argent Crusade. Both men are clad in armors representing their side of the Verdict, with lots of grey, black and skulls on Mograine, while Fordring is furled in gold, blue and enchanted fire. They’re deliberating on the consequent maneuver, what to act upon in the morning.

“We must storm the center and bring down the gates”, argues Fordring. “We hold the firepower and means for it, and although we’re not in immense jeopardy of what could arrive from beyond the entrance, the possibility that we’ll be routed at the rear is active.”

“We’re of one mind in this”, speaks Mograine in his reverberating tone, “but this shouldn’t indicate that we wait for the Lich King to box us in. We have people equal to the challenge to send east, who can cripple their forces and seal the tunnels.”

Tirion nods slowly, rubbing his grey beard.

“Certainly, and it would be wise. But this would call for a proven leader, one who doesn’t get overstretched and isn't unmindful of the risks of overflowing odds.”

“Agreed. I have just the woman for the job.” He turns sideways. “Strike-Commander!”

Marching to the front with her auburn hair waving in the cold breeze is a pale high elf, with a dark brown-skinned human by her side, as well as a moss-green Amani and a grey-orchid kaldorei at her back.

“Highlord”, utters the quel’dorei calmly.

“Allow me to present Strike-Commander Trienza Shadespire and her second, Wilthorn Siddall. Their squads have eliminated dire threats and acquired invaluable intel throughout Northrend.”

Fordring assesses them both with thought.
“I see. Where are you two from, if I may ask?”

Trienza arches her eyebrow at the inquiry, but decides to meet with it. “Southern Quel’Thalas, though my House originated in Fairbreeze.”

“Mm, beautiful town. I remember having roasted squash there once as a young man. One of the best I’ve ever partaken.”

Wilthorn straightens his back. “I’m from Stratholme, my lord.”

Tirion’s face alters then, a pained shadow coming over the old man. “Stratholme… I’m sorry to hear that, lad. You’ve both been to and suffered hell, then.”

“More than you’ll ever comprehend”, Trienza retorts. “If Arthas perishes, we’ll know it wasn’t for nothing.”

Darion jams himself into the talks. “This onslaught bears someone to take a sortie to the east and cut off the relief that the Scourge’ll forward. Can I entrust you with this, Commander?”

“Shouldn’t give it a second thought. I’ll have that one battened down before you Highlords can sweep the antechamber of the Citadel. I do expect some materials, though. I must have crusaders and various sanctification measures, were we to pass over. Being brought back to face up to our allies is no one’s wish here, I predict.”

Tirion inclines his head keenly. “You shall have them, some of our best.”

“There was a unique group which caught my eye that I’d request.” She points her finger at a human roughly fifty meters away. “Captain Haven and her columns. We’ve engaged the Scourge concertedly in Zul’Drak, to ground a different Citadel, a flight-capable one. I’ve begun to build some confidence in their skills.”

Fordring does not overrule her, but nods. “I’ve read the reports on this battle, said to have been one of the grandest in that theater of the war. If you think they can fulfill this role once more, they’re yours.”

“Thank you. I’ll go speak with them now.” She dips her head at Mograine. “Highlord.” And then towards Fordring. “Highlord.” Tirion smiles with a dash of mirth at these parting words. Trienza then moves with her comrades to concenter with Melia and the sin’dorei tacked to her. “Captain Haven.”

Melia, dressed in solid robes and furs, smiles at her and salutes, a gesture which Trienza reciprocates. “Commander Shadespire! A tremendous pleasure to see you again.”

The quel’dorei extends her hand and Melia grabs it, as they shake. Her voice is not insignificantly more somber. “And you, Captain. Your promotion was well-earned, from everything my second has informed me on.”

The Captain glances at Wilthorn and her old friend has his helmet off, his face softened. She glistens.
“And he performed above and beyond. You’re lucky to have him as your deputy.”

“No luck involved. I assigned him to me because I know his worth.”

Wilthorn bows marginally at her.
“You honor me, Commander.”

“Nonsense. I only speak the truth. And here’s some more – we’ll be taking action against the Scourge alongside you again, Captain. I’ve solicited for your squads to a special flanking mission. We’re going to grind their reinforcements to dust.”

A faint smirk trundles over Melia.
“My people are ready whenever.”

As Trienza steps to the left, Melia’s lips heighten while she nears Wilthorn and takes his hand. Their fingers entwine and though his are cold, she does not appear pestered.
“I’m glad you’ve fared well since Zul’Drak.”

“Right back at ya”, he responds. “So, Captain, huh? You’re really running past my ranks in the Guard. A ladder-climber now, are you?”

Melia giggles.
“Someone has to represent the north well.”

This makes him grin.
“Pff, shut up. I’m the second-in-command to the greatest Commander in the Ebon Knights!”

“Not saying you aren’t. Wanna race to the top?”

Wilthorn shakes his head.
“Nah. You’d just win.”

Melia laughs happily.

Meantime, Trienza stretches her hand to Ashindra and they converse in thalassian.
“You made First Lieutenant. Congratulations.”

Ash dips her head in respect.
“Thank you, Commander. My superiors briefed me that a certain someone’s recommendation facilitated this rise.”

“You don’t say?”, Trienza states casually, not smiling, but there’s a sliver of amusement to her.
“Can’t imagine who that is. You should thank them at some point, but privately.”

The sin’dorei chuckles.
“I’ll do just that.”

Trientza indicates to her left with a hand.
“You’re arguably more familiar with the hired help that we’ve secured recently.”

This impresses on Ash to blink bewilderingly.
“Hired help? Since when did the Ebon Blade need mercenaries?”

She then hears a voice that resonates with her.
“Since they found ones who know how to complete their shit. ‘specially little Scourge dumps like this tower.”
Ash reels somewhat and hangs right, her eyes communicating with multiple pairs. She perks up faster than she had estimated.

“Thariss! Riv! Raxeen and lady Nadelgosa too.” Rivaryn is patting and kissing the jaw of her purring raptor Razz, Thariss is standing with a smirk and crossed arms, Rax’s hooves are positioned at the back of her beloved drake, with Nadel banking into her. But further to the west, she gets the distinctions of two additional targets.

“Oh, Kass? And Khroga besides.”

Kassari droops her head lightly.

“That we are, but I would not judge myself as ‘hired’ by anyone. Khroga and I are on board for a different, albeit parallel purpose.”

Ash starts by moving to hug Riv.

“I’m relieved that your versatility and tracking expertise hasn’t waned with the years.” Riv smiles and rests her hands on Razz once more.

“It’s challenging to dwindle when you’re constantly in the process of it.”

“Hah, fair enough.” She then glides over to Thariss and replicates the same execution with her, slipping her arms around the waist, even though her head principally ranges nowhere above the kaldorei’s chest.

“Hope your combat-savvy hands haven’t gone over the hill either.”

The night elf smirks.

“What, from months ago? No, that’d demand a shitload of centuries to be real.”

“Would it now? I wonder.”

“Patently. Want me to prove it? I’ll put down ten gold that I can off more Scourge pricks than you.”

Ash’s ears are drawn up excitedly.

“Ten? Why not twenty?”

“Oh, high-roller paladin, eh? Well, if wanna get bankrupted, let’s make it happen. I trust you’re in the mood to get robbed.”

The sin’dorei pushes her gauntlet into Thariss chestplate.

“You’re on. But don’t weep too profusely when I trample your score.”

Thariss’ laugh is imbued with a certain bite.

“Ooh, so fierce, lil’ red. In your wet dreams, Revenor.”

“Your picture is not in my dreams.”

“Lies. You’ve fantasized ‘bout me once or twice.”

“No comment.”

At that stage, Melia approaches Riv, encircles the hunter with both arms and pecks her cheek. Riv shares this deed.

“I’m grateful to you for welcoming Ash back as your friend. It’s opened up for…alternatives associated with me.”

The hunter seems happy and brushes her lips against Melia’s forehead.
“Heh, yeah. She's a terrific friend to have. And I’m delighted for you two. She’ll be good to you, I know it.” Riv also motions at the sin’dorei who resembles her. “This is my sister, Kassari. She’s a member of-“

But Melia disrupts her.
It’s been a while, but I’m thrilled to meet you again, Arcanist. I had some lovely treats that was apparently due to your efforts.”

The mage is oblivious and confused at the start, but then her greens shift among her and Ash.
“Ah, now I recall. The cookies, wine and such?” She snorts in an easygoing tack and visually traverses the human. “So, you’re the intent of it? I did figure Ash was off and flirting again at the moment she loosed that letter.”

“Well, not so much flirting as comforting me, I guess. We’re already together.”

Then, Trienza intersperses with them and the bulk of the team drifts to her.
“We’ve come to back shaman Khroga and Arcanist Kassari in dredging up a specific man. I’ve verified that he’ll be inside the Citadel, patrolling a profitable cache. But to get to him, we’re left with no choice but to assume a significant first offensive, to crack open a wide enough gap.”

Melia caresses her own chin.
“Statistically, this’d warrant some extra offensive procedures or resources. Have we procured anything like that?”

“We have.” She peers to the left end. “Lady Ryanegosa, with us, please.”

Here, the setup beholds how not a skeletal dragon, but the shape of a night elf strides to them, moderately shorter than Thariss. Her skin is a languished light green, her unblinking eyes flickering in winter white blue, and her head adorned with black hair kept in a braided ponytail, resting on her left shoulder, whereas her countenance is streaked with twin blood red tattoos, which Thariss would peg down as ‘The Serpent’, if it were not that the lower ends are crossed. Her own unique design, then. Despite not having any visible scales, like Nadel does, sticking out from the edges of her head is a twin set of dark grey draconic horns, bent backwards, to loom over her head. Furthermore, her frame is covered solidly by blue-black saronite-esque armor, comparable to those equipped by the Ebon Blade death knights. Had she lacked horns, no one could’ve concluded that she is a dragon.

“I am here”, she states blankly.

"This is Lady Ryanegosa, formerly of the blue dragonflight, now free frost wyrm of the Ebon Blade."
Tриенса bows her head courteously.
“Are you prepared, my lady?”

“Yes, whenever.”

“We’ll launch it in the morning.”

“My fire is duly cold to disassemble that or any wall.”

Where Trienza chatters with the others in regards to the model of their plan, Ryanegosa glances edgeways and notices Nadelgosa’s squirm of discomfort. She’s in proximity, and the blue drake partially tries to examine Ryane from her own peripheral vision, but also darts her eyes away. It isn’t explicit whether she fears the frost wyrm’s person, or resents her.
Ryane has not missed out on Nadel, as she’s spotted her once or twice, and then questioned Trienza on her identity. This nominally justified to her why Nadel wouldn’t be so fond of Ryane’s imminency.

She trades to draconic, a husky and harsh tongue in the ears of those who aren’t taught in it – which is everyone in this party besides the two dragons. “Do I terrify you that badly, youngster?”, she wonders in a neutral pitch, albeit producing a vibrating sound.

“You don’t”, Nadel insists in a rush.

“Is dishonesty a trait among the young generations of my old flight now?”

Nadel bites her lip, wavering. She’s bound to be adjusting herself for a proper retort, but has troubles deciding. Ryane had never encountered the dead of her own whilst in life. It’s reasonable that she might’ve acted in this sense too. “I…I’m at a loss why you would settle for this life in disrepair, rather than ultimate death. It would be my end of choice.”

Ryane’s eyes flare. “What could you possibly grasp of life and death?”, she asks angrily. “I peeked your form earlier – you’ve not even ascended to full dragonhood. A drake, a child. And you presume to dispute me?”

The high elven being shrinks slightly in mild nervousness. “I…"

“Nadelgosa, was it? What age could you be at? 500? 900? Less than a millennium, doubtlessly. Well, what is it, then?”

Flustered, Nadelgosa stammers and her hands ripple. “I-I was hatched a few decades past your fall.”

“Precisely. How can you be awakened to the desire, the urge to gain vengeance? I had been struggling with and burning demon hordes, void infiltrators and old god servants before you were even a hope of an egg. The mortal scab sitting up on that icy spike has to be forestalled and if I don’t benefit this Ebon Blade organization, I won’t allow myself to rest easy.”

“And then what? Would you take off in the aftermath?”

Ryane exhales from her nostrils humoredly. “What a precious inquiry. Do I repulse you that sharply?”

“That’s…I…” Nadel swallows and peers aside. “…no, that’s not the case. Above all, it pertains to something…personal for me. Where I grew up, in our safe haven, we have shrines where we’ve written every name of the blues who’ve passed away. Regardless of what role they filled, the origin or their age, we memorize them. My mother, she…she schooled me in the lore and stories of what she had learned. Told me to record them in my heart, so that they wouldn’t be neglected, at all costs.”

Ryane has slowed her tempers to a degree, now mildly fixated. “Your mother…who is she?”

“Taraningosa.”

The wyrm then bobs her head compellingly.
“Ah yes, who could forget her? Quite smart, that one. Brilliant, some might claim. One of our greatest scholars.”

“She mentored me of you as well, how…fearsome you were in battle.”

“Hmph. Perhaps. And how much did it save me, all things considered? My jetting flame extinguished in a confrontation now practically forlorn.”

“No, not by us. We don’t let these things escape us.”

The kaldorei simulation of Ryane searches her.

“Where is she now? Your mother. Why isn’t she attending with us?”

Nadel’s elven ears sag unhappily.

“She’s dead. Slaughtered by the black dragonflight, some hundred years ago.”

Ryane goes silent, her lips sealed. It’s not out of shock per se, for she can’t rightly iron out what she’d like to be stated. Logically, it could even be that she’s mournful, in her own fashion. Shortly thereafter, she redirects her mind facing an alternate topic.

“You’re the brood of Senegos of the Azurewings, then? Is that old man vigorous yet, at least?”

“He…he is, yes. We supported him in the east, the Storm Peaks. Saved him from a class of…void perversion. We believe it was Yogg-Saron’s influence. Our people in this continent have been inundated with an abundance of ordeals.”

“Hmph. Isn’t there ever? This world would seem to have a sour taste for the entire blue dragonflight, since the Great War. And Malygos, then? Has the Lord himself transferred you to this miserable locale?”

Nadel is then caught by surprise.

“What? No, I—…you haven’t heard?”

“Hah. It’s a rare day indeed if I get an input on anything. Heard what?”

“He’s dead as well.”

And now, for the first moment today, and possibly going all the way to her reanimation, Ryane is struck.

“The Spellweaver…is dead?”

“Yes, he is.”

She would reject the notion publicly, and still she’s all but afraid to divulge the next part.

“Was it…?”

