The Wind and the Lion

by KaedeRavensdale

Summary

There’s more than one way to end a war, more than one way to protect your people, and wedged between a rock and a hard place—or, rather, the fact that the Horde possesses the potential to create super weapons—Anduin is forced to turn to an unconventional solution which may bring the warring Factions together but will tear the Alliance apart. What do you get when never melting ice meets ever burning fire?

Notes

I've got a good enough amount of this done that I can be certain I'll finish so I figured it'd be fine to go ahead and post it now. I saw a few fics for this pairing and figured I'd have a little fun writing one myself and, like most things I do, it ended up becoming a fair bit longer than I'd expected at the outset. I've found writing it to be an interesting experience so hopefully reading it's enjoyable as well.
What a King Must Do

Anur’s red and violet plumage gleamed in Durotar’s harsh sun, the Hawkstrider’s taloned feet kicking the parched red soil up behind him in little clouds. And, by the Light, was it hot! It had been so long since Valeera had been anywhere near the Horde’s capital city that she’d forgotten how truly unforgiving the desert could prove to be until her hair had been soaked through beneath the crimson fabric of her hood. The letter in her pack, carefully penned by Anduin mere hours after his return from Wyrmfall and axed eight times before he’d settled on the proper wording, felt as if it weighed as much as a fully armored war Kodo. She loved him as if he were her own blood, knew that diplomacy was his strongest suit, and trusted his judgement implicitly but the Rogue would have to admit that his plan was…well, calling it a scattered long shot was being rather mild.

At its base level it was simple and easily measured to be of greater gain to the Alliance as a whole than personal loss to him but in reality there were countless variables for them to catch on: the House of Nobles could find out that he was cunningly, deliberately and without the vaguest shadow of a damn stepping around them; the entire affair could be shot through by the Warchief before it even managed to gain legs; the other racial leaders, most specifically Genn Greymane, could potentially blow a gasket and attempt to depose him or else leave the Alliance outright. Valeera knew that he’d thought all of these risks and others through carefully over the month he’d spent researching and refining his plan but a large part of her doubted that anything would have been able to dissuade Anduin from the path that he’d chosen. Not when he’d had that look in his eyes.

That same recalcitrant spark she’d first become familiar with in Varian; that he’d inherited from his father; that had burned out in the wake of the disaster on the Broken Shore and she’d feared would never be rekindled. So when he’d returned to the keep with that look and the confidence of a man for which everything had become suddenly clear she’d been equal parts relieved and terrified. Greymane had been behind him and Shalamayne had been at his hip, the Gilnean King urging him to push north before the Banshee Queen could make a move and reclaim the whole of the Eastern Kingdoms for the Alliance with the promise that by doing so he’d be following his father’s words. Doing ‘what a King must do’. He’d placated the Worgen, sent the Rogue a telling glance and headed immediately for his private study.

Needless to say, Anduin’s interpretation of ‘what a King must do’ was markedly different from Greymane’s and that was how she’d gotten here. Through a blessed, or perhaps ill-fated dependent on how one looked at matters, combination of returned inner fire, a lack of care for what the House of Nobles as an institution did or said bred from Katrana Prestor’s long ago machinations and a selfless willingness to sacrifice any and all of himself if it meant achieving a brighter future for his people and the Alliance as a whole. She’d always known that he wanted nothing more than he wanted peace but Valeera had expected that his avenue to achieving it would be more…typical of attempted methods which had been employed with the Horde in the past, not a dredging up of an old Human custom to settle conflicts between Kingdoms which-though a modified form of it had survived to that day to strengthen bonds between already friendly nations—had died out even before the Orcs had first arrived on Azeroth.

Anur took the final curve in the rocky path at a full sprint and Valeera pulled herself from her thoughts as the massive gates of the rival Faction’s capital reared above her, casting an imposing shadow long across the ground. Supported by a pair of rock faces and two titanic towers adorned with spines and the banners of the Horde it was far from the most welcoming of sights. In contrast to the glittering white stone and curving walls of Stormwind City the front face of Orgrimmar was much like that of an Orc: unattractive and full of sharp protrusions.
To her Hawkstrider’s credit he didn’t slow even the slightest bit as they entered the gate’s gaping maw. His footsteps pinging like bullets off the metal plates which had been bolted unevenly to the rock. Her entrance was loud. Much louder than she would have preferred. Had the entire matter been left up to her she’d have done things the way that Rogues did jobs best: by sticking to the shadows, sneaking in and sneaking out again. Anduin had warned her that doing that in this instance would likely get her shot.

He was probably right, hence the reason she was now riding through Orgrimmar in plain sight despite the discomfort of doing so. Valeera was aware that most of her discomfort was without reason—though she wasn’t Horde herself there was little reason for anyone to look too closely at another Blood Elf among many and it was unlikely, after so long, that she’d be recognized as a fugitive of the ring—but that didn’t do terribly much to relax the hairs along the back of her neck.

Even years after the mad Orc had been dethroned and properly put down amid the hills of alternate Nagrand echoes of Garrosh Hellscream’s tyrannical reign could still be seen throughout the city, most blatantly in the portcullises and the Dark Iron wolf heads mounted atop the gateways which divided Orgrimmar into separate districts. Throng of people—soldiers and adventurers and civilians alike—swarmed through the dusted streets and clogged the skies. Merchants hawked their wares from inside doorways and under the tattered overhangs of stalls. A bell clanged from somewhere above, signaling the arrival of a Zeppelin from one of the Horde’s farther flung territories. No one paid her any particular mind as she dismounted Anur in front of Grommash Hold and started up the wooden steps.

It spoke to the amount of pay-to-go adventurers who poured in and out of the Hold on a daily basis that the Kor’Kron stationed outside of it didn’t so much as glance at her. She liked to think that the men and women charged with protecting Anduin were a bit more mindful of just who was permitted entry into the Keep, especially when they were openly carrying weapons, but that would just be her kidding herself. The interior of the Hold was thick with shadows and claustrophobic, the ceiling vaulted and the walls pressing in on either side. The daggers at her hips glowed a faint fel green and the heels of her boots clicked against the stone ground. A part of her was relieved when the main chamber of the Hold opened up around her. More Horde banners hung from the ceiling like drapes, rippling slightly in the occasional draft and illuminated by the five lanterns bolted to a heavy chandelier. A pair of glaives Valeera suspected belonged to Vol’jin prior to the former Warchief’s death hung on the iron studded walls. Accompanied by a handful of advisors and with a red eyed man standing in the shadows of the fur draped throne was Sylvanas.

The Banshee Queen’s forbidding eyes fell on her almost the instant she set foot inside the room. “I’ve no further need for adventurers today. All of the jobs which can be entrusted to untested nonmilitary personnel already have been.”

“I’m not here looking for work.” The man beside the throne tensed as her hand moved towards her belt only to relax just as quickly when, instead of drawing her blades, she reached into her bag and pulled out the letter. “I’m here as a messenger on behalf of someone else. He took considerable pains with this letter so the courtesy of reading it would be greatly appreciated.”

“He?” the Warchief’s mail clad fingers curled around the arm of the massive throne and, with one graceful motion, she pulled herself to her feet. Gold and violet grieves clicking harshly against the floor. “I’m interested in knowing who, precisely, this ‘He’ is.”

Valeera had never been a fan of the undead, had always found them to be incredibly unnerving—a response which she shared with most sane people on Azeroth—but she held herself in check despite that and didn’t quail as the Dark Lady approached. Meeting the former High Elf’s ruby gaze with her own green one and holding out the letter with a snap of the heavy parchment it was made from.
Claw tipped gauntlets caught a punishing grip, bending the material beneath them, and removed the letter from her grasp. A cold gaze flicking down to the careful, flowing script with which it had been addressed.

Banshee Queen Sylvanas Windrunner

Warchief of the Horde

She flipped it over, eyes immediately centering in on the lion’s head embossed into the blue wax used to seal it. “Anduin Wrynn.” The red eyed man was not alone in going stiff this time. One of the Plague Hounds resting beside the throne raised its gnarled head and growled. “What business does a Blood Elf have delivering mail on behalf of the Young Lion? Stormwind employs members of the Horde now?” that terrible gaze shifted to one of the others who visibly cringed. “Why didn’t I know of this?”

“I’m not a member of the Horde!” It came out indignant, Valeera couldn’t fully help herself. “But I’m not Alliance either. My loyalties are personal, to the House of Wrynn, and I’m delivering that letter on the High King’s behalf because he cannot safely do so himself. Further details are contained within.”

The slightly taller Elf’s baleful glare held her pinned like an insect for the space of a small eternity before she spoke again. “And is the Young Lion expecting you to fetch him a reply? Perhaps he intends to feed you treats from his hand when you return to the foot of his throne, like a good lap dog?”

As if Anduin would ever treat anyone that way! No matter how offended the Warchief’s comments had made her on behalf of her brother of choice Valeera refused to allow herself to rise to it. “He’s not expecting a reply.” She said. “He’ll have his answer if you make an appearance and if you want an explanation beyond what’s on that parchment you’ll have to.”