“No, it wasn’t the Scourge and they won’t be bringing him back. He went mad. He incriminated the whole of mortalkind of misusing the arcane and endeavored to isolate them from the leylines. This was in the depths of the Scourge’s assault on the southern lands too. My elder brother, Deradgos, went to a discussion, along with some of the other surviving broods. They attempted to dissuade him from this path, advised him that it was misinformed and unethical. Any detractors… were imprisoned, some of them tortured and interrogated. My grandfather took a stab at parleying for his release, but it didn’t work. My sister Stellagosa and I eventually recruited this band of mortals to get them all out. But it was not far from that we would perish in the mission. Teleportation hasn’t functioned for nearly a year, and his actions threatened to lay waste to it all, to be consumed by the Lich King. They destroyed him a few weeks ago. I was told Alexstrasza
herself arrived, to reason with him, but...he wouldn’t listen. Again.”

Ryane contemplates this to herself, for what might in actuality be a minute. Then, she sighs dishearteningly and swings her head sidewise.

“Damn that old numbskull. My father used to say that he was overly stubborn, even prior to the tragedies of the War of the Ancients. He was an Aspect, that is accurate enough, but...he was never wholly lucid in the aftereffects of it. We ought to have dethroned him at an earlier point. He wasn’t fit to command our flight anymore.”

“Yes…"

“Yes, I know, he was as a father to everyone, I won’t debate that. But it was his and the other Aspects’ inanity utilizing that damn artifact which flirted with the decimation of our entire race. And what did he carry out in the subsequent ten thousand years, while the remainder of us labored our hearts out to maintain an iota of safety for the mortals, the continents and the children of the future, to contain and eradicate turbulences which kept hemming us in from every which way? Nothing. He sat there in his little hideout, brooding, growing weaker and more self-pitiful. He wasn’t a 'king’ anymore, not a leader. I suppose, ironically, this proves that.”

She then steers herself edgeways, straight out for Nadel’s living azure gaze and the drake awaits her judgment.

“The Azurewings opposed him?”

“We did. Every one of us felt it was…unjust. We couldn’t stand by and watch him commit atrocities.”

Ryane nods with appreciation.

“I’m glad that there is at least a hope for the next dawn.”

Nadel is taken by this, clearly, perhaps even proud. The last thing she would’ve said she was on the way to, was a clap on the shoulder.

She’s on the cusp of a response when some commotion is sowed on the front. Trienza’s voice calls.

“Lady Ryanegosa, it would seem the Scourge prefers an early launch! We need you up here for this.”

Ryane lowers her head in acknowledgement and glances at Nadel.

“Follow me.”

Nadel hesitantly obliges and they both tread to the forepart of the area, and shift to their real shapes, with Ryane abundantly outsizing her.

“You may not like what I’ve become, but we will fight as allies. Show me how hot your fire burns, Nadelgosa of the Azurewings.”

Chapter End Notes

Nadel isn't really a child, but Ryanegosa can be a bit harsh. She's gone through a lot
Deep in the concourses of the Icecrown Citadel, heightened throne of the Lich King and monument of the Scourge’s mastery of Northrend, the various minions and henchmen of the one at the top of the pile scurry around, dancing like the cold wind to their allocated positions, sorting the defenses, outfitting bulwarks and forging their spell protections.

War has come to the Citadel. They always knew it would. They had been seasoned for this tangible drive, utilized and profiteered from to engage the living and bulldoze them. Or was that ever the end ambition? One can wonder. The Lich King’s hosts are enormous, profoundly numerous, where he can no doubt eclipse their margins by five or ten times, or more. So why hasn’t he harnessed these crushing estimates to smash the southern cities to the soil? Why has he privileged their armies to clash here, on his domain?

But it’s not Germark Steeljaw’s business to catechize or call his King into question. He is a death knight, one of the first-line champions and necromantic warriors of the Scourge. In plenty of angles, they are the Scourge manifested, the illustration of what his organization can achieve with the right tools and bolstering.

Although exteriorly, Germark would not be put down as the choicest of selections as an elevated trooper – he’s a real fossil, a chiefly bald orc if not for the circle of wispy grey hair on the boundaries of his dome. One of his tusks are now slightly corroded, a result of the demonic blow which killed him. His earlier fern green surface is now enlaced with an unhealthy slice of grey and plated in ocean dark blue saronite regalia, his hands carrying a great runeaxe born of the same material. He isn’t the tallest orc, nor the bulkiest, but a tenacious old boar, nonetheless.

Once upon a time, he went by the name ‘Steelfang’, a joke epithet his clan’s second-in-command and later Chieftain, Orgrim Doomhammer, had given him in the midst of the First War for the facial beatings he’d taken to the lower sections of his face – swords, hammers, gauntlets, even feet – yet his teeth and tusks were unscarred. Not cleanly white, but whole. As opposed to griping and reviling it, he took and owned the name. Steelfang was a fairly spectacular one anyway. But he could not preserve its integrity, for when reawakened by his new master, that man thought he would ‘aggrandize’ him, by setting him up with the style of ‘Steeljaw’. Germark wasn’t sure how he felt, as he liked the old one in life, but who was he to argue with a King? The whispers in his mind forbid it.

Germark has been put into the responsibility of main protector of a battery of vital contraptions to the safeguarding of the Citadel – this contains phylacteries which keep a batch liches standing. The assignment of these enhanced necromancers is to faster and bottomlessly resummons the dead in the vicinity of the Citadel, complexifying assaults on its spectrum of wings and rendering it unlikely that breaches will succeed. As to why these essential objects are compiled in one room is a secret to Germark, but again, he crosses the line if he acts skeptical.

To complete his mission, he’s thus been bestowed a magnitude of miscellaneous Scourge regulars – death knights, nerubians, frost vrykuls, wraiths, abominations and much more. Falling into this amount is a being which hovers above him, a heavily armored, pale and black-winged messenger of death – a val’kyr named Hareja, solemn and inexpressive. Under her command, a half dozen smaller-than-medium-sized frost wyrms encircle her in the upper realms of the room.

Germark is a death knight and in the ethics and internal relations of the Scourge, they are fearless, ineffaceable and malleable across the board, or so it is said. But granting that he isn’t expected to
be shivering at anything, there is one brand of idiomatic figures that unnerves him, which roots a melting of his ice – the val’kyr.
And no, it isn’t simply on the back of how powerful they are, or how enormously built every single one of them appear – even though that in itself is extraordinary. The val’kyr are the judges of the Lich King, his mouths and eyes. Ironic, as they never display theirs. In the event that a val’kyr enters the field, you’re aware that the Lich King is watching. But why? No, don’t check. Just obey.

Germark is administering and bossing formations of Scourge flocks around, informing them of where to take off towards or which lane requires what measure of people.
Then, he deviates to one of the monstrous beetle-type spiders that presides over the nerubians. “Bexorz, drag your grunts to the surface. The living are allegedly striking the reinforcement tunnels to the underground mass graves. To me, this lends credence to that they plan to seal ‘em shut, which would open wounds in our defensive lines. We gotta put a stop to it.”

The nerubian hisses as he tunes his throat to the Common tongue, which to Germark seems invariably inconvenient for the spiders. Their bodies were not bred for this form of communication. “Our warriors will live up to the Lich King’s demands”, he relays with a sluggish, flanging voice, “but this will necessitate magical assistance.”

“There will be”, Germark assures the spiderlord. “Five death knights, identical counts of necromancers and banshees, and two wyrms. Now get to it.”

“Yes, Enforcer.” Bexorz then shouts in the clacking and buzzing nerubian words, and they sense quaking in the earth.

At last, he draws his gaze to the aerial val’kyr, her wings beating rhythmically and composed, a spear in her right hand, as she is fronting the entrance to this chamber. He tightens his jaw, getting the impression of his tusk nudging his lip.

“Hareja, our King has not sent me word in the past few days. Has he shed light on anything to you? What is his decree?”

Achingly slow, the behemoth of a woman twists to him and ‘stares’ down from a commanding position.
“He has not.” She doesn’t sound or appear perturbed by that. “The Lich King calls upon us to bring down the living intruders and that is it. You will be held to this order and task, Enforcer. Do not fail.”

Germark wonders. Is their King doubting his own chances? Why isn’t he assuming immediate control here? Icecrown Citadel is his home, isn’t it? Does he wish to win, or is he giving them all up to the meat wagon?
But then, like an invisible restraint around his neck, for every wavering thought, his mind control reasserts itself. No. No questions.
“As the one true King bids.”
Raising his hand to direct some of the ghouls and abominations, his concentration is rended as a result of clatter in an adjoining hallway. It would be nothing of great anxiety, if it were not for the truth that it isn’t gelling in the angle of the forward corridor, but the wall to the east.
“What’s that activity?”

Hareja’s feedback delays, but she is as firmly untouched when she does, as he’d describe her any other day.
“Invaders.”
But a second behind the definition, the steel wall amid them and this corridor is ruptured by an icy ‘fire’ from some creature outside. It is so chilly that its acridity can erode the durability of the metal.

Afterwards, a colossal skeletal figure thrusts inside, a frost wyrm that overshadows what he has been provided, whose consequential roar brings panic into the lower minions. Is this one of the traitors from the Ebon Blade? When the hell did they acquire a wyrm this humongous?

An azure-scaled drake hops in after the wyrm, and with the fissure on the wall, several cheering crusaders, Horde warriors and Alliance soldiers ring her, to assail the Scourge opponents.

Invaders indeed, notwithstanding that Germark had figured they were due for an attack from the doorway and not a flank that didn’t exist. There’s an argument to be made that none of this army is as fatuous as his boss had made them out to be.

“Forward, warriors of the Scourge! You cowards. Stop wavering and get in there! We won’t suffer them to embarrass us and wreck the King of this land’s resources! Annihilate-“

But during the procedure of preempting his own aggression, his eyes close onto someone who treads into the center, a high elf he’s crisscrossed with on an earlier day. A woman who earned his esteem.

“Shadespire.”

Trienza is up and about to a mediate island inside this residence, moving with a conformingly unshaken gait that she’s resonated with since day one. Although for all her ostensible conviction, Germark used to get an impact from her which bespoke of an unstated sorrow, that correlates with the cry of her runeblade.

“Steeljaw. Still alive.”

“It was a fool’s errand to show up here. You had better business shambling into a new crypt somewhere and never go down this road again. The Lich King does not forgive.”

“Nor do I.”

The certainty to her defiance does ring nicely, he’ll cop to that.

“The joint you had for your exercises is not far away from where we’re stood. Your mistake was filtering such an abundance of knights, as here they are, strapped down to rip you apart. The leagues they’re at now, they could very well be a cut or two above you.”

Trienza sweeps the dozen or so neighboring death knights that he stakes out.

“We’ll see how far that extends, won’t we?” She hauls up her sword, Viri’valheen, steering the tip at them, and it croons. “Come then, knights of the Scourge! Take your best shot at your former handler! Show me your rage!”

“Hareja!”, barks Germark. “Keep those dragons in check!”

“As you will, Enforcer”, utters the val’kyr. She points at the massive frost wyrm and her own surges at Ryanegosa.

“Spiderlord, guard the phylacteries! Don’t give these tuskless bastards the freedom to touch ‘em, or it’ll be you that the King chokes the life out of and reanimates as a moving training dummy.”

Bexorz emits a couple of clicking sounds.

“Our lives for the Scourge.”

At Trienza’s rearguard, the Scourge can glimpse and catch words of Wilthorn dictating the actions of the larger bulk of their squads out in the main corridors, at the side of Melia. They’ve opted to progress into this locale with solely a fragment.
Germark transfers his bearing to come up at Trienza, taking ahold of his axe and mentally preprograms himself to wrestle with her. He’s an old veteran, that’s indisputable, but Trienza is a seasoned warrior of centuries, who hadn’t even blasted off from her prime years by the time of her death. Elven cycles are so bizarre to him. They’re just like the draenei in that sense.

Except, he makes a blunder in this guess, for in place of Trienza, a separate woman roars, hoists her weapon and forces herself onto his lane with a greataxe that slams into his. To begin with, Germark busts her weapon aside and looks ready to discard her, until he directs his visuals onto her visage and a bang goes off in his head – he sees the fury-filled likeness of Khroga, his daughter.

No, that can’t…

His daughter. His…darling girl. His future.
And suddenly, a typhoon opens in his faculties - he recalls it in an instant, the pride he saw in her. The day she was born, the days of their sparring sessions, granting her very first axe, how she soon outmatched him in speed and guile. When she was admitted as an apprentice shaman, he cried tears of joy, for the honor afforded to her and that a girl of his would be more for their people than he ever was, would revivify the old ways, free of Legion perversion.
She’s nevertheless shorter than him today, but she has grown in the years since he last laid his eyes on her. Not physically – she was an adult by then – but she has scars lined up on her face, her hands steelier, her eyes instilled with a tinge of-

But then the necromantic grip is reinstated. No, he has no child, no home, no family, nothing to revert to. He lives for the Lich King. He dies for the Lich King. For a good margin of seconds, they profess nothing, all but drilling their stares at each other’s hides. Then, at last, he grits his teeth.
“You should’ve stayed at home, whelp.”

Her nostrils flares.
“And you oughta have gone nowhere from your damn grave.”
Compressing her teeth, she brings up the axe and whacks it into his, which he parries handily.

“The ancestor traditions of your clans are powerless here. The Lich King and his will alone rule this land. Flee or join me.”

“No before I’ve torched your body this time.”

Her words sting something fierce. It’s out of places that they would, but they manage to. Does she despise him now? No, it’s liable to be that she’s conscious of him becoming the Lich King’s pawn. Good, then. More untroublesome and detached for them both.
With her words, a searing wind engages in her midst, ringing and flailing about her, joggling her black mohawk and smaller tails, as well as strengthening her arms.
She smashes the axe by him at a second occasion, but merely up to his retreat. He’s depended on to organize their defenses too and can’t trifle with this kid all day.
“Soldiers of the Scourge, at my line. We’re gonna-“

“No!”, she yells towards him, bewildering the older man. “They have no position in our challenge. This is between you and me.”

“How thickheaded are you, little cub? You expect attention, do you? You’re an enemy of the Scourge, of my master. I couldn’t care less for your petty-“

She fastens the axe in a canal onto his.
“I challenge you to mak’gora!”
He’s taken aback. Aged, times-past memories flood his mind. Mak’gora? Isn’t that…?
No, she couldn’t have said this. That’s not what such a style of fight is for. He snorts jaggedly.
“What are you yapping about, huh? This is not Horde territory, girl. You’re in Icecrown, jewel of
the Scourge. Your laws and customs don’t apply to the Lich King’s headquarters.”