This time the growl was from the man and not one of his hounds. Sylvanas treated her to another caustic glare before slitting the envelope and pulling out the letter inside. “It’s impolite to shoot the messenger, Nathanos.” Alarmed, Valeera turned her head in time to see the man reluctantly lower the bow he’d raised while she’d been distracted by the Banshee Queen. Having finished reading over what Anduin had written, expression betraying nothing, Sylvanas folded the letter again and turned away. Transferring her attention to two of the armed Orcs standing against the walls of the Hold. “See to it that the High King’s…pet gets back to him without trouble. The rest of you, baring you Blightcaller, leave.”

Valeera was shuffled away by the two Kor’Kron, the racial advisors to the Warchief following her out. By the time Sylvanas made it back to her throne and sat down they were alone.

“My Lady-?”

The Banshee Queen pushed the folded parchment towards him, cutting off his question with a clipped “read it.”

Nathanos took the proffered letter and unfolded it, his glowing eyes swiftly scanning down the page. Anduin’s hand was smooth and looping, the tone of his letter as impersonal as it was politely threatening.

First, allow me to extend my commendations regarding your appointment as the successor to Vol’jin. While I’ll admit that I don’t know much about you my respect for your predecessor, largely as a result of second hand information through my dear friend Baine as my interactions with the
former Warchief were brief at best, is enough to lead me to confidence that he would not have chosen you had he felt that you were in any way a threat to the future of the Horde. With introductions aside, let’s cut things short.

I know about the Horde’s operations in Silithus and I know about the ore. This can all end without need for further bloodshed on either side. Using the Blood of Azeroth is a risk you do not need to take. I write to you now in furtherance of what a King must do: protect his people whatever the cost. Please, meet with me in one week’s time at the crypt behind Light’s Hope Chapel at eventide. In good faith, I will come both alone and unarmed.

Respectfully,

Anduin Llane Wrynn
King of Stormwind
High King of the Alliance

“What do you think?” the Banshee Queen asked, watching his face. “Interesting?”

“Very interesting, though I have to wonder if the Boy King truly wrote this or if it was dictated to him by someone else.”

“Invoking a veiled comparison to Vol’jin’s concerns about Garrosh. An outright threat as a strategic show of hand. A sweet promise as temptation. A choice of venue where even ‘alone and unarmed’ a Light wielder like him would still have the upper hand. If Anduin Wrynn truly did do all of this himself there may be more to Varian’s peace loving cub than is outwardly broadcast.” A cunning manipulator. A calculated tactician willing to tempt to wolf’s bite in hopes that it would blink and he wouldn’t lose his hand. “Only one way to find out.”

“You’re going to meet with him?” Nathanos had lots of practice controlling his emotions but hiding them from the former Ranger General had always been a lost cause.

“To satisfy my curiosity, nothing more. At least for now. We’ll see what the Alliance’s High King has to say and how he fares without Shaw around to whisper in his ear.” Crumpling the parchment in her fist Sylvanas reclined against the throne. “One week’s time at eventide? I’ll have to clear my schedule.”
Though considerable progress in healing the land had been made in the years since the Scourge had been beaten back, the Eastern Plaguelands were still far from the glory which they’d once held. The grass was still dried to a dead brown. Many of the trees were still twisted, balding and leaking sap from cracks in their bark like open infected sores. Groves of towering, fetid mushrooms yet persisted; breaking the horizon line and releasing a fuming veil of sulfurous spores. What few clouds there were in the sky were shaped into long ragged strips like claw marks raked through the fabric of the heavens. Sunset had stained the red sky a sickly tone which was closer to violet than black. There were no stars. What little sunlight was still in the sky left the bell tower of Light’s Hope Chapel outlined in a pale halo.

The hooves of her mount clattered against the packed hard dirt of the rutted road which led up to and between the towering walls which the Argent Crusade had since erected around what had once been merely a melting shell of a building. An Argent Hippogriff soared overhead with the flapping of feathered wings, the Paladin astride its back looking down on her with suspicion but otherwise taking no action.

It was here, beyond the Crusader’s ramparts, that the land had recovered the most. The grass, growing on either side of the well maintained pathways paved in white cobblestones, was lush and green. What few bare patches of ground there were, balded either through the too-oft passage of feet or overgrazing by the order’s horses, revealed soil which was damp and near black in color rather than the parched and lifeless tan which blanketed the rest of the Plaguelands. Trees, tall and strong, spread emerald laden bows towards the sky. A decorative fountain built in the center of the grounds let off the comforting tinkle of falling water. More suspicious eyes landed on her, watching her pass with a measured caution, but again no one spoke. Sylvanas ignored them all with practiced ease and continued forwards; it had been so long since she’d been viewed without some measure of distrust that the sting of it had been lost almost entirely. To the left of the Chapel, leading around behind the building and through a small hedge row of neatly sculpted shrubs, was a smaller narrower and lesser traveled path leading towards the dilapidated stone crypt tucked into the cradle of a pair of towering rock faces butting up against each other.

She saw him almost immediately after rounding the back corner of the rebuilt Chapel, reclined against one of the lopsided pillars which struggled valiantly to keep the sagging roof aloft. Occasionally the High King would make a slight shift in his position and turn his head to scan the area but darkness and distance easily concealed her from the weak vision inherent to his race. The Banshee Queen took the afforded opportunity to examine him and determine how many of the ‘good faith’ promises made in his letter had been adhered to.

All of them, at least so it appeared on the face of the matter. The Young Lion did indeed seem to be alone without even a Horse or a Griffin of his own-briefly the question of what method of transportation he’d employed to get there crossed her mind-though she wouldn’t have put it passed the Boy King to have his pet Blood Elf and Shaw lurking somewhere nearby. The blue and gold overcoat he wore made it difficult to be certain he didn’t have something small and easily concealable on him, like a dagger, but a larger weapon like a wand or staff or sword was nowhere to be seen. Not that he would need them to defend himself. Certainly not here.

Clever of whoever had suggested Light’s Hope for the location of their meeting. Devious, really. If it had been the Priest’s choice…she might have to re-evaluate the level of threat she’d previously labeled him with. Dismounting from her horse the Banshee Queen prowled towards the crypt on foot. She’d made it half way there before Wrynn seemed to sense something and turned his head
again. Straightening up and squinting into the dark. Brow furrowed slightly in frustration at his inability to make anything out in the blackness the mountain’s shadow and the encroaching night had conspired to create. In that moment, wary and casting carefully around for any signs of what it was that had aroused his suspicions, the lion cub looked far more like a fawn alert for wolves.

Slinking a handful of paces to the right, leaving him staring at approximately where she’d been, Sylvanas closed the remaining distance between her and the crypt and mounted the stairs. They were only a few feet apart, now. So close that she could see the patterns of embroidery on the mantle on his broad shoulders. Pick out the different tones in his hair-straw and honey and pearl-which tumbled down his back in a smooth tail. Stealing the tie which kept it in place at the back of his neck was simply done and his reaction, though immediate, was not what she’d expected. When his hair fell loose he jumped but didn’t spin around, or yelp, or even lash out in the way his sire surely would have. Instead, after a brief moment’s recovery from the shock, the young King turned to face her with a smile-small and plastic-on his pale lips.

“Good evening, Warchief.” His voice was pleasant; a warm baritone had replaced the comparatively higher tones from years prior at the White Tiger Temple. He’d grown since then, too. Where he’d once been slight and short, meager in the shadow of his massive father, the Priest had since filled out his lissome frame-though he still had nothing on the bulwark of a man that Varian had been-and, much to her displeasure, now had about half an inch of height from which to look down at her. “An odd way to greet someone.”

Counting her ears, she was still taller. “Since this is ‘all in good faith’, Wrynn, I thought it more appropriate to make it clear how easily I could have killed you without actually doing so.” Sharp. Snide. He seemed more concerned with the fact that she was still holding his hair piece hostage.

“With respect, my tie?”

Sylvanas wasn’t certain if she was impressed by his lack of reaction or annoyed. His hand was extended towards her, long thin fingers clad in supple leather gloves. Even the gestures he made were carefully kept more in line with requests than demands.

Yes, the image he chose to present of himself was very clever indeed.

Rather than return it by placing it in his hand she flicked it at him, the stretch of elastic propelling the little tie towards his face. It should have made contact but, in a display of considerable reflexes, he caught it instead. “Thank you.” A moment later his hair had been pulled back into place. It was uncertain whether he was referencing the tie’s return or her presence at this little clandestine meeting.

“Your letter claimed you had reason to request my presence here. Address them. I have neither the time nor desire to babysit a lion cub.”

His lips twitched, the plastic smile becoming more of a bemused smirk. This was not the way acidic comments were reacted to, it simply wasn’t done, and the Banshee Queen found herself unsure of what to make of the Priest in front of her. “I am twenty one, Dark Lady. A King and a man, not a child.”