She raises her head and chest in a contrarian manner.
“Spare me your crap. You and I are gonna fight, and it’s gonna be a duel. This is the way of it. Or
are all the Lich King’s toys whimpering morons?”

Some breed of fierceness stirs in him, a grade of realization. Maybe this could…
And then he narrows his sight.
“Mak’gora is to the death.”

Khroga nods firmly.
“To the death.”

“The soldiers of the dead will not submit to your orders, given the chance that I fall.”

“Makes no difference to me. It’s you I want, nothing else.”

Good, she has an eye for tradition. He feels…oddly proud. But outwardly, he grunts, and any
Scourge lackey not currently engaged gets a wave from him.
“Take care of the living, but don’t interfere with my concerns. This is only for us.”

Hareja stares at him from her heights in the upper tier of the room.
“Enforcer, kill that sack of meat. In the name of the Lich King.”

He does not answer her. He’s set on Khroga and gestures with his runeaxe.
“One weapon, no outsiders. No other rules.”

Khroga cinches the battleaxe in her hands and bobs her head.
“Done.”
And so, it begins. With a war cry, Khroga launches at him, blade held aloft.

It’s during this one-on-one in which she experiences three instances that move her to be skeptical of
the grip on her father’s mind.
In the process of the first, he enacts the primary level of the defensive work. He blocks, parries,
knocks her away, but he doesn’t slash. He doesn’t make a single dent.

Once the axe in Khroga’s fingers heads in vicinity of his face, he catches onto a specific detail.
“That’s Magokash. My axe.”

“Was your axe.” She kicks at his chestplate, near the abdomen.

He leaps back a step and shakes his head.
“You believe you can just up and steal a man’s weapon, kid?”

She tautens her teeth, convulsing with indignance.
“Then maybe you shouldn’t have died and left us behind, you old bastard!”
If he wondered whether she misses him, he does no longer.

This outburst is succeeded by a growl as she lays her axe down on him yet again, and Germark
abides with his self-defensive exploits, to keep her staunchly at bay. But is this rumble something
he can give his blessing to, if he considers it straight from the shoulder? Is he in the business of
losing someone dear to him? Perhaps he ought to test a theory.
“Stand down and head back to Durotar. You don’t stand a chance against an honest death knight. Besides gaining a gruesome end, I can’t see why you’d progress.”

But Khroga doesn’t hold herself in retreat. In way of raw strength, she in fact fares decently to inflict a good chunk of strain into the old man, with Magokash grinding into his armor, the hilt of his own great runeaxe or rending the floor whenever he evades. All through this showcase, though, his conduct never flickers, never even blinking.

In time, Germark ceases the impractical performance, as when he swats Khroga’s arms abroad, there is a pulse through the air. She plans to hack at him anew, but then halts upon detecting something in her proximity – whispering. It’s quiet and indistinguishable, but it’s there and she’s fairly sanguine that it stems out of her father, but not his mouth.

Then, his brow hardens, his eyes resettle and his hands clasp around the runeaxe. “As you command, my King”, he states monotonously practically like some form of automaton.

This commences the second round of her disbelief, but it doesn’t quite reveal itself by the outset. The instant that Magokash strikes his arm now, she doesn’t impact armor or rotten flesh, but a veil of ice. The axe is lodged into the frozen water and it’s more than a little troublesome trying to unhinge it.

In this procedure, Germark advances, kneeing her in the gut, and then absolutely flooring her with a fist to her face.

The shaman is tossed away, caroming against the ground, her whole countenance burning with the agony, and she gets a read on that some of the bones in her back has stiffened.

Come her next rise, she beholds as her indifferent-faced father unfastens Magokash from his body, lobs it to the ground approaching her, and then a flash coats his gaze. At that point, she discerns a mist springing in his adjacency from nowhere, which gains pace and develops into a frozen storm that orbits his own body. But though it’s inevitably the ice and wind which they represent, Khroga listens and feels her heart sink, her throat swallowing – she cannot perceive the voices of the spirits for these elements, except the howling of the abyss.

She understands now. Death knights are not simply dead warriors, their path is not limited to reveling in piles of corpses, or the suffering of their enemies – everything they control is dead. Elements, bodies, magic, whatever.

Rising to her feet and snatching the axe from the ground, she primes herself for his refreshed deployment and it does come, which she needs not doubt. Germark lumbers onward, and getting to a reduced range of him, she receives the physical and brutal impulse of the froststorm that encases him. It’s so dense that her movements are slowed, she has to slit her eyes and there are distinct testaments to that her hide is cracking and splintering below the grievous ravaging of this unnatural frost.

She heaves her axe when spotting how his runs down at her, and she blocks the initial hit, but there is such heft bolstering it that she believes her whole skeleton is rattled. Although needless to say, her father is not weighed down by his own magic and with that, her blocks are not sufficiently supplied to keep up wit him. She takes on three more, and on the eve of the fourth, it clicks into place that she won’t make it. She girds herself for the hit, but the hurt is nearly unbearable in spite of it all, as the tip of the blade tears at her stomach. A fifth is driven up to her chest, but here at least, she turns and sacrifices her side, getting sheared at her forearm and then collapses to the ground, red liquid spilling on the foot of the place.

In the fringes of the fight, Kassari gets a glimpse of it and screams. “Khrogal!”
The orc strains herself, but displays a hand. “No! Don’t come this way!”
She crushes her fist into the floor and then carries herself to her feet. She bends her fingers and erects a hand. “Northern winds, frozen storms, come to me! The gusts of the dead would take your place – don’t step aside that easily!”

The gifts of the cold north is called and her hands crackle with lightning and air currents. Conjointly, they venture to battle the gales of the dead from her father. Her axes buzz with hissing rage and on occasion, she discharges a bolt at him, or tramples his chest.
But no matter what she sends, Germark does not yield, nor does he seem to remotely budge. He’s a blockade of stone, unmoved and unswerving. She does cause some injury, she can even confirm that, but he isn’t swayed by such puny demonstrations, which stacks up, since in his dead status, his body is equally numb to outward stimuli.

With her juice turning somewhat emaciated at one stage, Germark deems it time to give back some of what he’s gotten. A cold fluctuation shimmers along his head and after blocking a hit from her one-handed, Khroga sees to her dismay how a blackened ice scythe materializes in the second. He levels it at the correct bearing and then turns it facing her. Its bloodthirst almost comes off as if it gleams in a capacity that imitates a sort of grin, as it speeds to her.

Khroga senses a clump of fear bubbling in her throat and she accurately assesses that if she gets grazed by that…well, nothing good would take place, that’s for damn sure.
As such, she abandons her guard and instantaneously drops to the floor like there’s no tomorrow, even if it might expose her to consequent attacks. She does manage to avoid the blow and furthermore, its elongated reach – at the rear of his slash, a rift in the floor blazes up, as if the scythe’s edge is so sharpened that it maims anything within five meters in front of it.

With the scythe dissolving, and Khroga safely out of its reach, she remains in danger, nonetheless. Germark boots her in the gut prior to stomping the seat of the room, fertilizing a zone of frost that stops short within ten meters or so, and yet it may engulf Khroga still and all, unless she derails it. Luckily, the ice which overlaps the walls in here is real, and she works it to her favor.
“Churning seas, I beseech you to bare your passion and the strong arms of life”, she mutters under her breath.

She courts the particles to flow down in rivulets of water and create a puddle. This wetness presently initiates a bubbling, as the pool heats up and boils, attaining a temperature where it melts the narrowest ice. When Germark’s death frost collides with the simmering current, they erupt in smoke, as two polar opposites, albeit this delivers Khroga from being swallowed.

Her own luck is pretty damned here, though, for the mist that the concussion crafts is drawn on to impede their line of sight and therefore they have to lean on other senses. Regrettably, this leaves Germark with the higher ground. Out of the blue, his cleaver segregates the smoke and swishes down against her body. She does circumvent it enough to neutralize his chances to dismember her, but she is subject to another deep and wide laceration across her torso, by the upper right side of her chest. The armor abates a segment of the overall affliction, even if this does not stop her from being flung headlong into a severe degree of purgatory.

Toppling over, Khroga lies unguarded where she fell and Germark has a clear road to a decisive victory. He saunters to where she’s reclined, upraises his weapon and trains his eyes above her, for the cavity or flesh he aspires to cleave. She’s laid out in a manner parallel to a slain beast mounted for the butchers, à la the hogs back in Durotar.
But then, the unstable and scrutinizing side of him reawakens, as for but a second, the reins are...
eased—his daughter sprawled in front of him, his only child. The girl he raised, watched grow, supervised her martial practice, bulwarked her from affectionate offers of young men and women, faced off the demons of the Burning Legion by her and her mother’s side in the Third War. That’s his family, his everything. And now he’s on the cusp of closing out her life, of never indulging her another meal, to afford a new morning, to feel warmth or the kiss of a lover…

Without explanation to Khroga, she heeds how her father has shut down every solitary motion in his body, his axe topside, but it goes unused. He doesn’t deal the killing blow. Is he wavering? Did some nugget of his devotion to her call this off? Irrelevant. This is her window. Digging her hand into a pocket, she fishes out some grains of dirt, and jacking some shamanistic energy into them, they get artificially enlarged into a collection of rock lumps, which she heaves straight into his chest, indenting his plate and thwacking him backwards, lending her temporary space.

With blood smearing her armor and furs, she rises to her feet.

“Mother of earth, keep your ears close and grant me the stability of your mountains.”

Fetching another fistful of the grains, they get enriched to compressed mantles of rock-hard soil which spreads over her arms, chest and neck, insulating her from harm.

This precedes the third leg of the clash and also the third time where she becomes irresolute of the state of her father, how mighty of a stranglehold that the Lich King really has. She busts him once more, passing the torch from axe to the enchanted arms and then comes full circle, to optimize her foray.

But though she produces a grand quantum of havoc, none of it befittingly falls into place. Germark looks unflinching in any condition and his never-ending parrying shrugs off her more burdensome stuff.

“You haven’t found your feet in this affair, kid. Lay it down now, or this will only get nastier.”

“I’ll take my damn chances, thank you very much.”

“Then pay some attention.”

In a few seconds, he drops his axe, blocks her next attacks with his wristguards and snatches her by the forearms, confining her to this foothold. He stares stringently into her face throughout the duration of what he does next—he implants one batch of fingers on the enchanted earth, drilling inside and activates a manner of internal potency.

Drawing on tremendous rates of apprehension, Khroga observes as the earth which clothes her incurs a single string of grey corruption, something that spreads and replicates at full blast and within seconds, begins deteriorating and rotting, dropping off her in chunks of barren grime.

“This is the land of the dead. And everything dies.”

Coldcocking her, she trips over for a second time around. But Khroga here grants proof of the pudding for who she is, by virtue of that she refuses to lay down. She goes all out to rise, bleeding and busted, baying her incessant furor and despite that he continues to thrash her down, three or four time in total, to the moment where she’s fully overworked, she still carries on, swinging Magokash even when there is no fuel in the fire to work it.

Sooner or later, her body rams exhaustion down her throat, so she has to sit. Hauntingly, Germark stays fresh. The dead never sleeps.

Kass is in a state of despairing now, and she has been warned not to weave her spells through this fight, but be that as it may, she won’t give the world the satisfaction to steal Khroga from her, honor be damned. Moreover, a raging battle is all in their atmosphere, so if a dash of…well,
‘cheating’ were to be at play, who’s gonna know? She won’t hand it out, at any rate.

The structure of the Citadel and its skeleton does not boast a panoply of much else than steel, saronite and ice, but for her purposes, Kass can wring some stuff out of the possessions of the Crusade. She bolts to some of the carts, and snaps up some wooden boxes that were dragged with them by healers, alchemists and such, pours out the potions and herbs to the bottom of the carts, and then brews a score of magic in her hand. She teleports a trio of containers to the steel beams twenty something meters up. After the fact, she puts the arcane into effect, gathering a decent conflagration and picks off each of the boxes, coercing them to keel right over the pocket with Khroga and Germark, startling the duo, for they hadn’t seen this coming.

Though it eludes them where this is sourced, with an outlet of real red-hot flame, Khroga can whip out another card in her arsenal.

“Wrath of the blaze, take up with me! Lend me the armaggedon of your zeal and consume my enemies!”

She entices the bristling flame to her, steeping her weapon in its wave and then lunges an orb flat into Germark’s chest. Two more are driven into him, although with the ice of the north, he is inexorable, even if it does scorch him well. This is at least until she launches the subsequent blast – the past three were mere feints, for she now transmogrifies the flame into a flash, vaguely blinding him.

“Death is inevitable, but so is the thawing!”, she sings out and rounds him, in order to get a superior angle. Will any of it carry a single ounce of punch, though, if she can’t siphon his essence? Surely, he can’t be illimitable.

But though her attacks haven’t been supremely effectual, they have built a distinct slate for him – she suddenly notices how he freezes up, shaking, as if he’s constricting himself. What does that indicate? Is he fighting back against the Lich King’s grasp, attempting to enable her to finish him off? Or did the fire trigger something in him? Doesn’t matter, as he’s now locked, not roving. With his fixed position, she compiles a slender one-meter long spike of earth, and thrusts it point-first directly into a spring in his armor, which it pierces and somewhat deepens. Whereas he staggers, she slides in behind him, kneels and manipulates the ice to trap his legs in a block of it, passably firm to ensnare him in place and keep him there. She batters his weapon away, embeds a second earth stake on a different gradient and tops the entrapment of him with spare sheet of earth, to well and truly hold him.

With it now seeming like a damned scenario for him, she grasps Magokash once again and mounts it up, to finish him. He reads as if he’s slowed down, some of his sanity returning, and no matter whether his gaze flares in blue, she sees her father’s eyes in those sockets.

“Well…well done, kid”, he taxes himself to give forth. “The elements acknowledge your strength. I…” He’s stalled by a cough. “…proud of you. Tell Shrokit…I wait for her on the other side.”

A shuddering wave comes over Khroga, and she nearly loses it, but then swallows and nods grimly.

“…I will, dad.”

He then stares deeply at her, seeming serene, at peace with what will follow.

“Now…bring me back to my ancestors. For the Horde.”

“For the Horde”, she responds, voice breaking slightly. One final verse, Magokash howls in its last call.
With her father succumbing for the last time, Khroga in due course surrenders to the cost of the overdrive she’s been in the middle of and she’s right on the path of collapse. It’s only with Kass’ speed to capture her that she doesn’t all out droop down, keeping her up by an arm at her waist, and a hand on her forearm.

“Khroga!” The orc’s face rings to Kass not purely of physical exhaustion, but a mental sprain that as likely as not could overpower her. The sin’dorei presses the shaking orc alongside her, the red rivers staining her robes, and she whispers.

“Are you…are you okay?”

Khroga’s eyes pull close and she supports her face onto Kass’ shoulder. A faint word leaves her lips and hits the mage’s ear.

“…no.”

Her voice is quavering as well, betraying her doleful heart. She possesses a mien which speaks to that she’s unsatisfied with the victory, blinking away her tears. It’s best for Kass not to get the lynx out of the bag for what she did in this one, to be on the safe side.

“We should get you a healer, darling.”

“No yet.”

The blood elf drags her sight at the trapped and headless remains of Germark.

“Do you wish to bring him home for a burial?”

But Khroga rocks her head in denial and enlists Kass’ shoulder to raise herself once more. It is modestly burdensome, but Kass weathers it.

“No, not again. We’ve already hosted one. It’s better for everyone if we don’t.” She rechannels her eyes at the blood elf. “Could you light a torch?”

Kass inclines her head tardily and lowers Khroga, complying with her request. When she makes good on it, netting a torch from the carts and igniting it with the arcane, an actual flame forms and Khroga can perceive the elements crinkling. She then guides the spirits of earth to situate her father and his head with respect, prior to praying to the fire to do its work. As it eats below the armor, devouring the rotten flesh, the shaman slots Magokash on his chest. She presses her hand onto this spot and whispers.

“Ancestors, guide him back onto your plains and give him a place among you. What he deserves.”

Upon finishing, Kass assists her in getting on her feet.

“You’re…sure about this?”

The orc stares at the pyre he’s soon being subsumed into and dips her head, cheers of the Ashen Verdict’s victory in this zone of the Citadel thrumming around them.

“Nothing but the fury was left. I’m leaving that where it is.”
A fragmented soul

Victory. Conquest. For the first time in what may be passed off as decades or even centuries, the land of Icecrown is topped up on the ruckus of joyous festivities, musicians singing, instruments playing, and transient inhabitants cheering in relief and assuagement. A plentitude of these hearty people are not solely intent on partying off the back of their resounding success, but the validity of what will follow – they’re going home. No more undead plague, armies at their doorsteps, or despots to lay away. They can at long last egress this continent, pick up their daily lives and jobs, and shut the gate to consternations of the northern wastes.

A week has transpired since the defeat of the Scourge’s overlord, the toppling of his standing forces and the freeing of the world from the yoke of the frost-bound shadow. Once he was undone, the Ashen Verdict travelled in chorus up to the northeast and the Heat of Dawn outpost, to string together and enact a massive romp of festivities, the largest which the north has viewed or faced in a few lifetimes. The losses for both sides were off the scale, with members of the Horde, Alliance, Argent Crusade and Ebon Blade having no way of walking out of this clean, to be sparse on scars, wounds, mutilations and broken souls. No one will scratch the Battle of Icecrown Citadel from their minds in living memory.

Some of those who did not see tomorrow will be cared for, buried and mourned, but ahead of bitterness and grief strides joy, the buzz and exhilaration of how countless of them have hung onto life and the Scourge is now a name that can be consigned to the history books, rather than at the recurrent forefront. It’s a momentous day.

Rivaryn was not one of those who had a slice of the action in rising to the Lich King’s challenge, but she has been reported to more than once from secondary sources that her teacher was. She can appreciate her own sense of letdown, though, that she wasn’t present. Participating to lodge a couple of bullets into the monster who ruined her home would’ve felt…cathartic, but perhaps it’s for the best to delight in that he’s gone for good.

Riv and her team accompanied the Verdict back to the Heat of Dawn post-battle, but they’ve tarried in the outskirts of the camp. Neither of those there are party animals or much into crowds, Riv least of all.

During the dining procedures of the team, with Thariss also serving some grub to Razz and Ilca, Riv excuses herself for a minute, as she has a yen for the company of another woman.

She swans off to scout for Trienza, resolved to address her on the nitty-gritty of the events at the crest of the spire. She would’ve engaged this preliminarily, but there was a certain dissociative streak to the Commander throughout the trip north, as if she was locked in reflection and there wasn’t really anything Riv could retrieve. All she was fit to do was sit on the waiting list. But today, she explores the social isles where Trienza might have treaded, leading off with the Ebon Blade convoy that had companioned the living and Forsaken, in part for the kegger. However, none of them had spotted their superior, only calling attention to that Trienza had been remarked departing from the outskirts of the camp, but where she roamed, no one could determine.

With no one else to rely on, Riv judges herself the only candidate. She’s more familiar with the high elf than anyone. Well, the old one, anyway. Where would Captain Sah’nrir have meandered to?

Roaming to the northwestern reaches, she does indeed discover the auburn-haired Commander positioned a couple of meters afield of the cliffside of this plateau, dreaming herself out past the
rippling waves of the North Sea. Viri’valheen is buried in front of her in the snow, one hand laying atop the pommel, the other palming the hilt.

For a couple of quiet seconds, Riv does nothing but stare at her ex-superior, the woman who gave her so much wisdom, strength, a reason to life outside of her petty family and disappointment. Has that Trienza dwelled here on Azeroth, the unassailable shield of the south, or is this an independent one? It matters, because Riv no longer comprehends what Trienza is prone to achieve with this war at its dissolution.

She’s coming up on a comment when Trienza somehow outpaces her and speaks first.
“Did I stress you out, Sergeant?”, she says calmly.

Riv coughs and rubs her own neck.
“Uh…just a touch, Captain.”

“Fret not. I don’t mean to jump.”

Riv blinks, aghast at that and realizes the knight is signifying the cliff.
“W-what? I…that’s not what I-…”

Trienza gives off a subdued laughter. Did she just pull a jest?
Exhaling softly, the high elf speaks absentmindedly.
“I used to wander to this frontier around the days when the Lich King discharged me on exercises with the recruits I was honing. I was pulled here by intrinsic desires, ones I failed to rationalize, to the silence. For all I know, it was an implicit longing. Clueless, to be sure – no Sunwell populates anything up here, but in my brain, it may have been a self-swindle.”

A zest trickles into Riv’s chest – this is the Trienza she followed, the woman who opened up to few but Riv, Efaria, her parents and brother. One who loved Quel’Thalas enough to die for it.
“Are you doing okay?”

The blue fire of her eyes deviates to Riv.
“To what end would this make you uneasy?”

“Well, I caught wind of that you fought at the peak of the throne, in the final fight.”
The hunter thinks back on her own escapades in the arctic hallways, that she couldn’t heel Trienza as she was netted in a struggle with a rage of Frostbrood and upper infantry, tangling near the crusades from Melia and Ash’s squadrons, and the ebon knights under Wilthorn’s command.

The Commander snorts.
“Yes, I was in attendance at the last round”, she confirms. “I watched the sunset of the Lich King, as he faltered and lost his crown.
Not that it was an individual effort – roughly fifty of us had managed to climb our way to the apex, including Ryanegosa, to clash against him and some of his handpicked champions.”

“Who else was with you?”

“Hmm. Keeping track was…unruly. We mainly trailed Fordring when he pointed the path for us upwards. I glimpsed some Horde and Alliance tabards, a few crusaders. I noted Darion, as expected, because I gave him a heads-up that I was going, whether he wanted me to or not. Ryanegosa told me the same thing.
If I’m not wholly mistaken, I could swear I observed General Windrunner bolting after us at the back, prior to our rise, but I didn’t register her in the fighting. The wind was howling too gratingly and Arthas initiated some form of thick snowy cloud that made everyone half-blind.”
“General? Uh, you mean…the Banshee Queen?”

Trienza grunts.
“Yes, yes, whatever she names herself now”, she dismisses annoyedly. “Besides that, I couldn’t pick the rest out, nor was it of any concern. Ridding the world of that fiend on the throne was the prize and I was hypnotized by the contest.”

“Did it go well the whole way through?”

The quel’dorei shakes her head.
“It was a close call. The Lich King’s strength was…immense, world-shaking. We had foreseen that he wouldn’t make it easy, but this was worse, many times worse. We were on the precipice of tipping the scales in the wrong angle several times.
Turns out, his grand design was not restricted to slaying our nations down south – it was a trick, a bait.”

Riv flinches.
“Hang on, what? You’re saying he wanted us here?”

“Oh, he did. He’d toyed with us, that smug bastard…
His quest was to test and stockpile the grandest, strongest and cleverest champions of the living and free undead, heap us into a single venue and then reap us all. Reanimate us into his new champions. And he would’ve lived out his dream too, if not for his underestimation of the Ashbringer. In fact, the whole bunch of us had not done that blade justice. I believed it was simply a flashier sword to slay Scourge with, but…it rocked the foundations of the overall engagement, and cracked Frostmourne. And then, unexpectedly, he was down. We’d won.”

Riv’s gaze is momentarily inattentive. To think that the ‘great’ tyrannizer and mass murderer of Quel’Thalas would expire so…abruptly. No fanfare or cursing or upending of the world’s rhythm. He’s just…gone. Riv had presumed perhaps that she’d absorb a goodlier sensation of ease and uplifting, now that it’s through, but she can’t espouse that she’s swayed in either bearing. It doesn’t clear her of the memories, the scars, the darkness wreaked by her family’s atrocities. She’s not engulfed by disenchantment either. It’s simply empty.

“So…you helped avenge Quel’Thalas.”

Trienza lingers on this line for ten seconds or so, before she scoffs.
“Hmph. ‘Revenge’. I don’t see why that would be a priority for me, or any one of us. No, I wasn’t there to get back at him for what he caused, or to satisfy the fallen’s pining. I did it because it had to be done. Because I don’t want another Quel’Thalas, or worse. And now it’s past us. He’ll never harm a soul again.”
The spirit of duty, evermore.

“Are you…unsatisfied that you didn’t get to deal the killing blow?”

“Don’t be absurd. I didn’t care for that in the least. When have I ever, hmm? It was not my intent. To tell you the truth, I didn’t receive the opportunity to strike him even once – I was bogged down in throes with his foremost frost vrykul champion, an ugly bearded mammoth of a man. I slew the cur twice, but he rose both times by the Lich King’s behest. Succeeding the second occasion, Frostmourne’s strength corralled us and I feared it was through for our struggle, to the point which Fordring gained his freedom and Ashbringer drowned the arena in Light. I’ve never had an eye or interest for the human church’s drivel about it, nor why any of our kin would harken to it, but that display was…certainly something.”
Then, Trienza browses her former student.
“And you? Were you well, in the course of the fighting?”

The hunter nods faintly.
“I was, albeit with a couple of snags at times. Thariss pulled me out of those, though, and I obviously paid her back in kind. Nadel and Rax weren’t too far off from us either, but Rax’s paladin aptitude was necessary in more places.”

The Commander rubs her gauntlet at the lower fragment of her chin, looking down at the snow.
“That woman is…extraordinary in her devotion to you, surpassing what I had inferred. It could be that she…might serve as an acceptable wife to you, after all.”

Wow. Riv is now taken aback. Mild flattery for her lover, from Trienza? Not even Kassari full-on bestowed the kaldorei with that, not until months later, anyway. Riv smiles with a flicker of hope.
“You…you seriously mean that?”

“I do. Now, don’t take this out of context and assume I approve of the thought of her…proclivities. But she’s decent to you, she does a good job at deriving smiles from you and makes you feel safe. That’s enough.”

A tremor tinkles by way of Riv’s chest and she nearly tears up in excitement, if it were not for that it’d make both awkward. Instead, her smile widens.
“Thank you. Truly.”

Trenza sweeps her hand in the air.
“Pff. Stop it.”

Riv goes all in to restrain herself for a few seconds, prior to following through on the conversation.
“Do you aim to re-establish your previous mantle, but in the Ebon Blade now? As a trainer, that is.”

The Commander, filled with sobriety, shakes her head.
“No, my teaching days are over.”

Riv’s extended ears list backwards.
“How come? You’re not a member of the Scourge any further. And you’ve consistently claimed being an instructor was your calling, right? Unless I got it backwards, then this could come through for you, reclaim some of what you lost of yourself. That’s what was gnawing at you before, wasn’t it?”

With a contemplative muteness at first, and then a profound expelling of air, Trienza swaps to a mellower tone.
“It’s not…the same these days. I wish it could be, but… You didn’t see me out there, dorei’nan, what I brought off, what I…” She shifts one of her gauntlets, rotating it upwards and stares into its palm. “…permitted my own hands to execute on my students.” Riv now catches emotion in that pitch, boding heartbreak.
“I… I shamed my trade, Rivaryn. I spat on the whole of my creed, on what I’d vowed to never do. The way in which a teacher can’t be authorized to act or work with her own damn students. It was…” She breathes in sharply. “How could I ever look at another would-be knight or warrior or whatever, without keeping in mind what these hands have inflicted? No, I shan’t. I never will again. If my essence wasn’t frozen, I would incinerate myself to death of the humiliation.”

Riv feels for her, as much as them. She was cognizant of the love Trienza held for her trainees, that she was harsh with them because she cared, because she hoped they would grow stronger and not
be weighed down by traumatic memories. The Lich King’s journey for her changed that.

“Trying to lift them out of the gloom, Riv tries to sketch a solution. “What is your aim from now on, then?”, she speaks with care.

The Commander takes a good look on her own scene, what there is for her here.

“In all honesty, I don’t rightly know. With the Lich King extinct, my purpose has been chipped away. It’s…up for debate. What is there for the dead knights in the dark, if not war and carnage? Will the world in all seriousness require horrors such as us in it?”

Riv bites at her lip.

“What you guys represent isn’t for nothing. Azeroth will continually have need for protectors and stalwart watchers for danger.”

Trienza huffs drearily.

“Protectors? You really believe the living – barring you and your friends – want us as a shoulder to lean on? Warped monster warriors who feed on suffering and bring forth the necromancy which rattles their legs? Even the Forsaken jump at our approach. I’ve seen their faces, their downturned glimpses. The Ebon Blade has no home anywhere on this world.”

The hunter hems and haws in this circumstance. Though she was distressed at learning of Trienza’s rise from the grave, the weeks she’s spent near the knight have in some ways…recuperated her vitality, the building blocks which constructed Riv pre-invasion. Kassari, uncle Calanis, his wife and her cousins gave her the warmth of family; Ashindra provided her with physicality and lust; the Farstriders fitted her with friendship; her pets – like Khevala – forged companionship and trust in her heart. But Trienza? She taught her discipline and courage. She was Riv’s confidence. Losing her once almost broke Riv, setting her off course, to where her sails were straight up torn. What would come to pass if she went away once more, ahead of genuine healing?