“Perhaps to your people, runt!”

He raised a gilded brow, that little smirk becoming more amused, but didn’t bring up their barely present height difference. Smart of him. He’d have found himself gutted with her bare hands otherwise. “I’ll concede the accuracy of that but it’s only to be expected: mine is, after all, the shortest lived race on Azeroth. High Elves are middle aged at one hundred and seventy five, are
they not? Adulthood for your race would be sixty? All things equalized, I’d be around the equivalent of sixty eight though I may be a margin off with those numbers.”

“I haven’t the time for an adult lion either.” She snapped. “Who wrote that letter, Wrynn? Was it Shaw dictating for you? Or maybe it was the mutt?”

“Genn?” surprise briefly flashed across his face. When he laughed the sound was bitter. “Light, you really think he has any idea that I’m here? That any of them do? No. I wrote that letter all on my own; took me a few attempts to end up with the one that you received but it was all my doing.”

Yes, he’d have to be raised from the status of nuisance to clear and present danger immediately. Hiding behind the façade of youthful innocence and pure intentions was a venomous snake. It dawned on her a moment later what else he’d revealed: none of the other leaders of the Alliance knew that he was here. Doing this. Speaking to her about some sort of plan. He’s chosen Light’s Hope Chapel because it was the only place he could be free of fear that she’d simply make him disappear. Where he could, with near impunity, toy with her however he liked and reveal whatever information he saw fit to.

It was far too similar to another Human Prince turned King and Sylvanas felt her hackles rise. “You claim to know about our operations in Silithus. Then you must know, Wrynn, that your Alliance is doomed. I’m here to satisfy my curiosity and nothing more: there will be no concessions made.”

She expected him to quail, plead, and attempt to reason with her. Perhaps drop to his knees in some effort to buy Stormwind’s safety even if it meant selling the rest of the Alliance up the river. Anduin Wrynn responded with a hum that was, at best, half interested and leaned back against the pillar. Crossing his arms across his chest. Grinning like the cat that got the cream with eyes a shade of blue disturbingly similar to His.

“Nothing good ever comes from Silithus.” The phrase was soft, the lilt of it almost teasing, but the message was unmistakable. She’d heard those words before, from Varok in the supposedly impenetrable safety of Grommash Hold. Sylvanas hissed, eyes narrowing as her stance coiled down. “You don’t know the true extent of what that ore can do. I’ve little doubt that you could destroy us with it easily but I’ve no reason to expect your using it won’t destroy your Horde as well. You don’t either. We both know you don’t. I asked you here because I wished to offer an alternative means of resolving this to force, which hasn’t been working well for anyone for decades. It’s high time this needless bloodshed stop.”

“We,” she snarled, “will never surrender to you!”

“I’d have expected no other answer. Which is why I’m not asking you to surrender to me.” He had something up his gold embroidered sleeve, she could tell from the way he was smirking. His turn to ‘snatch the tie’ as it were. “I’m asking you to marry me.”

If she hadn’t already been dead the former Ranger General of Silvermoon had little doubt that her heart would have stopped then and there from the utter shock, the utter absurd temerity of the mere suggestion. Marry him? A Human? The High King of the Alliance? A Priest who must—as all Light wielders seemed to be-be deeply bothered by her mere presence so near him? It was absolutely ludicrous.

He waited patiently for her half crazed cackling to ebb into silence before he spoke again. “It’s a practice of evidence in both Humans and Orcs: to end the fighting and insure permanence to the close of war the leader of one Kingdom, Clan, or in this case Faction will wed the other.” Anduin said. “This isn’t a formal proposal, of course; I felt it proper to approach you directly about your
willingness to consider such an arrangement before I even broached the possibility for consideration. No point in a fire storm if I’m walking into a stone wall.”

More like no point raising the ire of a certain flea bitten mutt. Oh, it might be worth at least considering the matter simply for the sake of seeing Genn Greymane turn rabid. “What, Wrynn, do you get out of this?”

How would he respond? A platitude? A redirection? The High King’s answer came immediately and without hesitance. “The only thing which I’ve ever truly wanted in this world: peace.”

How disgustingly virtuous. “Why would you want to marry me?” her tone was acidic, low and growling as she closed the distance between them. Backing him further against the wall. “Me, a cold hearted soulless monstrosity who’s thought nothing in the past of butchering your precious people? Who despises you for living when my life was ripped away from me? Who can never yield an heir from the seed you plant?” she had him pinned to the stone pillar now, hands on either side of his head and their bodies pressed together down the line. He was warm. Afraid, though he hid it well. She could smell it on him. Feel it in the way his heartbeat quickened against her chest. “What do you gain from having death in your bed when you could instead marry for love?”

“Marry for love? A King’s duty is to match for his people not for himself.”

“Oh,” she sneered, “so you’d shackle yourself to me for your people?”

“I’d give my soul for my people!” He snarled it at her and, briefly, an image of Frostmourne flashed before her eyes. “What you should be asking, Banshee Queen, is what you stand to gain from this.”

“I gain nothing from chaining myself to a Human whelp.”

“Wrong.” He bared his teeth but didn’t push her away. “Val’kyr.”

The Val’kyr bound to her service were all that kept her from the grasp of the hell that Arthas had been condemned to. There weren’t many left, now, and Genn’s destruction of Hel’ya’s lantern had rendered making more impossible. Red eyes narrowed against unfaltering blue. “You lying bastard! You said you knew nothing about me.”

“Lying and obfuscating are not the same.” And, just like that, the pleasant tone from earlier had returned. “We’re very similar, you and I. Where it matters.”

“We’re nothing alike!” She hissed.

“Wrong again.” Her fingers twitched against the stone. In this position it would be so incredibly simple to wrap her hands around his throat and squeeze until his head popped off! “We both understand the importance of family and ache for the loss of it; unlike mine, yours still exists and your sisters, I’m sure, would be pleased to have you back. And we both hold our people out to be precious, though I’ll admit to having no ulterior motive for wanting to surround myself with mine. That, I suppose, is a difference between us.” He said. “An end to the fighting means an end to the constant struggle. The hate from all sides. You didn’t choose to be what you are and shouldn’t be blamed for what Arthas did to you. Shouldn’t have to fight to have your right to exist recognized. Wouldn’t it be nice to no longer have to be afraid of that darkness that you seem to think is waiting for you? That can all end. Consider it.”

It seemed those ‘similarities’ he’d mentioned didn’t end where his listing had. Two could play at that game.
“Consider it?” already flush against him she pressed herself closer, her softness pushing against his chest as much as the mail she wore would allow. Close enough that her cold breath fanned across his face and that, when she spoke, their lips nearly brushed together. When he shuddered, this time, it wasn’t from revulsion. Fear was no longer what caused his heart to race and his pupils to dilate, swallowing all but a thin ring of blue into a uniform and glossy black. He’d never lain with anyone; that was the only explanation for how easily she could affect him. “Yes, I’ll consider your offer, King Wrynn.”

His mouth was hot and soft when she closed the last sliver of space between them, satisfaction flooding through her when his gasp of surprise confirmed the successful reestablishment of control. His hands found her shoulder and hip as if of their own accord, seeming to battle his mind for a moment on whether or not to push her away before giving in and drawing her closer instead. He tasted like sunlight and citrus and his efforts to resist her invasion were fumbling and unskilled. Easily subdued. Easily claimed. Sylvanas pull his bottom lip between her teeth and bit him before abruptly drawing back and stepping away. Watching him pant and bleed, then touch gloved fingertips to his mouth and stare when they came away red.

“If you wish for my answer, Little Lion, you’re going to have to make that formal proposal.” Leaving the Priest stood against the pillar of the crypt looking dazed she flitted away into the night.
Nathanos and his hounds hadn’t strayed from where she’d left them at the mouth of the bridge which spanned the deep lake the Cataclysm had formed out of the Pestilent Scar, calmly watching her draw steadily nearer until she reached him and trotted to a stop.

“My Lady,” he said, inclining his head. The horse he sat astride tossed its patchy, knotted mane; tangled hair flopped limply against exposed, jagged vertebrae. “The Alliance King was there to meet you, as he claimed that he’d be?”

“He was.” Sylvanas could still faintly taste the metallic tang of the Human’s blood on her teeth. “Our topic of discussion was of considerable interest; I’ll admit that he had me off guard at first, but when we parted ways Wrynn was the one left unbalanced. Come, I’ll inform you of the contents of our conversation on our way back to the Under City.”

“Of course.” Calling both of the desiccated hounds to attention and pulling at the reigns of his mount he nudged it forward after hers at a trot.

“Varian’s cub is considerably more dangerous than I’d ever have thought to give him credit for before tonight.” Sylvanas said as they clattered across the long stone arch of the bridge. “The Young Lion claims that the letter was written by him and him alone. And I’m inclined to believe him.”

“What did he want?”

“To end the war between our Factions once and for all, though not through any avenue that you would expect.” The filled in scar fell away behind them. For each step they put in their wake, the night around them seemed to darken a measure more. “He made it explicitly clear in very few words that his SI: 7 spies are better than we ever gave them credit for. I don’t know how many of them he has in Orgrimmar as we speak, but at least one of them has access to Grommash Hold. The point that he raised against our use of the Ore is an infuriatingly solid one and his alternative…to say the least, it’s interesting, if only for the presented opportunity to further toy with him.”

“What alternative could there possibly be if not surrender?” One of the hounds took off running after a squirrel, vanishing into the surrounding darkness for a few moments before it looped back around and into sight. “Armistice has been tried time and time again before. Something beyond either of our Factions, or someone on our side or someone on theirs always breaks the terms be it with provocation or without. What could possibly be different about this time?”

“What indeed except for a royal marriage?” her black lips curled into a mocking grin. “What do you think, Nathanos: Sylvanas Wrynn, Banshee Queen of Stormwind?”

The former Ranger Lord almost fell off his horse. “His alternative proposal was-?”

“A proposal?” she shook her head. “Not a formal one; the Little Lion is behaving badly, going around behind the backs of the mongrel and the other leaders of the Alliance that he rules. He’d hoped to secure at least some idea of whether or not the uproar sure to follow such a suggestion would be worth enduring before setting off a chain reaction he cannot undo. I made sure to leave the High King with something to think about.”
Nathanos’ red eyes narrowed, considering. “He’ll make a formal proposal of this soon?”

“We’ll see if he has the spine to go through with it.” Though after his performance that night Sylvanas had little reason to think he’d blink now. She knew her reputation, had cultivated parts of it at least to some degree, and yet even after being pinned and faced with her fury he’d barely batted an eye. Surely Greymane couldn’t compare.

What she wouldn’t give to be a fly on that wall.

“And if he does?” Nathanos asked.

“Then I’ll allow him the privilege of being taken as my husband, provided the terms which come with the matter aren’t harmful to the Horde. It’s been a long time since I’ve bothered with the bedroom and Wrynn isn’t hard on the eyes. He’ll make for some amusement if nothing else.” Oh, yes, amusing indeed. He kept his spines hidden but they fit well against hers; he didn’t display the outward disgust most others did when confronted with her people and commanded his fear admirably. And she hadn’t realized how much she’d missed the living warmth his body held until she’d let him free from where he’d been pinned against the pillar. “Humans live, at most, seven decades. He’s already approaching his second. I won’t be stuck with him for very long.”

“So you don’t intend to make him Forsaken?”

“What point would there be in that?” Anduin would be at most a point of mild interest. He could have his ‘peace’ in his life time, he’d impressed her enough to earn as much, but once that was over the Horde would destroy them. By that point, all but certainly, they’d understand enough about the Blood of Azeroth that they could use it safely. And then, once her soon to be husband had grown grey and feeble and taken his bloodline to the grave, the Alliance would finally be finished. “Doubtless there will be some caveat included in the terms our marriage will seal about no further spreading of undeath. Better not to be forming plans which won’t be tenable. I’m certain you understand, Nathanos.”

Her champion had been with her for more than long enough to work out what she was thinking on his own in good time. The Blightcaller didn’t disappoint her, nodding. “Of course, my Lady.” He said. “I understand.”

She found Anduin sitting on the edge of his bed in his chambers, the hearth stone which had been set to the Gilded Rose discarded haphazardly on the rumpled sheets beside him. He was staring at the grouting of the wooden floor with a half troubled look on his face, his gloves draped across his lap, fingering his bottom lip and apparently heedless of the fact that blood was dribbling down his chin.

Valeera pressed a short length of folded gauze to his face, successfully making him jump a mile in alarm. “You’re bleeding, Anduin.” She chided, worried but not truly scolding, wiping away the trail of blood with the cloth before pulling it away to examine the wound. “Why haven’t you healed that? It’s going to scar.” His bottom lip had been cut through. “How did that happen?”

“Sylvanas. She kissed me.” The way that he said it made it sound like the act of kissing someone was entirely alien to him, reminding her of the shyness of his childhood which even then had been reduced by hardship to a washed out shadow. Even aware as she was of the fact that his first kiss had been stolen and annoyed on his behalf over it, Valeera still found his total confusion more than
a little bit amusing. “She bit me.” His eye brows knit together. “I think it was a power play.”

“The Warchief of the Horde is known to be one who prefers to be in control.” As Anduin took over holding the gauze to his face on his own Valeera sat down beside him and pulled her brother of choice against her side. “You put a lot of care into letting your darker side out to play to set her on edge and off guard. Sylvanas must have felt the need to reassert herself and you must have somehow given away your…inexperience.”

He’d removed the gauze, now, and was in the process of healing the cut with the Light. The soft golden glow of the spell revealed the crimson dusting along his cheekbones.

“I know that I’ve asked you this question before, and that considering how far you’ve already gone it’s stupid to ask it again and expect your answer to be any different, but I’m going to do it anyway.” Valeera pulled him a bit closer. “Are you sure about this, Anduin? About Sylvanas Windrunner? I know how hard it is on you to act the way you must have in your meeting just so that you could match her. She acts like that daily without thought. She’s a-.”

“No.” Anduin cut her off but didn’t raise his head from where it rested on her shoulder. “Sylvanas isn’t a monster, Valeera. She’s just been forced to act like one by what the Lich King did to her and the unwillingness of everyone, even her own allies in the Horde, to look passed what she was turned into.”

“You really think that you can get through to her? That there’s anything to get through to?”

“I believe that she deserves the same consideration I’d have given to Thrall or Garrosh or Vol’jin.” So he was admitting that this was just the expected evolution of his ‘saving people’ thing. At least honesty was a good start. “Isn’t saving souls the work of a Priest of the Holy Light?”

“That may be, but is it really worth risking your own to do it?” Valeera smoothed down his hair, wrapping the tail gently around her fingers. “What if she…you know?”

“Theoretically, if I can easily be revived I stand a patent chance at breaking the streak that Wrynn men seem to have of dying young.”

Though the blow was light the sound of her hand meeting the fabric of his mantle still reverberated around the room. “Anduin Llane that is not something to be joking about!”

His smile was only vaguely contrite. “The marriage between us will be cementing a treaty which will be drawn up between the Alliance and the Horde.” He said. “I intend to include a protection in that: a voluntary clause.”

“And what is that?”

“You’ll see.” He said. “Provided that we even get that far. I’ll call the other leaders of the Alliance together tomorrow and present the matter for a vote.”

“Are you prepared for Genn’s reaction, Anduin?”

At this he signed heavily and sagged against her. “I’ve come to consider him family. I know that he’s suffered horribly at the hands of the Horde. We all have in some way. But the Horde has also suffered at ours. I want this cycle of hatred to stop. I can only hope that he’ll be reasonable.”

“If he isn’t?” More like ‘when’. They both knew it. “If he huffs and puffs and tries to blow Stormwind down?”
“I’ll deal with it?” More than anything, Anduin hoped he wouldn’t have to. “He and all the others will have a chance to air their grievances. High King or not I won’t use my power to overrule them. Won’t make this decision for all of us on my own. The majority has to agree or this won’t go forward.”

“And if they don’t?” she asked. “What then?”

“We go to war, as we always have, but this time we face our destruction on the end of weapons we’ve no way of resisting.” He said. “The very blood of Azeroth itself.”
Huff and Puff

Mathias Shaw prided himself on his ability to read people, be it the facial tells given by liars or the faintest twitch of motion in battle before his opponent executed their next move, and he had plenty of experience doing it. That skill was part of what had gotten him all the way from a fourth finger assassin on Stormwind’s dirty back streets to his current rank, Master of not only the Assassin’s Guild that he’d been raised in but of SI: 7, Azeroth’s most elite intelligence agency. As the chief intelligence advisor to both of Stormwind’s presiding King’s since the city had been rebuilt after the First War he’d long since learned the tells particular to each of the Wrynn’s.

Varian had been something of an open book for him; as was in the nature of a Warrior and also owing to his having been split in two by the Black Dragon Onyxia and improperly fused back together, the former King’s tenuous control over his more powerful emotions, especially his anger, had made ‘poker face’ something of a moot point (though he still thanked the Light that he’d never had to deal with a leader remotely close to the rash, brazen war monger that Garrosh Hellscream had proved himself to be) but Anduin was something of a puzzle even for the Spymaster.

The path of Discipline had led him to an outward calm which could rival the most hardened of his agents, though one which was markedly less cold blooded in nature, and the distraction of his empathy made gauging the deeper aspects of his plans difficult. To make his job even harder, when he’d started learning to follow the path of Shadow from Benedictus in secret-though, thank the Light, he hadn’t gone down it very far—he’d learned to obfuscate and mask his true feelings behind seamless porcelain of whatever he believed those around him expected in that given situation, though usually that manifest in a sunny persona meant to keep his personal concerns and troubles from weighing on anyone else.