Trienza is still staring at the seas, with a minute of dead air floating by them, until she is struck by the event that comes to surround her in a second. Riv’s arms move up behind her, sliding and resting above her shoulders and entwining in front of her chest, with the sin’dorei’s head tilting into the back of hers, hugging her tightly.

Trienza freezes, her eyes widening. This is…new. Well, not per se, not in her entire lifespan, but how many times have these two hugged? Twice, in several decades of cooperation, at best? Trienza is not a terribly huggable woman. Plus, she’s now dead.

And furthering this, she pricks her ears up to the whispered wind of Riv’s plea. “Please…don’t go anywhere, Captain. I couldn’t bear to—...I need you.”

It might come off as mildly selfish to cite something like this, as if she ought to live for Riv, but for Trienza, it is stirring. She is not left to being a nuisance, an unwanted ghost or a pale shadow of someone who was once loved, but a person who is welcome in this world after all, if only by one woman so far. Trienza doesn’t respond, couldn’t even begin to fathom what she’d say that would be up to the task, and hence she performs what she knows – she takes Riv’s hand and squeezes it softly.

They stick to this spot and angle for conceivably two minutes, before Riv slips her hands into retreat. “I’m heading back to the others. You…you can come with me, if you’d like.”

Trienza coughs and finds her voice once more. “Thank you, but…I’ll linger here for a while. Clear my mind.”

“Alright. You know where we’ll be, though, right?”
“Mm.”
And then, as Riv intends to leave, tucking her clothes closer at herself once more, Trienza reaches out.
“Sergeant, before you go.”

Riv blinks at her, a semblance of wonder.
“Yes, Captain?”

Trienza pulls in air, with no consideration to the pointlessness of the act.
“Do you recall our last conversation?”

The hunter’s greens bolt side to side questioningly.
“I…what? Yesterday?”

“No. My final words to you. Do they come to you now?”

Oh, right. Not the last in the present – the last in life. Trienza’s life.
Riv’s ears and eyebrows flag.
“…they haunt me still, yes.”

“Tell me, what happened? What happened to…” Does she stop to swallow? “…to Efaria?” Riv bites her lower lip at the question. “After I was freed from the Lich King’s grasp, I visited the Undercity and requested an excerpt from the registry of Quel’Thalas’ fatalities during the invasion. They’d been struggling for years to assemble it, and some had been distributed to the Forsaken, in light of their mass of quel’dorei. It was incomplete, but not inadequate. Her name…her name was on it, yours was not. I thought…I thought I was clear.”

Riv hesitates, her eyes shutting, and her body visibly quivers when she’s extorted to conjure up these stark, insidious portraits of the worst days in her existence. She had promised Trienza, her superior, her—

Regardless, it should come as no surprise that she wouldn’t have found out the reality of the phenomenon. After all, who else but Riv is alive to tell the tale?

With several seconds passing, Riv’s voice is a murmur.
“She…refused to go.”

“…pardon?”

“She wouldn’t leave with me, Captain. I told her what you asked of me, what elapsed on the battlefield, what I saw with my own eyes, but she…she wouldn’t listen. She refused to evacuate with me, and though I tried to make her, she pushed me back. She said to me that you…”
Riv has to cease her retelling and presses her lips together, to hold herself. She can’t cry now, not in this. It would only devolve it beyond the reaches of this dreadfulness.
“She said you’d never lose her. That you two were one. You wouldn’t…you wouldn’t disembark this world without her. So, she would wait in Silvermoon. That’s…the last I saw of her.”

Trienza’s subsequent lull and quietude is eerie, practically alarming. Not that she’s never been a bit unnerving in light of her present status, but at this, Riv thought she was in for more. Outrage, an explosion, a censure. But no, it’s barren.
Once what feels like an eternity has whizzed by, she speaks.
“I see”, she states flatly. “Thank you.”

“Captain…”
“That’s it, Sergeant. Nothing else.”
Okay, better not intrude then. She doesn’t wish to talk, not right now. Riv bows her head and with a vacancy of extended words, she spins and departs the scene, leaving Trienza to it.

The minute where Riv has left the zone, now out of sight, Trienza releases the stone-cold grip on her blade lodged in the ground and drifts aside, her arms and legs trembling, her mind spinning. Where no one can see, the Strike-Commander collapses to her knees, into the snow, finally beaten.
Take heartened wing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hundreds of meters above ground with naught but open space in between, the air racing past her at such brisk pace that her curls rock wildly and her heart is firmly rooted in her throat, her sizable hands and fingers clutching whatever outcropping she can hustle up on the back of this much more gigantesque being that she’s straddling.

What Raxeen hadn’t had on her cards in the week behind their decampment of Icecrown is that she’d be souring sheer across the skies of Dragonblight in the proximity and practically also at the plea of her girlfriend. But here she is, settled on the back of the mighty blue drake, stretching herself to not solely commit her body to holding her grip, but to absorb the scenery.

Walking on the heights of the world like dragons do is a surreal factor to Rax, a fusion of indecipherable fear and towering fervency. She loves being rested at this altitude, but she also disdains it. Draenei aren’t meant to hang this high up. She can articulate why the dragons relish it so, though, the freeing gusts and the ambience of that they are at the top of realms, with nary a thing to stand in disobedience. They govern the canopy of this land, no one else.

Rax is cautiously acclimatizing to the circumstances as well, as this is now one of multiple events where she’s ridden her girlfriend, literally speaking. Another was at the battlefield of Icecrown, where Nadelgosa lavished it in arcane fire and Rax heaved spears and hammers of refulgent and singeing Light. It was splendid to behold, as she’s been informed.

But in the here and now, Rax’s concentration is on the terrain which runs beneath them, and in particular, a location to the east, which jars with the rest of the landscape.

“That sandy spot. Is that another dragonshrine?”

Nadel cranes her neck in that vector, her wings continually erected to capture and take advantage of the rushing wind pressure.

“Yes! It belongs to the bronze flight, their leader being Nozdormu, ‘the Timeless One’. They patrol and oversee the passage of the timelines. They can literally travel through them.”

Rax smiles faintly at the notion.

“Time travelers? You dragons are…peculiar figures indeed.”

“The Titans bestowed us with the role of supervising Azeroth, and that implicates more than the gardens and roads.”

But as they cruise south, Rax points at a forested section in adjacency to the sea.

“Is that not a garden?”

“It’s a tiny forest, which I believe would weigh as more than one. However, it is affiliated with the green flight.”

“Green? They are related to nature?”

“Well…yes. I imagine that was quite blatant. Their sovereign is Ysera, ‘the Dreamer’, and they stand as guardians of the natural world and the Emerald Dream.”
Emerald? Rax doesn’t state it, but that is another oddity. What she hangs onto, though, is the former classification.
“Did you say…Ysera?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Hmm. The manner in which you enunciate it, is…similar to a draenei phrase.”

“Not utterly confusing, fundamentally. Plenty of languages sometimes coalesce on pronunciations of dissimilar words. What is it in your tongue?”

Rax stalls for a second, mulling it over, and then chuckles.
“In draenei, it is spelt ‘Y-h-z-e-r-r-a’. It is a variety of…detergent, I suppose? It is utilized to scrub the underside of our hooves, by and large. Quite expedient too.”

Stupefied by that, Nadel gasps.
“You…you can’t say that regarding the Dreamer! She’s an Aspect!”

The paladin giggles at this bite-sized outrage.
“That the greens’ caretaker among my people would awaken conceptions of what we clean our ‘feet’ with? I do not discern how that would be our misstep.”

“Just don’t mention it! Wait, you know what? I’m not going to even introduce you to her.”

“You do not surmise it would hold even a fraction of comedic value? I believe it would.”

With Rax marching on with her laughter, Nadel bends her neck and squints at her girlfriend, until a devious tactic forges in her head.

The next thing the draenei knows, she’s impelled to cling even nearer to the scaled body, as Nadel has shifted into a free fall, diving at full tilt, dead on for the ice and snow-cover upon the surface of Dragonblight. Rax senses not plainly panic in the cavities of her mind, but misapprehension. What’s going on? How come it all lapsed with such instantaneity? Did something hit her beloved or what in the Light’s name-

Rax nearly capitulates her hammer in the course of the drop, but she clasps it and two seconds later, Nadel once more fans out her wings ten meters from the ground, masterfully catching the trails of gusts in the environment and avails herself of them to carry her forward, sweeping along the aerial routes and bringing about a shockwave below, the pressure splitting and dispersing the snowland in every which way by a straight line, as if someone barreled a sword at lightning speed against it.

After that, she arises anew.

As soon as she resurges to a couple of hundred meters elevation, Rax smashes a hand into Nadel’s cast-iron hide and scolds her.
“Rhavjaka! You should not dabble in dangerous ploys such as that!”

But now Nadel cackles, a sound that echoes with half-hisses too.
“You were laughing at one of the honored Aspects! Thus, I’m hereby laughing at you. Ha-ha! Karma, you see.”

“You shocked me, Nadia!”

Nadel elevates her head to a proud level.
“Teaches you not to tease a dragon, the masters of the heavens!”

“This is…this is unrighteous.”
“It’s not.”

Soon thereafter, she levitates to a cliffside to the east, a laughter stuck in her throat and her tail flipping side to side, with an amused-not-amused Rax jumping off before long, setting down their bags and her hammer. She can’t rightly obfuscate a loose smile, as a response to Nadel’s joy. Though it grates her at the present time, glimpsing a happy Nadel is interminably an excellent view.

The hulking drake then positions her rear on the snowy precipice, her wings fluttering beguilingly, and she tilts her head in a downwards slope, so that she’s accessible for the draenei. Rax swivels her head, raising her lips and kisses Nadel’s snout, previous to driving her own head softly into the drake’s, one horn each nudging narrowly, albeit the drake’s conspicuously way more massive.

“Sorry, dear”, says Nadel.

“It is alright. I often neglect that you hide a real trickster under that haughty shell.”

“Pff. So do you, my sweet oh-so-honorable paladin.”

The drake abruptly morphs into her high elven form, now noticeably littler than the draenei, draws her arms along Rax’s shoulders and gets tugged in by the waist, as they lose themselves in a kiss.

It’s peculiar, but also quite pleasing what a reflexive act this has become for the last several weeks, to find themselves in each other’s arms and not have to bother as to the variables of the past. Rax hasn’t had anyone this sentimentally attached to her in…well, decades now. Perhaps pushing a century if she’s being honest.

When they splinter temporarily, Nadel regards her.

“Are you chilly?”

Rax nods lightly.

“A bit, yes.”

The drake fetches one of their bags she carried and fishes out some cut-up wood that they’d collected prefacing this flight, and in harmony, they work up a fireplace with Nadel generating flames from the arcane to light it up. Meanwhile, Rax grabs a blanket from the pack, loops it over herself and gets seated, her legs mildly spread. Nadel slides in between them, and with the paladin’s arms ringing her, she leans in. To the right of them, Kerashta Rakkan is resting against the wall, and to the west, the vast vacuum of Dragonblight sprawls out, with the sporadic hill, antique bones or rocky spire, and Wyrmrest a few miles down.

Embracing Nadel, Rax pores over the immensity of the white scene.

“It is quite spectacular. For a graveyard, of course”

“Yes, I concur with you. It’s eerily silent at that, but it’s the warranted and correct kingdom of the dead, as they ought not be disturbed. I’m relieved that this is now regressing to where it’s suited to be.”

Considering the dead, Rax glances at her partner, stroking a hand along the shorter azure hair.

“I recall lady Ryanegosa’s night elven shape possessed horns. Why do you not showcase the same? Are you…too young?”

Nadel shakes her head sparingly, but indulges the touch.

“That isn’t how it works. Anyone can conjure up a pair of horns on oneself, if they’re so inclined. I’m merely not into it. I leave the scales upon myself as a manner of decoration, to exhibit my affiliations, but horns are, to me, pushing it.”
“Well, I am charmed by it, in any case. From my viewpoint, your spots and scaled accessories are gorgeous.”

The drake glows mildly.
“Mm, I’ve picked up on that. And I’m obliged.”

With this, Rax inclines down, in proximity of the neck, and plants sensitive, smooth and passionate kisses by it, whereas Nadel latches her eyes and moans faintly, congruent with a miniscule rush of air.
The drake then herself gains Ryanegosa on the mind.
“I hadn’t invested myself in an assessment of her, but now, I think she is…fascinating.”

“You appeared more at convenience with her towards the windup.”

“Yes, I was. She was alarming to begin with, as hot-blooded as the stories had posed of her, but I appreciated her candor. She plied what she needed to and ostensibly, she was in attendance at the last struggle with the Lich King. She snatched her vengeance, which was a fair deal. What I can’t determine, though, is what she seeks to enact from now on. I wouldn’t picture that she could live together with us, nor would she be eager to. She’d forever be viewed as an outcast in whatever blue sanctuary she lodged in, irrespective of the whirls given not to make it so. Then again, I will at least be required to moot it with my grandfather.”

“Indeed. Will Senegos despise her?”

“No, not him. My grandfather is kindhearted, nearly to a fault. He’ll condole with her, presumably, but it’d be a stretch to take her as one who is pleased by pity.”

Rax nods.
“Well, that is quite assuring to hear. And the blue dragonflight in general? It has been bereaved of its preeminent member, yes? As the Aspects are, as I understood it, critical.”

With sunken eyes, Nadel breathes in.
“Yes. I haven’t quite been able to ingest it. It’s…uncanny. Unimaginable. No one in the history of our kin has ever had its monarch fall. We blues have throughout my life been at a decline; or more appropriately, an already diminished state. I had heard yarns of our glory days, but never viewed them. And now…
In any case, his gifts were in all probability preserved by lady Alexstrasza and the remaining Aspects. Ah, perhaps not Neltharion, but the three who hang onto loyalty. My flight will in this state be bound to arrange some style of election, with representatives from every brood there is."

“Who would they elect for such a position? Your grandfather?”

Nadel’s head oscillates slightly.
“No, he’s much too old. In this procedure, he would’ve likely been transformed into true eternality, but he would not accept it. He lives for his family, not the authority. Though I could formulate a decent range of candidates.”

“Such as?”

“In my mind, Azuregos – Ryanegosa’s father - is emphatically one choice. He’s one of the greatest protectors of our artifacts, assigned by lord Malygos himself millennia past.
Another is Arygos, the senior of Malygos’ children, who’s gained his father’s expertise for leylines.
Tarecgosa is a third, the matriarch of the Marinescales, a powerful brood in western Kalimdor.
The last on my list is Halehgosa, third consort of Malygos and matriarch of the Mazthoril brood.
some say the wisest behind Senegos.”