It would be one thing if the young King made a habit of falsities and manipulation because then his expectation would have robbed such a tactic of its teeth but he didn’t. Most of what Anduin did was earnest, honest if not fully open, and his episodes of Machiavellianism could come one after another in quick succession or hit in bursts months or even years apart. His manipulations, when they did come, weren’t just carefully crafted they were fully blindsiding and that rendered their powers even more devastating.

That wasn’t to say, of course, that the Spymaster couldn’t glean anything from his current monarch though, admittedly, most of his ability to predict him came from having known the Priest since he was a boy. From being aware of what he placed the most value on and most wanted to protect. In most circumstances awareness of the fact that Anduin Wrynn could go to any lengths to protect the people he’d been charged with ruling, not just Stormwind but the Alliance as a whole, allowed Mathias to build a skeleton of the young man’s reaction which never failed in being at least partially accurate.

Which made his sudden vanishing act the night prior all the more alarming. Shaw had interrogated Sanguinar on the matter, correct in the assumption that the Blood Elf was at least in part aware of what Anduin was doing, but she’d been taciturn on the matter and had told him very little: that Anduin had gone to Light’s Hope Chapel and would soon be returning. She hadn’t told him why.

He’d known better than to fall for the assumption that the Priest had been suddenly overcome with the desire to visit a holy site when the shadow of a potentially apocalyptic war with the Horde loomed large on the near horizon. Light’s Hope was neutral territory where a Light wielder would have a marked advantage over an ungifted opponent if things should come to blows and it would have been a clever, out of the way place to meet with a representative of the other Faction in secret.
Reckless as it was, such an action wouldn’t be out of line with the boy who had run head long into Samuelson’s scheme with the Black Bishop during the Cataclysm.

He’d come back, luckily, but it hadn’t been a return made unscathed: a scar which, to Mathias, looked rather suspect cut a ragged silver line down the near center of his lower lip. It hadn’t been there to day before; must have been something he’d sustained and healed prior to the sun’s rise. Shaw cycled rapidly through possible causes but couldn’t settle on one which made sense. A blow to the mouth, no matter what he’d been hit with, would have left more damage. The scars, at the very least, would have been longer.

He could tell that the King was nervous, unable to keep his leg from jumping on occasion while resisting the urge to leave the Lion Seat entirely and start pacing; taking up his father’s habit of making a heartfelt effort to wear a hole into the stone tiled floor. His gloved hands were clenched around an old book which looked to have been dredged up from the deepest bowels of the Keep’s library and a crumbling scroll covered in Orcish glyphs though where he’d gotten his hands on such a thing Shaw couldn’t begin to guess.

“The other leaders should be arriving any moment now, your Majesty.” Indigo eyes shifted up from the book and scroll in his lap to focus on him, their color sharpening as his attention slipped away from his thoughts and back into the surrounding present. “Genns cut his visit to Darnassus short and will be arriving with Tyrande and Malfurion. I believe that the High Tinkerer and the Council of Three Hammers are already here. Velen and Aysa shouldn’t be far behind. The city guard is receiving them in the front courtyard. Once they’ve all arrived they’ll be let in.”

Anduin inclined his head in response to his statement, worrying briefly at his lower lip; stretching the semi-raised scar. “Thank you Mathias.” He said. “I appreciate the warning.” The scroll crackled as he unrolled it, eyes scanning across the faded writing as if to reassure himself the contents hadn’t changed while he wasn’t looking. Apparently satisfied of the intentions of the lettering to remain free of mischief while unobserved he rolled it up again with a nervous huff.

“If I might ask, Sire,” he said, “what is that scroll and where did you get it?”

“This? It’s the evidence I needed of the practice in Orcish society to be certain that my solution would even hold water as an alternate method of dealing with the Horde. As for where I got it,” Anduin spun the scroll between his fingers, “as it pertained to nothing which could in any way be associated with their current military practice Baine was more than happy to indulge my request for a loan from Orgrimmar’s records. A sad reality that in times like these very few people think anything of history.”

The King’s friendship with the Tauren Chieftain was an unfortunate reality which he’d almost forgotten about. The Spymaster’s lips thinned. “Trusting that what you were given is accurate is a dangerous assumption.”

“On something more sensitive I’d be inclined to agree with you.” A small smile tugged at the corners of the young King’s mouth. “But I highly doubt anyone would be so incredibly paranoid as to go through the trouble of doctoring the various matrimonial practices of Orcish Clans. Outwardly, it’s merely an anthropological interest of mine.”

“And inwardly?” Orcish matrimonial practices? Insuring that his alternative would hold water with the Horde? Light’s Hope Chapel? They connected somehow, but what those links could possibly be had the Spymaster tied in knots.

Anduin didn’t seem inclined to give him a straight answer. Not yet, at least. “That’s something that should wait until everyone’s arrived. When forced to choose between one large firestorm and
several smaller ones I find I’d rather get everything over with at once.”

By the Light, that sounded incredibly ominous. “Of course, your Majesty.”

At least he didn’t have to wait for very long. Guard Captain Stonebridge walked into the throne room a few moments later, his polished Stormwind plate flashing in the light as he bowed. “King Anduin, the other leaders have all arrived.”

The Priest’s expression remained warm but his grip on the objects in his lap tightened to the point that the spine of the book bent alarmingly. “Thank you, Guard Captain. Please show them in.”

As the Captain of the Royal Guard retreated from the room to collect the racial leaders in the Spymaster again cast his King in critical gaze. Anduin’s spine was ramrod straight, pulse visible in the side of his neck. Yes, he was definitely nervous. And from the way his gaze immediately centered in on Greymane Mathias thought he could guess with a fair amount of accuracy why.

“Anduin!” The Worgen King wasted no time in speaking once he’d straightened from his own bow. Even in his Human form his eyes were a feral amber color and anticipation coiled beneath his tone. “You’ve called us together because you’ve come to a decision on what’s to be done about the Horde?”

“I’ve come to a decision, yes, though the idea was one I thought prudent to cast a vote on as it will affect us all in equal measure.”

“I see little need for any votes, High King. There’s not a single one of us here who would oppose marching North this very moment!” Aysa looked alarmed by the Gilnean leader’s statement. The Council of Three Hammers exchanged a glance which made what they thought on the matter clear. “Gilneas-!”

“We are not marching anywhere if there are any other avenues open through which this could be brought to an end. Most certainly not this very moment, without proper strategy or supplies.” Anduin’s voice was firm, a tone Mathias hadn’t heard him use before. “I understand, Genn, what your people have suffered. What we’ve each suffered in turn. But we must think about this rationally. The game has changed. Our strategy must change as well.”

“Yes, the ore.” Greymane’s teeth were sharp in his mouth, his voice growling. Confusion filtered through the others. “All the more reason to act quickly, isn’t it my Lord? The Horde doesn’t yet know how to use their new weapons.”

“We don’t know that.” Anduin said. “Mathias, I know that Genn and I have already been briefed some time ago on this matter but could you repeat what you told us to the others? So that the stakes are clearly understood by everyone. So that it’s clear why I’ve elected to attempt to pursue something so…well, unconventional doesn’t quite begin to cover it but that’s neither here nor there.”

“Of course, your Majesty.” The Spymaster said. “When Sargeras struck his final blow with Gorribal in Silithus he did more than obliterate the area. From the wound in Azeroth’s crust a new ore began to form which the Goblins affiliated with the Horde wasted no time in beginning to harvest and exploit. We know from Magni that this ore is, in fact, the blood of our world itself: a similar, if not the same, substance which filled the Well of Eternity ten thousand years ago. More importantly it’s extremely volatile: our estimates suggest that a few ounces would have enough destructive power to reduce Teldrassil to splinters.”

“The one aspect that we have to our advantage in this matter,” Anduin said over the hiss of alarmed
chatter which shot through the room, “is that even if the Horde has determined a way in which they
can convert this ore into weapons they haven’t yet determined how to use it against us without
getting caught in the blow back themselves. Without the application of the pressure which a direct
move against them on our part would create we can safely consider the danger they pose in that
regard temporarily moot. My alternative may make it permanently so and give us all the necessary
time to focus on what should be our foremost concern: saving our world. It is, after all, the only
one we have.”

“What alternative are you suggesting, King Wrynn?” Tyrande’s voice rose above Genn’s growl.

“One which I pulled from the historical practices of both Humans and Orcs: I had to be certain
there’d be some precedent for it on their end that wouldn’t render this as little more than a pointless
farce.” Anduin held up the tome and scroll that he was holding. “The practice ended in Humans
about two centuries before the fall of Stormwind in the First War, but prior to that it was common
to end long enduring feuds by allying warring Kingdoms through the marriage of either the current
rulers or their Heirs. The practice was similar in Orcish Clans: in fact, the whole reason the
Thunderlord Clan ever came to be was through a merging of the Lightning’s Blade Clan with a sub
faction of the Blackrock Clan. Sylvanas, obviously, is not an Orc and we’d be working on the level
of entire factions but the inherent principle is the same.”

The High Tinkerer cleared his throat, the first to recover from the shocked silence which had fallen
over the room in the wake of the suggestion. “And you’re offering yourself for this?”

Anduin nodded. “The tie will be strongest if it’s made between equal ranks. And, regardless of
that, I wouldn’t ask this of-.”

“You’ve lost your mind if you think that any of us are going to allow you to tie yourself to that
monster!” Genn’s transformation was so sudden that his clothing tore in several places, his ears
pinning back and his teeth on display. “You will not do this! I won’t allow it! I won’t let her take
you too!”

“You won’t allow it?” though his tone remained respectful, his eyebrows had risen to his hairline.
“Need I remind you that I am the current High King of the Alliance? As much as I respect you and
your council you’re in no position to be ‘allowing’ or ‘disallowing’ me to do anything.”

“Gilneas-!”

“I have to consider more than just Gilneas!” A rebuke with the Light behind it. His voice
thundered off the walls far louder than the Worgen’s howling had. Greymane gave ground in alarm
and both Night Elven leaders winced. “This isn’t easy for me, either. I want all of this to end and
I’m willing to sacrifice more than this to stop the fighting but it isn’t easy. Please don’t make it
harder than it has to be.”

“We will not stand for this! If the Alliance takes this path, Anduin, we will not be going with you!”

“And I will respect Gilneas’ decision to walk away, however painful that might be. That said, your
threats may not be necessary.” Anduin looked as if he wanted nothing more in that moment than to
melt into the Lion Seat and disappear. “The vote hasn’t even been cast; for it I surrender my power
to overrule.”

“Anduin.” It was Moira who spoke this time. “What makes ya think tha Banshee Queen will even
consider this proposal at all?”

That was when all of the pieces snapped into place and indignance and disbelief at how incredibly,
stupidly reckless the Priest had been boiled up inside him. “That was why you went to Light’s Hope Chapel last night! You met with her, alone and without telling anyone where you had gone! Have you any idea how irresponsible that is: you could have been killed!”

“I knew what I was doing, Mathis, and I refused to further engage this matter if it stood no chance of going anywhere; would hold no yield in taxing the faith and confidence of my fellow rulers. Valeera was aware of where I was, what I was doing and had instructions on what to do if I failed to return at a set time. Not to mention that I highly doubt the Argent Crusade condones murder on their doorstep.” Anduin never had been one to quail before authority. “Shall we call for a vote, then?”

“We both know Genn’s vote, King Wrynn.” Aysa said. “If it’s truly your intention to relinquish the High King’s power to overturn whatever decision is made than it will only take one further vote in the negative to lead this course to being a dead end.”

“I’m aware.” He said. “The permanence of this decision is one which I’m not comfortable making alone. I may be High King but I’m aware that I received that position through birth and not merit and that I’m the youngest leader here, by millennia in some cases. If those wiser than me believe that war is the better answer then so be it. We’ll go to war.”

“Wisdom does not always come with age, Anduin. Some among the young are touched with knowledge far beyond their years and I know from your time under my teachings that you’re foremost among them.” Velen said. “If you believe that we have a road to peace at last on this world and are willing to make so noble a sacrifice of yourself for the chance to walk it than the Exodar stands behind you.”

“Gilneas will never stop fighting to see Sylvanas brought to justice! If the Alliance pursues peace with the Horde we will no longer consider ourselves a part of it!”

“Aye, Greymane, we’re bloody well aware.” Muradin said. “My brother is incredibly concerned about tha wound in Silithus and tha current focus on exploitation instead of healing. Tha three of us agree with him. Ironforge is behind ya as well.”

“You’ve Gnomeregan’s support as well, High King.” Mekkatorque squeaked excitedly. “With all of the interfaction fighting over with we can finally prove Gnomish technological superiority over the Goblins once and for all!”

“Relations between the Tushui and Huojin have been repaired almost completely in the years that have passed since the Siege of Orgrimmar.” Aysa said. “We managed to get along on the Wandering Isle just fine. We’ve no reason to oppose a way to peace.”

There was only one vote left. All eyes turned to the rulers of Darnassus who, up until then, had been quietly conferring among themselves.

“Tyrande,” Genn growled. “You know what the Horde is. What they did in Ashenvale. To Gilneas. When they abandoned us at the Broken Shore. It’s their fault that Varian is dead! You can’t agree with this!”

“The Kal’dorei have every reason to hate the Horde. They have plundered our lands; defiled nature; had a hand in Cenarius’ death and have committed countless other crimes. They are mongrels. I’ve said it before and I meant it.” Grinning ferociously Genn turned lamp like eyes on Anduin but before he could speak Tyrande continued “but if living so long has taught me anything, Genn, it’s that a leader cannot afford to cling forever to a personal grievance no matter how dire it may be. I must think of what is best for my people. We are no longer immortal and our numbers
have already fallen considerably in the wake of the Cataclysm. Though it is with great reluctance, King Anduin, Darnassus tolerates your proposal.”

“So that’s it, then? This is what you’ve chosen?” the Worgen snarled. “Sylvanas? She must have bewitched you somehow with her damned Banshee powers! Anduin, think this through!”

“Bewitched me? And you say that I’m the one who’s lost my mind? I have thought this through, Genn. More than thought it through.”

“She killed-.”

“My father,” the young King snapped, “is why I’m doing this. When Shalamayne gave me that vision at Wrynnfall I asked for his advice. Asked him to tell me what I should do. His answer was ‘what a King must do’. What a King must do, Genn, as I’m sure you’re well aware, is protect his people and look out for their best interests over his own. To do right by them and ensure they have a future. That’s precisely what I’m doing now.”

“Then you must understand me doing right by mine.”

“I do. And for what it may be worth I’m sorry.” Anduin watched the other King shoulder his way through the other leaders with sad eyes, perched half-forward on the Lion Seat. “You’re welcome to return should you ever reconsider.”

“We will never stand with the Forsaken.” Genn paused in the doorway long enough to glare over his shoulder. “Gilneas will only reconsider if Stormwind does so first.”

The Priest tilted his head towards the throne room’s ceiling and quickly muttered what was either a prayer for patience or a plea for guidance. From that angle it was impossible to tell. As the other leaders began to filter from the room as well Velen stepped forwards, his hooves clicking against the throne room floor. “You have made the choice which you most believe is right. In that much take comfort, Anduin.” The Prophet said. “Genn will return. Give him time.”

Anduin smiled at his mentor, but it failed to fully reach his eyes and the weight of concern still rested heavy on his shoulders. “I know.” He said. “Thank you, Velen. Your willingness to support me, I think, played a large part in swaying the decisions of the others.”

“Your way if ruling is different than those who have come before you. Any way to peace, no matter how unlikely to work it may seem to be, should not be allowed to pass unattended. We do not wish to see another world fall to ruin.”

Anduin nodded, wincing when his old injuries twinged as he shifted his position and rose from the throne. “I can understand that. To lose your home not just once but many times…for all our sakes I hope this works.” The shift of the seasons was crawling rapidly towards summer and in only a few more weeks the chill of spring would be little more than a distant memory. For now it was enough of an aching nuisance to make him seriously consider procuring for himself another cane as he lifted Shalamayne from where the sword had rested propped against the Lion Seat’s arm. “Please, excuse me Velen. I’ve a proposal to arrange.”
Terms and Motivations

A full set of gleaming plate—though it wasn’t gleaming quite so brightly any more, caked as it had swiftly become in a layer of the reddish brown dust which covered absolutely everything in the parched desert which the Horde had claimed as their own—was not a tenable choice for the prevailing climate of the baking peninsula. That much Renbrook and Eldrin quickly learned upon crossing the boundary between Durotar and the Barrens, where they’d arrived in Ratchet earlier that day. Back in Stormwind, situated between the ocean and the lush greenery of Elwynn Forest, plate from head to toe over a layer of leathers and under that a layer of cloth wasn’t a problem. Was actually quite tolerable as, even in the height of summer, temperatures at night could get quite cold. Here, however, it was little more than the makings of a wearable oven.

Eldrin wouldn’t have been too terribly surprised if he looked down and found bullets of sweat leaking from the hinges of the armor he was in. Renbrook was half-slumped over the feathered neck of her mount. Even their Griffins looked as if they were having trouble with the oppressive heat and brutal sunlight. It had gotten so bad that the sight of Orgrimmar’s massive spined gate rising up against the near horizon came as a marked relief. Regardless of how much he may or may not have agreed with the message they were currently on the road to deliver, not that its contents had been thoroughly explained to either of them, he was glad to know that their sweltering errand was almost over.