“Not Deradgos?”

Nadel chuckles softly.
“No, not precisely. I love my brother, look up to him, but I won’t ignore the truth that he’s far too young and not overtly leadership material. He wouldn’t appoint himself, nor would grandfather. It’d be a great honor, although an error in judgment.
Personally, I’d go for Halehgos. Like I mentioned just now, she’s a wise matriarch, one of the most perceptive there is, and to throw into the bargain, she was opposed to the Nexus War. When Malygos asked for her support, she told him he was vested with this gift to shield the leylines and the mortal realm, not simply the magic. She would not advocate for an Aspect who shuns the latter responsibility. Then she departed.”

Rax smiles.
“Impressive. She has moxie, then.”

“Didn’t say she wasn’t clever too.
Azuregos wouldn’t be an underqualified option per se, though he is not as widely popular as some of the others. He’s a mite…cranky.”

“Well, there is a surprise”, Rax states, but with insinuated sarcasm.

She gets the drake to giggle sweetly, as Nadel groks the joke – like father, like daughter.
“Anyway, he’s quite a solitary dragon, one could say.
As for the other two – Arygos is…obtuse. And he did go to bat for his father, so he may have forfeited already. Tarecgosa is the one I have the least on, as she’s sort of an anomaly to me. My grandfather has praised her magical strength considerably, that she’s a bit of a ‘savant’, but this is the extent of my knowledge. She’s ‘young’ too, born a few centuries after the Great War. This may be a disfavor for her.”

Rax’s lips turns upwards.
“Sounds as though there is abundance of politics ingrained here.”

“Mhm, there is. Sadly, I would not receive the opportunity to partake of the election.”

“Why not?”

“I’m overly young for starters. Secondly, and reasonably, it will be an event administered for brood leaders and/or their heirs. My brother will be present, most like.”

With a thoughtful massaging of Nadel’s hair, Rax makes inroads to another adjacent theme.
“Are you meditating to revert towards your home now, then?”

At this, the drake dithers at first, scratching her own neck, and finally shakes her head.
“I have…a different example of desire in mind.”

Turning halfway amidst Rax’s legs, she cants into the paladin’s presently un-plated chest, gazing into the white eyes and caresses Rax’s cheek, chin and down to some of the tendrils which protrude along the cervix. The draenei’s face virtually illuminates.
“And what might this fresh interest be?”

Nadel unassumingly fondles one of the tendrils, her eyes now thinly slumped to it.
“I’d want to…remain with you – and your friends, of course – in a farther…permanent capacity.”
“You would enjoy travelling with us?”

“Well, that as well. Travel, quarter, battle, have fun. Whatever it is your circle has in store, I’d hanker after this arrangement. I’m fond of my home island, but I am ever the drifter, exploring for unfamiliar places and people. For the longest period, I had…trust issues with mortals, in light of their actions. This pivoted with you – you changed the variables. You’re the first non-dragon here on Azeroth that-

…actually, you don’t hail from this world even, so perhaps that should speak to my internal confusion. Nevertheless, you’re the first to get me to come around and reconcile with what mortals are equal to and what residing in a relationship can benefit. I’ve never felt the way I care for you with anyone else. It’s…exhilarating and coincidently, a bit terrifying. But I have this reflexive appetite to explore and extend it, however long it’ll necessitate. And I’m young yet, relatively. Technically speaking, I’m on the cusp of ‘true’ dragonhood, as that is closer to a title one achieves than a corporeal evolution. I’ve all but the size and definitely the ‘intelligence’. Some of my people keep on growing for millennia, some half their lives.

For this purpose, I’m keen on observing where this could pull us, if I properly and genuinely go together with you. It’s a question I can’t shake. And at any rate, getting a mage is in order, isn’t it? You aren’t as of yet sporting an arcane caster in your little party, so I believe I can add something.”

Noting that Rax renders a pondering visage, Nadel lifts her hands, agreeable to prove herself.

“If you’re concerned for my credentials, don’t worry! I got plenty under my belt beyond combat! I can summon synthetic food and water at the snap of a finger, cast chunky arcane fires or watery elementals, telekinetically fling objects across a field, teleport us to wherever—”

She’s intervened by a laugh from the paladin and then a peck on her nose.

“You need not list your qualifications. I am a draenei, my love, an off-shoot of the Eredar. We are one of the oldest advanced species identified in the Twisting Nether, merely outmatched by ones such as yours. We have been resorting to and mastering the arcane for longer than some civilizations or even planets have existed. I may not be a mage and I have never seen Argus, but I have taken basic education on the Genedar, so I have plenty of understanding for its components.”

Nadel coughs somewhat awkwardly.

“…alright, but then you can’t underestimate me!”

At first, Rax does not react with words, but descends to capture Nadel’s lips in a kiss, which the drake is all over, shutting her eyes to luxuriate in its confines, her arms lingering near the paladin’s neck. Their foreheads then massage each other.

“This is not the cause of my pause”, she admits mildly hushed. “It is rather…myself. My own flaws. The last era where I possessed a lover, I broke that woman’s heart and failed her. With this evidence of track record, am I legitimately someone you would deliberate on dedicating yourself to? I would get your drift if this is moderately off-putting.”

But Nadel watches her lover, getting a luculent idea of that not only is she not likely to discard Rax, but furthermore that they are synonymous in many ways, both brimming with sheltered guilt. She pitches into the draenei, smooching Rax’s neck with the most delicate of strokes, which presses the sum of her passion and affection into it, and thereafter gradually voyages upwards, to Rax’s cheek.

“You pinned your faith onto me and permitted me a second chance”, she tells the paladin in a tranquil voice, “disregarding my surreptitious violation of your mind. If you can trust me in this dreadful sequence, I can make a return of this favor. I want you and I to happen, Raxeen, to grow, to be bolstered. Let’s give us that potential.”

With a thriving smile, Rax tilts nearer, now squeezing her hands along Nadel’s sides, to her hips, whilst hemming in Nadel’s lips into energetic, raring kisses.

Closing her eyelids, Nadel swishes her fingers to enchant the blanket with warmth, yanks it and
sweeps it around them, as they disappear below its cover together.

Chapter End Notes

*Regarding that list, you might ask, "what about Kalecgos, Claire?"
Hmm, nope. Not familiar with a loser by that name*
Crusade-Captain Ashindra Revenor. Hmm.
Feels out of place to even account, if she is to be well and truly honest with herself. That’s not what she had prefigured when she got charmed into signing up an approximate year previous to now, on the back of that unconscionable attack in the Plaguelands. As much as she’d like to attribute it to her own competency and practice, it wouldn’t be the least bit equitable to dismiss the centrality of one definite woman. Uh, well, reasonably two, as the Strike-Commander wouldn’t be too happy if Ash flouted her part. Sure, she doesn’t have the urge for open acclaim, but she wouldn’t abide Ash to be remiss of her bill.

But still and all, Ash wasn’t lonely in being put through a promotion, for others were equally fortunate to rise. Braktog has made Lieutenant now, and Vihara was who he deputized as his Sergeant.
And Melia, her lovely and mesmerizingly sweet girlfriend, is now Crusade-Commander, this being for the reasons of her efforts in Icecrown. Had they lost her, there is no way that Highlord Fordring and his allies would’ve even been able to perpetuate their locus for the blitz on the Lich King. Her lover will henceforth be one of the uppermost officers in the Crusade, and assuredly granted her own outpost to lord over. It’s unreal to think about, but highly merited in Ash’s mind.

And this is also the drift behind Ash this afternoon sitting in a cabin within a ship, two weeks on since the departure of Icecrown. The festivities are not cleanly polished off, but Ash had been alerted that they’re to report in to the Plaguelands and settle some matters inside Light’s Hope Chapel. She personally speculates this bears on Melia’s fresh posting, and the Commander is quite conclusively not heading out devoid of Ash. And that suited the blood elf just fine, as she’ll travel wherever her lover does or desires.

But as they boarded the ship, a couple of hours down the line, Melia said she had to ‘take care of some errands’, and asked Ash to hold tight in their joint room. She had something special to flash for the paladin, but wouldn’t tell her what. Ash was insensible what it could be, but she’d never flout a request out of Melia.
Although Ash can’t be elaborated as strictly ‘nervous’, she does sit and twiddle her thumbs in the process, faffingly puzzling over what it could express. Melia never plainly gets up to something shady in an evasive capacity, but what’s the motive for dumping Ash in this room and maintaining absence for this prolonged session?

But then, finally, the door shoots apart and in she abruptly strides, with no comment or forewarning. Her regular shoes have been kept on, but it’s what else that coats her which collars Ash’s concentration.
Swirling and shimmying astride the human’s body is a scarlet dress, sitting tight on the chest, but with a long slack skirt and sleeves, shifting into an elevated collar attached to two flat leather
epaulets, and an open space for her belly. Embroidering the totality of the piece are trimmed golden lines and stripes, even upon the shoulders, including a golden metal lining on top of the chest area, which furthermore sports two small wings, representing the phoenix. Her sash at the midriff is outfitted with a tiny emerald orb, though it’s unclear whether it’s a true gemstone or merely glass.

With her entry, Melia smiles, albeit shyly, and she dances around a bit, tucking her hands onto her side, with Ash staring at her in wonderment and stark awe. This isn’t a simple two-piece dress – it’s a <i>sin’dorei-sewn</i> dress. The materials, the handiwork of the metal, the leather and the accessories, the wings, and the infused symbol on the back – either it’s someone instructed in sin’dorei craftsmanship or this is taken from Quel’Thalas.

“Uh, yeah”, says the Commander, “before you ask, it is a lil’ constricted, especially on the chest with the metal bits and the hem on the waist. Believe it was made for someone thinner than me.” And Ash would say she’d guessed accordingly that it is in fact a piece of clothing for a body not quite as thick and curvy as hers, but from Ash’s viewpoint, it’s grand. Once Ash has stared for a few seconds, Melia coughs.

“So…what’d you think?”, she asks excitedly. “Is it worth having around or uh…?”

Ash is overrun by the show itself, and this isn’t confined to the design and measure of the article, but how it fits on the one wearing it. Ash is practically speechless.

“I…”

But this is a bad omen, for Melia’s face sinks as she misconstrues Ash’s reaction for distaste, and her aspect shows some dolefulness.

“You don’t like it”, she claims.

The paladin awakens from her reverie.

“…what? No no no! You misunderstand. I certainly do! This is just-…” She squeezes one of her ears. “I was attempting to, like…suss out the right uh, translation.”

Melia shrugs, part confused, part unsatisfied.

“Couldn’t you just have told me it looks alright?”

“I could, but-…”

No, it wouldn’t be-“ She sighs, remedies her shirt and then drags herself to her feet. She nears her lover, eyeing the apparel once more.

“Belore’kan dar’enin.”

Now, Melia is flabbergasted, roving Ash with an expression of perplexity.

“…I have no blinking idea what you said there, but it sounded <i>very</i> hot.”

Ash titters upon this and swivels her head.

“It’s a thalassian phrase obviously, but I couldn’t concoct a decent meaning in Common.”

“None at all?”

“Well…like, loosely translated, it would be ‘like the gleaming brilliance of the summer sun’. Sticking to something along the lines of ‘beautiful’ or ‘breathtaking’ doesn’t hold the right…tang.”

Melia’s eyes stretch and she bites her lip in a bashful tendency, setting a hand over her mouth for a few seconds.

“…Light, I uh…dunno if anyone has ever flattered me that hard.”
The blood elf elevates her lips, sails over to the priestess and kisses her tenderly, hands roaming lovingly around Melia’s stomach and hips, validating how infatuated she is with this demeanor. “Where did you pick it up?”

“Ah, I had a chat with Kassari, past the triumph of Icecrown”, Melia admits. “The Arcanist pledged that she’d work something out.”

“Oh, hah! And now you’re pulling at my contacts, are you?”

Melia giggles and runs her mouth across Ash’s neck. “Mm, y’know…I’d like to view them as our contacts.”

“How convenient.”

“But I’m ecstatic and kinda relaxed that you care for it. Was afraid it might’ve looked…bad. Is it gonna offend people in Quel’Thalas? Kass assured me it was on, but…”

Ash mounts a puzzled eyebrow. “Huh? Don’t be nonsensical. You’re going to arrive in Quel’Thalas next to your sin’dorei girlfriend, with a dress bestowed by your sin’dorei acquaintance, an acquaintance’s sister who you befriended and the dress you wear is put together by sin’dorei. It’s not as if you’re having a go at distributing this getup for your own gain. My people will be happy to see that you’re respecting our culture. Few humans ever do – though the sin’dorei and quel’dorei have returned that bilge before, sadly. Some will turn their noses up at you, that’s a given. It’s pretty much unavoidable, really, for some of them are…quite honestly, immeasurably identical to humans on that part, or any other race that aren’t them. But everyone won’t be that senseless.”

“Even if I’m human?”

The paladin fondles Melia’s hair and cheek. “You’re one of the hero soldiers of this world now, you represent an imperative feature of a neutral faction, and you originate from Stratholme. Even my brethren are aware of the atrocities that bastard committed on your home. Some of our Farstriders witnessed the smoke from a ways off and we had a rundown by our Forsaken comrades after the fact. Victims of the ‘Culling of Stratholme’ who never sided with the Alliance, will be accepted, trust me. Plus, you’re a priest of the Light and my people are now more welcoming of Light-sworn than previously.”

Melia skews her body into Ash. “Thanks for the reassurance. I feel…better and more at ease, reception-wise. All we’re obligated to do now is make the preps.”

“Mhm. I’m ready for it.”

In moments, their lips congregate at a second occasion, with Melia swathing Ash’s waist and the blood elf injecting her fingers into the black hair of her flame. In this confluence of yearning, they stray piecemeal to one of the beds, their lips steadily interlocked, with Ash’s hands breezing down Melia’s back and to her rear, drilling her fingers into the whole shapely package. Getting seated, the human snogs her way alongside Ash’s neck and then rests her head on the paladin’s stronger shoulder. “We’re tripping towards the Chapel as we have some administrative and clerical baggage to cover first and foremost, as well as that I have to be commissioned a new position.”
“Have you heard where it’ll be placed yet?”

“No, we didn’t speak on this inside out so far, but if we’re being serious, I can’t conjure up a mountain of footholds. The Crusade has sparing domains – some in the Plaguelands, Dragonblight, Zul’Drak and Icecrown. In response to that the Highlord is dispatching me south, I’m wagering that it’ll be in the former, and I was hinted at that he may stick me into the eastern lands, so I can assist with reinforcing and cleansing it, for the future regrowth. And I’m psyched for it too – it was my homeland and seeing it return to splendor is…practically my biggest wish. I’ll request that you’re made my second, big time – if you’ll have it, that is.”