The blast of a carved horn cut through the overheated air, causing Renbrook to sit bolt upright, and a cadre of Wyvern mounted Wind Ragers closed in around them. A close circle of spikes and swords and barbed tails which prevented them from advancing any further. He never had been good at Orcish. That was what Renbrook was there for: to explain in their grunting pig tongue the reason for their being there, that it was a matter of diplomacy and that their Warchief knew to expect them eventually if not that day. It was difficult to tell if the Orcs circling them were able to comprehend what they were attempting to explain, regardless of the fact that there was no longer a language barrier between them. Orcish expressions weren’t easily interpreted with their large tusks getting in the way.

Finally, the leader of their detainers barked something in response and the circled parted though the Wind Ragers didn’t fly off and tailed them as they continued over the gate and landed in the city. Here they were stopped again by a pair of Kor’Kron guards stationed outside of Grommash Hold but before anything could be said they were called to heel by a red eyed man in Hunter’s chain mail.

Nathanos Blightcaller, the Banshee Queen’s shadow. “You’ve come on behalf of the Young Lion?”

Eldrin narrowed his eyes and drew himself up despite the ever mounting desire to faint from the heat. “We came to speak with the Warchief not with you.”

The Dark Ranger’s lips twitched into a sneer. “The Dark Lady will see you then, Human.” He said. “Step inside.”

Eyeing him with bald suspicion the two Stormwind guards stepped through the gaping door and into the darkness of the Hold. The walls were tall and close. Their footsteps clanged against the floor. In the dim orange glow of the lanterns hung from the ceiling Sylvanas Windrunner leered down at them from atop a massive throne.

“So this is the ‘formal proposal’ I was informed to expect?” she said. “Three days? That’s quite
quick. I have to wonder where his eagerness could possibly come from.”

Disliking the insinuation evident in her tone Eldrin squared his shoulders. “The King of Stormwind
is eager for peace, a permanent end to the war, nothing more than that!” Though he had to admit
that vile and black hearted as she was, the Dark Lady was still quite desirable. Elves, as a rule,
were beautiful and even in spite of her scarlet eyes and bloodless skin that beauty hadn’t faded.
Producing the letter from the bag at his side he stepped forward and thrust it towards her. Stepping
back the moment it was out of his hand. “His Majesty Anduin Wrynn requests a summit with the
Horde in Dalaran in one week’s time to draw up and sign the treaty.”

“Inform him that his presumption of my agreement is correct: he’s caught enough of my interest to
earn this summit.” She drawled, slitting the envelope and drawing out the letter inside. “And make
certain it’s clear that further missives ought to be sent through his Elf. Pets, after all, need exercise.
Leave my city.”

Though neither of them acted on it their indignation at being dismissed in such a way was plain.
Smirking, the Banshee Queen watched them go before dropping her gaze to the parchment in her
hands. Thick and white, clearly of fine quality, just like last time. The message written out in that
same looping hand, the ink-dark blue, how quaint-scratched into the surface with the sharpened tip
of a feather quill. The tone of his words were almost the same as well, only with a polished sheen
of obligation—there was a protocol for all this, it seemed—and a noted lack of subtle threats.

Little more than an impersonal letter detailing a skeletonized version of what they’d already
discussed enclosed in the appropriate amount of bells and whistles none of which meant anything.
No maneuvers. No phrases edged with parallels. No mention of exactly how they’d parted.

Anduin Wrynn’s letter was everything which she’d expected him to be. Everything he’d revealed
he wasn’t. Proper and boring.

“I’ll admit my surprise at the fact he managed to get the other leaders to agree, especially so
quickly.” Had he simply leveraged the power of his position? Sylvanas doubted the young King
would have dared to take such a step lest it lead to the Alliance unraveling around his ears. No, it
was much more likely he’d talked them into it. Perhaps in such a manner that they believed they’d
come to agree of their own accord. It wouldn’t have been too great a stretch to think his tongue
wasn’t simply edged but made of silver or, even, that he’d employed a slight of hand which was a
fair bit darker than a Discipline Priest should have been engaged in. How vibrant of a fireworks
show had the mongrel provided before acquiescing? “The next few decades should be interesting.”
And once he’d ceased to amuse her, well, that untraceable poison she’d originally developed for
use on Garrosh needed to yield results somehow. “As discussed, Nathanos.”

“Of course, my Lady.”

As he exited the Hold Sylvanas settled back against the pelt which lined the throne, twirling the
folded parchment before her fingers and her thoughts slipped back to that charged conversation.
He’d shown an admirable ability to not only deflect most of her efforts to crawl under his skin but
turn them around on her; a strategic hold on exactly what card he pulled and when. An unexpected
ferocity in digging his fingers into her weakest points and twisting without a hint of the bleeding
heart he was supposed to have. Yes, he’d known exactly what he was doing. Hadn’t made a single
unconsidered move motivated by emotion no matter how hard she tried to force him to.

When he wanted to play games he was good at them and, idly, she wondered how much of a
nightmare he was for Shaw.

Gallywix, Ji, Varok, and any one of the number of Troll representatives who’d been in and out of
the Hold recently—even so long after Vol’jin’s death, likely owing largely to the chaos of the Legion’s invasion, the Dark Spear had yet to elect a new leader—were already in Orgrimmar and Baine, due to Mulgore’s comparatively close positioning, would soon arrive but Lor’themar’s arrival from Silvermoon once Nathanos’ message reached him would take some time longer.

As expected an hour passed before the other leaders of her Horde filed into the room. None of them wanting to be the first to arrive or, Light forbid, to be stuck alone with her for any period of time not a single one of those who’d already been present in the city had dared to enter the Hold earlier. To think that a Human boy had more metal in a vice than a ruthless Goblin, savage Troll, massive Tauren and an Orc who was a veteran of the Northrend campaign alongside many other battles was beyond laughable. Nathanos reentered the Hold behind them, circled around the walls of the room and came to a stop in his usual place beside her throne.

“You called for us, Warchief?” Baine rumbled, once the silence had stretched on for longer than the Tauren could stand.

She leaned forward far enough that the ember toned light cast her sallow face in harsh relief, relishing the way many among the other leaders shifted in discomfort. “I’m to understand that you, Bloodhoof, are friends with the High King of the Alliance?” the Tauren’s ears flicked back but he gave no other sign of discomfort. “He spoke of you, briefly, in the first letter he sent to me. The one delivered in a rather torrid, under the table fashion asking me to meet with him a handful of days ago. Quite an interesting proposal he’s made.” Apparently Baine had at least some knowledge of what the Priest had been plotting because after a moment’s confusion horrified comprehension dawned across his face. “You must be happy for him, getting married so soon after taking up his father’s crown. I think it may be a record breaking time. And quite a woman he’s chosen to pursue, if I can say such about myself.”

The uproar was both immediate and enjoyable though it ended rather more quickly than she would have liked. The Tauren muttered something that might have been “anthropological interest my hoof!” Gallywix started to speak but only got a couple of words out—largely complaints about the loss of the opportunity to profit off the coming war—before Ji clapped a large furry paw over his mouth, the Pandaren’s face frozen in an expression of confused alarm. The Troll who’d been sent to answer her summons cackled and rubbed his three fingered hands together. Both Varok and Lor’themar seemed more cautious than anything, clearly unsure of what to make of her decision.

That was one certain advantage to her position over Wrynn’s; unlike him, she’d been elected to her place and thus didn’t need to jump through hoops in the hopes of convincing her fellow leaders to go along with her plans. She simply did things and, though they could attempt to challenge her on it, it was largely expected that they’d simply fall in line.

“The Young Lion has requested a summit in Dalaran in one week’s time where the Alliance and the Horde shall draw up the treaty our marriage is to be meant to seal. My future husband will all but surely arrive with their terms already in hand so the Horde must answer in kind.” Her heels clicked as she got to her feet. “I’ve something to see to in Under City. I expect each of you to come up with at least one term and submit it for recording prior to our appearance in the City of Magic. Do not disappoint me.”

Her cloak hissed against the uneven floor as she exited the Hold with Nathanos behind her, leaving the other leaders to talk.

“Aysa has only ever spoken highly of her King, even back when he was still a Prince.” Ji said, not quite fully recovered. “Where I know he had little outward qualms about spending hours alone with Garrosh Hellscream I hadn’t realized he was crazy!”
“Crazy?” Gallywix pulled the Pandaren’s paw aggressively away from his face. “Given what I’ve heard about Stormwind I doubt it’s motivated by ‘crazy’! She may be dead and heartless but she’s hot and his Kingdom is supposedly the kinkiest on Azeroth!”

“Anduin isn’t doing this because he’s lost his mind and he isn’t doing this out of some form of sexual deviancy.” Baine’s tail flicked in annoyance. “This is simply the natural progression of the King of Stormwind being himself. He’s always wanted to end the fighting with our Faction, and he’s always had a bit of a bend towards trying to fix things he views as broken.” His private counseling of the former Warchief and refusal, even to that day, to divulge a word of what had been said was just one example of that fact among many. “My concern is why Sylvanas would agree to such a thing. What could the Banshee Queen possibly stand to gain from this?”

“Worryin about dat’s gonna take all da joy out a da weddin, Tauren! Da Horde will soon be in control a da Alliance! Dat’s what ya should be happy about!”