Ash smirks and boops her nose.

“Tsk, you silly lil’ priest. You seriously need to ask?”

Melia laughs happily.

The sin’dorei then portrays her appreciation for Melia’s new clothes, and how she manifests in them, by love-biting along her neck, down her arm and to her stomach as well, with the priestess nibbling at her own lower lip.

Later, she clears her throat.

“Uh…carrying forward, I’d love to leave for Quel’Thelas. It’s right next door anyway, and there’ll be room for this grade of journey without a war on the horizon.”

Ash resurges to Melia’s face level, and smooches her cheek and lips.

“I’m up for it. It’ll be gratifying to see my own homeland once again.”

“Do I oughta get some groundwork done first? Like…honoring my thalassian or something. I was tutored in some as a kid, but it wasn’t thorough, and I’ve lost most of it.”

With an elated surface, Ash nods.

“I’m on board with that, hands down. But for what it’s worth, I’m not an astounding teacher. Don’t have the first clue of how.”

“There’s a lot to be said for some basic lessons. To date, you’re fluent in Common and Orcish too, right? I’m plugged in on a portion of the latter, but it’d merely be fair-minded if we split our language comprehension. After all, I’m gonna be living with a blood elf, supposedly for years. Erm, excluding that we don’t break up. I’d feel inclined to be a bigger part.”

“Alright, I can doubtlessly pitch in there, with the best I’m in form for.”

They then get more comfortable in the bed they’re locked upon, a similar one that they had amid their sail to Northrend – save for that they hadn’t had a crack at sharing in those days. It’s marvelous how their relationship has evolved in less than a year.

“But to be fair, I’m not sure where we’d pick this up.”

“Hmm. Maybe like, something lightweight? Greetings aren’t half bad. Hello, and possibly goodbye and stuff too.”

“Well, there’s a plethora of those. ‘Bal’a dash’ is ‘Greetings’.”

“Bala…dash?”

“They’re kinda like, three syllables. Bal, a, dash.”

“Bal’a dash. Right.”

“‘Doral ana’diel?’ is ‘How are you?’ or more accurately ‘How fare you?’. ‘Sinu a’amanore’ is ‘Well met’.”
Melia coughs.
“Could we like…write these down?”

“Mhm. I’ll just tell you a few of ‘em first. A casual ‘Hello’ would amount to ‘Shiruan’. To say ‘Farewell’, you’d go ‘Shorel’aran’. ‘Al diel shala’ is ‘Safe travels’, but something curt such as ‘Goodbye’ is closer to ‘An’elu’.”

Melia puts the pedal to the metal in order to reproduce exactly what she’s been revealed for every word, though her pronunciation is a tad off, albeit Ash doesn’t have the heart to be forthright on that part. She’d feel rude.

“Does thalassian have any basic honorifics? Same as ‘Sir’ or ‘Ma’am’ and so on. Orcish does as well, in some cases. Not as gendered, though.”

Ash ponders it for a couple of seconds.
“We don’t apply gender-fixed ones, and all in all, purely bringing on someone’s title does the trick, but if you’re motivated to be broadly polite, ‘Edel’ash’ is alright. It’s rough translation is ‘kind soul’.”

“Wait, Edel’ash? As in, your shortened name?”

“Uh, well, ‘Ash’ in thalassian is just one of those small packs of letters that can translate into an abundance of things and is context-sensitive. If I say ‘Melon’, that’s not indistinguishable in Common from ‘Melia’, is it? They don’t have the same effect simply because they both have ‘Mel’ in them.”

Melia chuckles.
“Fair enough.”
The priestess then grills Ash on some other default elements, such as clothes, furniture and in fact, how to say some of those previously-mentioned titles that could be of use.
Out of nowhere then, Melia acquires a mischievous mien and steals a gracious kiss from her lover.
“What ‘bout that?”

Ash blinks and smirks.
“What, kissing?”

“Mhm.”

Ash snorts in a thrilled way, shaking her head. But two can play at this game.
“Hmm. You know, it might’ve slipped my mind entirely. Could you do me a favor and hand me one more?”

The priestess giggles, with a hand to her own chest and then presses herself a tad extra upwards, her lips fastening onto Ash’s firmly and her tongue digging deeper, to Ash’s tremendous delight. The elf herself sets a hand at the posterior of Melia’s neck, the second coasting over a thigh. Everyday, the human is gathering exactly what folks have been gossiping of, concerning the old Ash. The bolder Ash. Then, the paladin parts, with a content exhale out Melia’s mouth. Ash licks her own lips.

“Ahh, yes. I got it now.”

“You did, huh? ‘Paladin modesty’, my ass…”

Ash subdues a laughter.

“‘Nu’falen’ is a kiss, but at the same time, it’s immediate conversion is ‘Sea’s caress’.”
“...why sea?”

“Uh, I...guess since mouths are wet? Listen, I don’t have all the etymological facts or trivia. I’m not a language scholar, or whatever.”

Melia is amused, nonetheless.
“So, if I wanna say, like, ‘kiss me’, it’d be...nu’falen something?”

“Oh, no no. That’s ‘a kiss’. ‘To kiss’ is ‘ala’nu’, and ‘me’ is commonly ‘oren’, but for this, you’d just shorten it to one or two letters, so it’s ‘ala’nu’or’.”

“Hmm. Ala’nu’or...”
Upon saying that, Ash charges and plants a brief kiss on the human’s mouth, who smirks.
“Hey...”

“What? You asked.”

“I didn’t!”

“What was it you just told me then, hmm?”

Melia laughs and then breaches Ash’s lap, driving her lips more intensely into the sin’dorei, who levels her hand onto the priestess, groping her thighs.
“Figure we can move on with some of this stuff. Reckon I’m leaning towards a...physical education, after a fashion. Can get underway with ‘undress me’.”

Ash chuckles heartily and angles her lips at the human’s neck, nibbling below her jaw, until she can in agonizing deceleration strip her lover, kissing and munching each inch, and as soon as the moment allows, drops her onto the bed, to partake of the spoils of her physique. Sometimes, this woman drives Ash mad, but in a divine way.

Chapter End Notes

So, this is the end of the Ashindra and Melia-specific storyline. They won’t go away altogether, definitely not, but they’ll go back to being secondary characters for Rivaryn and Thariss.
There is one more chapter left to write in this one, though, featuring the stars of this show.
To the sorrow, we pray

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Valiance Keep in the Borean Tundra, the first and in probability, the last Alliance stronghold to the northwest, licking the very edge of the continent’s placement. With the stars twinkling overhead, the moon climbing out from a layer of clouds and a cold wind slashing its way along the people outside, a huge array of them are stood here, their eyes and minds upon the sight before them.

 Practically everyone here carries the elongated horizontal ears of kaldorei, most wearing civilian clothing, or the armors of soldiers. They’re diverted at the vision of hundreds of bodies, lined up in strict and specific rows, but each one covered with silverleaf-woven sheets, decorated with branches and flowers brought in from Ashenvale, Darkshore, Teldrassil and other kaldorei lands. Additionally, they’re bestowed with the crescent moon mark of Elune a pop, the blessing of the nightly Mother.

The collective of kaldorei hail from far and wide as well – from the Argent Crusade, the Alliance, the Sentinels, a number of mercenaries and austere Wardens, and surprisingly, in the far end of the assembled members, a few death knights of the Ebon Blade stand vigil. Every one of them are hemming in a small section of people, primarily women but also a smattering of men, wearing the official garbs and symbols of Mother Moon – the Priesthood of Elune, guardians of her faith and guidance.

In the heart of the priest knot is a slightly above-average-heighted slim woman, with pale blue skin that glistens in the light of the moon, and lengthy teal hair that is now tied up into a single braid. To some, she’s readily identifiable as Javynna Dusksong, senior priestess of Elune, housed normally in the coastal region of Darkshore. But tonight, she heads up the prayer for the dead. She and the rest of the priests set their hands into praying signs, with Javynna reciting the relevant words and her retainers imitating a couple of sentences here and there.

At one of the borders of this service are five people stacked together – Rivaryn, Thariss, Trienza, as well as the latter’s two aides, Sydela and Lah’kur. Mainly, they stay hushed and watch the show, with no heed to that only two of them in reality can interpret what the priests are claiming. The trio who doesn’t, just finds it fascinating.

Upon one partition of it, Trienza heels over to her old subordinate, asking quietly in thalassian. “That’s her?”

The faint nod is guided towards Javynna. Riv inclines her own.

“Yes, the tall one in the center.”

“I see.” Trienza then remains inexpressive for a few moments, to the extent where she suddenly pronounces her belief.

“Hmm. She’s quite attractive.”

This all but floors Riv, who gasps, albeit quietly and stares dumbfounded at her superior.

“…Captain!”, she whispers edgely.

Trenzia glances confused at the hunter.

“What?”

“She’s…she’s my future mother-in-law!”
The Commander snorts mildly and looks at the priestess once more.
“Keep your head on straight, Sergeant. That was not an expression of my emotions, merely an observation. She is an attractive woman.”

“But…”
Riv sighs. No use arguing about it here.

It is at this stage where Javynna reaches the conclusive part of the prayer.
“Ishala Elune dal elendir”, she states ceremonially.

The other priests join her, plus the gathered crowds who repeat it, including Sydela, Thariss and kaldorei death knights.
“Ishala Elune dal elendir.”

Un antic iped y, the priests elevate their hands and up above, the clouds barely divide, to coruscate the illumination of the moon down, directed at the dead souls upon the ground.

As the moonlight blesses them, Riv gazes at her beloved and speaks in Common under her breath.
“What was that final segment? Something with…Elune’s blessing?”

Thariss nods.
“Yeah. ‘May Elune embrace you evermore’.”

Driving herself to the masses, Javynna droops her head and Thariss translates the Darnassian to the non-kaldorei.
“The bodies of the fallen have been sanctified in Elune’s warmth. They can be brought home.”

And imminently, the men, women and others initiate embraces of one another; some relieved, some sad, a few downright sitting and crying, being hugged by their friends and loved ones. It’s over. The kaldorei no longer have to suffer in this blasted, hollow war. And some of the people who were lost were those who’d lived thousands of years, keeping their people’s lands from outward danger, only to fall in this cold damnation. Others were young, too green to deserve this fiendish nightfall.

The major number of the attendants gravitate to Javynna, thanking her, holding her for their own comfort, or bow. As Elune’s main representative observing, she accepts it wall to wall with the smile of an understanding mother, to keep their spirits sturdy. She promises that proper funerals will be dispensed upon arrival in Kalimdor within a couple of weeks.
Whether she wishes to weep is irrelevant – she symbolizes the goddess at this event, and forms the basis for Elune’s counseling. She must care for others before herself.

Lastly, upon becoming freed of the burden, Rivaryn and Thariss tread beside her, pursued by Trienza and her aides. Bordering the priestess in a moment are three Sentinel guards, who flank her, glaring at the death knights in a protective mode.
Thariss leaves them unseen and beams at the priestess.
“Mom!” She runs to her.

The younger but taller and more muscular kaldorei clasps her mother, getting wrapped by a giggling Javynna who reciprocates the sentiment.
“Thariss, my sweet girl!”
The priestess soon draws her daughter down a smidgen, pushing a cherishing kiss on her forehead, whilst stroking her fingers through the white hair.
“I’m so very glad you’re okay.”
Thariss laughs and nuzzles into her mother’s shoulder. There are few times that she seems as much as a child as when she’s with Javynna.
“I’ll never not be okay, mom. I’m a pro.”

“A parent worries no matter what, dear. One day, you’ll understand.”
In its wake, she bends her back moderately, to hug the blood elf adjacent to her daughter, kissing Riv’s cheek.
“I dearly hope Northrend did not get out of hand for you, sweetheart. Your traumatic experiences must’ve made this challenging.”

“Mm, they did. But I surpassed them, thanks to your daughter.”

“Naturally. I can see Thariss’ love for you a mile away and it keeps her motivated to give her everything.”

“When did you get to the north, mom?”, asks Thariss.

“A few weeks prior. The time came when the High Priestess granted me leave to assist in Valiance Keep, joined by a portion of volunteers obtained out of the Order, and a detachment of Sentinels who stood by us through it all.
I had set myself up for journeying to Icecrown, to oblige with the light of the moon when I caught wind of a battle at the Lich King’s doorstep, but…”

She then takes a gander at the woman to her right, a burly heavily-plated short-blue-haired and dark-purple-skinned lady, with a vicious outlook. This woman tips her head in Thariss’ way.
“Sentinel Captain Daolan, southern Darkshore garrison.”

Javy smiles on the hazy side.
“The good Captain…advised me to remain in the Keep. Your sister was quite resolute to see that I was fended for.”

Thariss chuckles.
“Ain’t she always?”

“But at this current scenario, I believe I’d wish to converse with my daughter short of supervision.”

The Captain casts a fair ounce of doubt, but not on Riv, for in place of her, she stares at the death knight trio.
“…Priestess, the Battlemaster was quite methodical with my commands and that I should not depart your si-“

“Captain”, the priestess emphasizes pointedly. “This tall woman is my younger daughter, and the sin’dorei in arm’s reach is her future wife. They’re veterans of numerous critical battlefields across the latest couple of wars. I would surmise I’ll be noticeably safe for you to head off a handful of hundred meters. I won’t escape, were you to fear that.”

Daolan is shaky on this, glaring at the death knights, Sydela more than the others. But she cannot pay no heed to the governing of a priestess of the Moon.
With a sunken brow, she bows her head.
“…yes, priestess. We’ll…be outside the inn. Please call on me at the slightest provocation.”

Javy smiles at her, still clement, and brushes the big warrior’s cheek gingerly.
“I will, Captain. Thank you.”
She then marches off with her troops. Javy takes that time to glimpse at the others.
“And here are a cut of your allies?”

Riv inclines her head, facing them.
“They supported us in the battles within Icecrown. The nearest one here is...someone who’s been instrumental to me for a long time.”

The Commander snorts gently.
“The bulk of her lifespan.” She lowers her head respectfully at Javy. “Strike-Commander Trienza Shadespire of the Ebon Blade. It’s a pleasure to meet you, my lady.”

Javy’s lips ascend and she simulates this motion.
“Javynna Dusksong of the Priesthood of Elune. And I am no noblewoman, Commander.”

“Ah, my apologies. …mrs Dusksong, then?”

“If you wish.” The priestess then reaches her hand towards Trienza. “It’s a custom in the confines of the Alliance to shake hands as a greeting, from what I grasp of its founding. May I?”

Trienza blinks bemusedly.
“What? Oh, uh…certainly.”

She extends her own to the priestess, but Javy nearly mischievously pulls back. “Without the gauntlet, if you please.”

The quel’dorei balks to some extent, tapping into Riv. The predominant number of people refuse to even touch the putrid flesh of the undead, shying away from their presence, and yet Javynna is... asking for it? Riv smiles alleviatingly, and trusts it’s sufficient. The Commander clears her throat appreciably and detaches her right gauntlet. “…very well.”

Straightaway, Javy levels both of her warm ones atop it. “An honor to chance upon you, Commander.”

Trienza is taken as if she’s...oddly mollified by this lady’s genial disposition. Javy practically radiates benevolence. Recalling her former diplomatic lessons as a youth, and to return a quantum of it, Trienza raises the right hand of the priestess and puts her lips to its back. “Thank you, mrs Dusksong.” Javy giggles sweetly. Thariss looks a trifle discombobulated at Riv, who smiles and shrugs. Trienza doesn’t notice it. “You are Thariss’ mother, correct?”

“That I am. Well, of old, we were two, but my wife...sadly passed away in the Third War.”

Judging by her exterior, Trienza is thoughtful and ambivalent. “Ah, yes, I...have been in the same boat.”

“I’m sure you have. Just the same, my ears picked up tales of that you’re a modicum of a mother for Rivaryn besides, are you not?”

Trienza is at six and sevens now, and Riv is dumbstruck, her cheeks reddened. They habitually think on it, but...no one words it. The quel’dorei is stumped. “…some could uh, entertain such...inklings.”
“Then you have your eyes open to the unease I experience at my daughter charging unwarily into combat.”

Trienza ruminates on it fleetingly.
“Hmm. Perhaps. But on every occasion, I’ve deferred to Rivaryn’s abilities. She knows her stuff.”

“Ah, as I trust Thariss. But a mother’s stress does not disappear.”

The Commander appears oddly caring with the eyes she lays on Riv, and then resumes at Javy.
“I…suppose there is wisdom in your ideas.”

“I have been a mother for millennia, so I would assume.”

Looking forward, Trienza glances at her companions.
“Let me introduce my aides – this is Sydela and Lah’kur.”

The kaldorei knight bows her head in reverence.
“Elune-Adore valernon.”

Javy seems glad and dips her head in kind.
“Velu’shelan Elune kilaren.”

Lah’kur is much less flashy, merely waving her hand.
“Yo, mon.”

“May Elune be with you as well, miss Lah’kur.”

“Eh, doubt she is. Although she did lump me together with this daffy girl.” She smirks and pokes her elbow into Sydela’s side, who rolls her eyes. And despite that, the kaldorei does not outwardly shove her away.

“Are you a member of the Darkspear?”

“Hah, no. Guess ya haven’t come onto the way of a lotta Amani, then – born and bred in Zul’Aman, until life took me—well, life took me apart, as it was. Don’t hang with many trolls, I assume.”

“Ah, that is where you’re incorrect, miss – if you can imagine it, I am a part-time emissary of the priesthood at that. I’ve toured Kalimdor and had more than one brush with trolls of contrasting tribes and empires – Darkspear, Zandalari, Farrak, as well as our neighbors in the Shatterspear, who we maintain a tenuous peace with.
But yes, I’ve never been presented with one of the Amani Empire before. Though I do recall the stories of your nation, in the era of our own misfortunate empire.”

Lah’kur is astonished for a second.
“You do? But how is that—oh, right. Sorry. Forget you moon elves get mega old. Yeah, the Empire in its prime is—chiefly a myth in our society. And the Shatterspear? Huh. Never heard that name. Must be some small group from somewhere else.”

“They rarely voiced much to us, and favor to be left alone. But yes, from discussions with their envoys, the Shatterspear came from the Gurubashi Empire. When it cracked apart, they escaped the Eastern Kingdoms and came to our lands by ship. Having resided in jungles, the dryness of Durotar or the Barrens did not entrance them, so they sought themselves to the forests. They were, I’m sad to admit, run out of Ashenvale by our kin, and as such, they fled to Darkshore.
My wife was the Battlemaster of the Darkshore Sentinels, and she considered likewise seizing and
ejecting them, but as I discovered they were refugees who purely desired a new home, I lent her my guidance, that we had better leave them be. Kalimdor is not too small for us both. She heeded me, and we directed the Shatterspear to empty lodgings in the north.”

Lah’kur nods thoughtfully, and with a breath of gratitude.
“That’s…kind of ya. Our peoples used to fight all the damn time in the past. Glad someone sees it differently.” She smiles wryly and ruffles Sydela’s hair. “Well, two of ya. And I’m happy to be the first Amani for you, priestess, although I’m not much of an ambassador, personally.”

Taking the lead once more, Trienza inserts her words.
“I want to declare my gratitude to you, priestess, for your cleansing of the dead kaldorei of the Ebon Blade, and that their bodies are being returned to your lands to conduct the proper burial rites. The knights who fell were previously killed once and I’m confident that the small amount of them who did not persist at the battle of the Citadel would yearn for nothing more than being interred into the soil of their own people. It’s why our column was dispatched. Nonmembers do not at all times show compassion for death knights, however, and I am beholden to you for not equaling these people.”
She then takes a bow.

Javy simply looks at Trienza with the joy of the moon.
“Elune watches over and stands up for all her people, and being of the undead does not override this. Rest assured, Commander, I’ll secure their homecoming and committals. They will be laid where they belong.”

“On their behalf, thank you, priestess.”

She then angles a correspondingly delighted face at Sydela.
“And you too, child. Should you seek to visit home once more, you can. Mother Moon loves us all.”
Sydela looks introspective, but doesn’t speak a word.
Javy then reprises her stance at Trienza.
“Commander, had you learned of that we intend to host a kaldorei-fashioned wedding for Rivaryn and Thariss sooner or later?”

“Yes, I am acquainted with this. I was…critical of this at the start, and of Thariss.”

Javy laughs leniently.
“I can imagine so. My wife would’ve doubtlessly reacted synonymously against Rivaryn.”

“Mm, that may be true, but…she’s won me over. I’ve never encountered anyone outclassing her in worthiness of Rivaryn’s affection.”

Thariss grins joyfully at her and Javy smiles proudly at her youngest girl, caressing her cheek.
“I couldn’t agree more. And I know my daughter – she’ll outmatch our expectations once again. She’s been underappreciated by all sorts of individuals. And Commander, you’d be very much welcome to attend on this special day. We’re pending my oldest son to reappear from his obligations in Mount Hyjal to the druid Order, but in approximately a few months, or a year, it will be organized in Aberdeen.”

The death knight is perplexed and averse.
“Would that be…a due act? In light of my…status.”

“Commander, as I’ve little doubt you’re aware, Rivaryn has a narrow count of family who reside in
this world. Her sister will be accompanying her, joint with their uncle and his wife, but in terms of parents, why...there is a drought. It’s not a condition by any means, but your presence would be an utmost joyous one, for all involved.”

Even Riv is astonished now, but then glances with a relatively positive face at Trienza. The Commander, on the other hand, conveys the feeling of awkwardness.
“I...am uncertain.”

“Captain, please”, Riv begs in Common. “It...would be very dear to me. You won’t be injured or disparaged amid your stay, I swear it.”

Thariss nods self-securely.
“Yup, I’ll chat with ‘em, Commander. My older sister is the boss of the Sentinels in that region, so people will know what’s up, in large part.”

Trientza funnels herself at Riv, communicating in thalassian.
“Is this genuinely what catches your fancy, dorei’n? I wouldn’t seek to...muddy your special day.”

Grabbing her hand tenderly, Riv shows her best smile.
“Captain...you know it would only be ten times better with you.”

Staring at her former recruit and aide for a number of seconds, Trienza exhales and squeezes Riv’s fingers.
“...as you desire.” She dips her head at Javy, toggling to Common. “Fine. I’ll...frequent these celebrations.”

The priestess glimmers and claps her hands.
“Splendid! Absolutely magnificent. Then, if you’ll allow it, I’d like you to follow me for a private chat for a couple of moments.” She flags to the side, using her hand.

Trientza arches a wide eyebrow and shrugs, stepping to her.
“I suppose that’s...acceptable.”
With the two of them rolling out close at hand by each other, Javy puts an arm around the shorter elf’s, with Trienza low-level flabbergasted. This priestess is...more presuming than Trienza had been prepared.

In the meantime, Thariss signals for Riv to tag along, and she piles onto a small stonewall. With Thariss locating her butt on it, Riv slides smoothly into her lap. The kaldorei envelops her fiancée with her arms, in the moment of watching the other two women further off, with the tendency of a hawk.
“What’d you speculate they’re laying on one another?”

Riv tilts into Thariss’ broad, robust chest.
“Haven’t the faintest. Maybe your mom has like, a scheme?”

Thariss chuckles.
“What, my mom? My sweet, tenderhearted mom?
...now you mention it, it’d track that she’s cooking up a fashion to coax your mom towards getting hooked into this wedding stuff. Bet you all the gold.”

The hunter blinks.
“...my what?”
“Eh, you know what.”

“But…she’s not—…it’s not quite…like that.”

“Isn’t it? What did ya tell me that word she has for you means again?”

Dammit, she gets an excellent point through. Riv would be driven to contradict it, but then sighs.
“…alright, I guess so.”

“See?”
Thariss gazes at her beloved, dropping her lips to the top of the blood elf’s head. Riv charts her own eyes to the night elf, and then circles an arm to the back of her neck, and the two of them sink into a brief make-out session; Thariss’ hands clasping Riv amorously. Once they disjoint it, Thariss settles her chin on top of the dome.
“Are you okay, babe?”

“Mm. A bit…washed out. Been analyzing, erm…the beginning and end of this voyage. Such a wealth of goings-on on this continent, that I don’t…It was a true rollercoaster. I couldn’t decide whether to be sad, shocked, ecstatic, rattled or flip my lid.”

“You got it. I’m on your page. But thankfully, it’s now forfeit. No more Scourge armies or raids of innocent villages or levelling of families and homelands. Those shitmunchers are outta this game for good.”

“Yes. It does sit well with me too.” She then deviates to Trienza. “I’m…gonna miss her.”

“Hey, babe, it’ll be alright”, Thariss solaces her. “There’s no way in hell it wouldn’t float her boat to engage with you in the future. Besides, she’ll be sitting tight from now on, probably wherever that ship of theirs’ll hang. You’ll be with her again.”

Riv stares out at the outlying Commander with a faded gaze.
“…here’s hoping…”
Not to get bogged down in this pessimism, Riv retrained herself Thariss, embracing the warrior’s lips once more.
“Our reappearance in Darkshore can’t come soon enough. Wish we were home right now.”

Thariss carries the countenance of a joyous woman at Riv deeming Darkshore as such at this time. It bodes well.
“Yeah, same here.”

“Have any idea if your mom will cook for us?”

“Tsk, you betcha. Whenever I’ve been gone for a time, she does get really into it.”

“That’s mainly since you’re lazy, isn’t it?”

Thariss gasps, aghast.
“What?! That’s not—…how dare—…no. Shut up, shorty.”

She prods Riv’s nose, and the hunter snickers.
“You know the truth as well as I.”

“Ain’t got a clue, traitor! You’re meant to be on my side!”
Riv laughs at her softly.
A couple of minutes up, Trienza and Javy tread along back to them and the quel’dorei nods at Thariss.
“Your mother is…a creative woman, Thariss. And fairly engaging.”

“Yeah, many people plead that.”

At this phase, Trienza gloms onto and shakes Javy’s hand once more.
“I’m expecting our next encounter with some interest, priestess.”

Javy ducks to her and kisses the Commander’s cheek politely.
“And I you, Commander.”

Trientza clears her throat.
“I…yes.” Trailing this, she fetches Thariss’ hand too. “Take care of yourself, Dusksong. And of Rivaryn.”

Thariss grins crookedly.
“Yo, when do I not pull that off, huh?”

And lastly, she aims her sight at Riv, who’s simultaneously itching and dreading this talk.
“Are you heading off of Northrend now?”, wonders the hunter.

The Commander bobbles her head and then points to the east, near the coastline.
“You see the vessel, in the sky? Acherus is awaiting us.”

And lo and behold, they do spot a not-so-humble dot, floating carelessly, with mettle. A necropolis in the firmament, both ominous and hope-giving. But Northrend does not greet its return with acceptance.
“It’s…stalling for the three of you?”

“Yes. Hmm, no, not just us. We also have the numbers beyond the wall that you spotted us coming with as well. We landed outside this stronghold to hand over the dead of the kaldorei and other Alliance races from our ranks to their people, at the end of the day. Officially, anyway. We made a call to the Horde fortifications for the same premise. But now we’re coming about, likely to shuffle along to the Eastern Plaguelands.”

Thariss smirks.
“They’d rightly hold back for you guys?”

Trientza huffs with an ounce of amusement.
“Darion would never embark without us. Young Mograine is wont to be the Highlord, but he’s cautious of honoring his elders.”

This affects Riv into a laughter, syncing up with Javy and Thariss. Then she charges to the front, and embraces Trienza.
“I’ll miss you, Captain. Mightily.”

The Commander seesaws for a moment, but then slips her hands down Riv’s waist, and mumbles.
“…and I you, dorei’nan.”

They look one another square in the gazes, still cradled in their arms.
“Remember what I told you.”

Trientza smiles subduedly.
“Persistent, aren’t you? I will. And I shall see you upon your wedding.”
Riv is utterly delighted and ecstatic at that.
“Thank you, Trienza. You don’t know how much—just, thank you.”

The Commander turns to her soldiers.
“Ryanegosa is abiding out of doors, no doubt impatiently. Let’s hustle to the Acherus.”

“Yes, Commander”, says Sydela.

Lah’kur chuckles.
“Yeah, the Highlord is gonna wonder what took us so damn long.”

“We brought down the damn August Corona for him”, argues Trienza. “The boy can muck around for another half an hour.”

With them marching aside, Riv’s eyes follow Trienza till the gates, sensing how a part of her heart will dwell with the knight, but in a pleasant and familiar capacity. And by some means or other, she predicts a portion of Trienza will strengthen Riv for years. Maybe the past won't all be a crestfallen nightmare for her.
Then, Javy smiles and places her hands on one shoulder each for the two younger women.
“Come, girls, Raxeen and lady Nadelgosa are resting at the inn. Tomorrow night, we’re going home.”

Chapter End Notes

And that's it. This fic is finally at an end.
If you got to this point, thank you for reading

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