“Don’t get so ahead of yourself, Darkspear.” Varok said. “Wrynn’s aren’t so easily subdued. Their King may appear to be easily malleable, but he’s Varian’s blood. Sylvanas will have a real fight on her hands if she wants to tame a lion.”

The Goblin scoffed.

“To have caught the Warchief’s attention enough that she’d be willing to tie herself to him even briefly there must be something about the High King he’s shown to her that the rest of us don’t know about.” Lor’themar’s good eye glowed a faint green in the darkness. “But there’s no point in standing here and gossiping like children. With how low my people’s numbers have already fallen I can find myself nothing but grateful for the decision to avoid a war which would only cut our numbers further. We should be talking terms.”

“The Humans had better be willing to give us a damn good trade deal to make up for all the money I’ve lost from the war profiteering I could have done or he and I are going to have a very personal problem!”

“Trades are one issue among many that will have to be discussed, Gallywix.” Varok said. “We’ve a week to put this all together. There’s no point in wasting time.”
Anduin had spent a fair bit of time in the City of Magic in his youth, be it to accompany his father to summits, attending himself to matters of diplomacy or simply visiting Jaina-thinking of the former Archmage, who he’d come to view as a surrogate aunt and whom would once have been the strongest advocate of the rightness of his choice made his heart twist with despair-and by consequence the place, for him, was filled with countless faded memories. It was also, owing to the fact that it had returned to its former position above Crystalsong Forest in the wake of the Legion’s retreat, freezing cold. As the deep leeching ache in his bones which never quite went away pushed itself to the fore the young King of Stormwind could only be glad that he’d thought to dig his cane out of his old belongings before coming. Fashioned from smooth, well-polished wood and caped in a golden foot and handle it had served him well years ago who his leg had still been too bad to bare his weight on its own. Anduin had since shot up in height a number of inches, rendering the cane almost comically short, but using it was still better than attempting to forego aid entirely and depending on Valeera or one of his footmen to support him would not have been a good look for him to have when appearing before the Horde for the first time in his new position.

Overcoat traded in for an indigo cloak lined in the fur of a tawny wolf to protect him from the cold, cane clicking against the ground as he walked, Anduin stepped clear of the Silver Enclave’s Stormwind Portal with Valeera behind him. A few of the High Elves who’d been milling nearby glanced over, regarding her with disapproval clear on their faces, and received an unimpressed glare from green eyes in return.

“It’s interesting,” she hissed just loudly enough for Anduin to hear, “that they’re plenty pleased to be allowed back into Silvermoon and more than gracious when they’re there, and yet once they’re not in our lands or seeking something from us it’s right back to seeing the Sin’dorei as some sort of freaks! They’re about as pleased to have me here as I’d have expected they would be.”

“Well, they’ll have to deal with it won’t they?” Anduin was barely able to lean his weight against the cane without bending over and winced with every step he took. “I’m not going to send my sister away simply to please a handful of Elves whom I’ve never met and have more of a connection to the Kirin Tor than they do to the Alliance.”

She smirked and slung an arm around his shoulders, a move which only attracted more disapproving glares. “I knew there was a reason you were the greatest little brother on Azeroth.”

“The greatest?” he repeated, smirking himself and leaning his weight against her. “I don’t know if I’d go that far.”

“Anar’alah, stop being so modest!”

Standing in the center of the Silver Enclave, apparently waiting for them to arrive, was Khadgar; Atiesh as always close at hand and dressed in the feathered blue and bronze robes which Anduin had since come to associate with him, his prematurely aged to white hair gleaming in the mid-day sun like snow. He smiled when he caught sight of them and approached with long strides. “High King!”

Anduin smiled back. “Archmage.” He said. “You haven’t been waiting her all day, I hope. I never specified a time for our expected arrival and even if I had I’ve arrived a bit earlier than was originally intended.”

By two hours, give or take a handful of minutes, owing mostly to his inability to take the rumbling
of the House of Nobles anymore. The invocation of the critical failure surrounding Onyxia had brought them near about to heel on the matter but it hadn’t been willingly that they’d gone and after the seventh time he’d been reminded in painful detail of pre-marital propriety and post marital duties as well as the necessity to consider alternate arrangements through which he could produce or procure an heir he’d been about ready to take a running leap into the shark infested harbor. The other leaders weren’t set to arrive until much closer to the time the summit had been scheduled to start.

“Not all day, no. But I may admit to having asked that word of your arrival in Stormwind’s Mage Tower be sent ahead of you, Anduin.” Khadgar said. “I’m relieved that at least someone in this world is able to hold on to their ideals of peace, and impressed that you’ve managed to get as far with this as you have. Though I’d never be one among those who call Sylvanas Windrunner a monster, ‘difficult’ is I think a fair descriptor of the Horde’s current Warchief. Difficult and proud.”

“Get Shaw in the right mood, and maybe after a few drinks, and he’ll call me ‘difficult’ too.” Anduin said. “I don’t expect her core personality to change, nor would I want it to as no one has a right to attempt to control such things of others, but once Sylvanas no longer has to live in constant fear of death-and I’ll admit it’s rather odd to think the one of the undead would be more frightened of death than the living-I’ve every confidence she’ll calm down. At least somewhat.”

“There are some who would tell you that a calm snake is still a snake.”

“A snake is a snake is a snake, Archmage.” He said. “What most people are too needlessly frightened to realize is that a snake won’t bite unless you force it to. There are far more dangerous creatures in this world.”

“Take Discipline Priests, for example.” Valeera snickered. “Nightmarish things, they are. They’ll get you when you least expect it.”

Anduin rolled his eyes and grumbled something under his breath but it was all without heat. Khadgar’s smile widened. “If we all had hearts like yours, Anduin, Azeroth would be a better place.” He said. “How is Genn taking this?”

The last of the Wrynns’ expression faltered. “He’s not.”

“I see.” The Archmage rested a hand on the younger man’s shoulder and gently squeezed it. Since the exodus of Gilneas Genn Greymane had come to be a sort of grandfather to Anduin and the Priest had lost too many of his mentors and parental figures already without grudges getting in the way of what few ties he had left. “Many a good man has acted rashly in anger. Give him time. He may come back.”

Anduin nodded, seeming to sink into the fur lining of his cloak. “Velen said much the same.” He said. “I hope he’s right. That our relationship hasn’t been too damaged by this. That he understands. I don’t expect them to ever get along, but…” he looked away.

“I’m sure that things will work out in the end. Somehow.” Khadgar told him. “You remember the way to A Hero’s Welcome from here, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes. For the most part.” He said. “I may make a few wrong turns but I’ll get there eventually.”

“Then I’ll leave you here, High King, if you’ll excuse me.” The Archmage said. “I’ve a last few things I need to attend to before I can mediate the summit. Please, enjoy your stay in Dalaran.”
“I’m sure I will.” Though he was equally sure that most of his time spent in the city would be consumed by the stress of the summit. If his experiences in the past had taught him anything it was that these sorts of things never took less than half a week and that their chances of success were tenuous at best. And that was when it only had a few leaders attending.

This was the most perilous part of the entire ordeal, even more so than when he’d first presented the possibility to the other Alliance leaders for their consideration, because all it would take was one stipulation too far from either side and it would all be for nothing. All of it. Maybe Genn would return, then, or maybe he wouldn’t but either way there would only be one result for them.

Total destruction. A final end to the Alliance. The extinction, quite possibly, of every race that was a part of it. Shaking such concerns away, dislodging them from his shoulders like dust (though, he noticed, they didn’t go far and simply gathered around his feet like starving rats) he turned to Valeera and pinned a smile to his face though he knew she saw right through it. “Shall we?” he asked, offering his arm.

“Oh, such a polite and well-mannered thing. The Warchief had better count herself lucky because there are women out there who would kill for you.” Valeera wrapped her arms around his and allowed him to lead her away. “Let’s get you out of this cold for a while. I know your leg must be hurting you.”

Dalaran’s architecture was unlike that of any other city that Anduin had ever visited: a mix of tall arches towering pillars and willowy needle like turrets which could only be structurally sound with the help of magic. The colors were a mix of white and gold and violet, accented on occasion within the confines of the Silver Enclave with drappings of midnight blue and artful lion motifs. A Hero’s Welcome was warm, dimly lit and at least for the time being not particularly busy. The innkeeper, a High Elf named Isirami Fairwind, bowed on catching sight of him and realizing who he was.

“High King,” she said, “we’ve a room already prepared for you, and for your company, but we hadn’t expected to see you quite so soon.”

“I apologize, Ms. Fairwind, for dropping in on you so unexpectedly but I needed a place to hide from the House of Nobles. If I attempted to do so anywhere in Stormwind I know they’d be able to hunt me down like sharks scenting blood.”

The High Elf laughed, covering her mouth with one hand and blinking up at him through her lashes. Valeera’s ears pinned back. The flirtation either flew over his head entirely or simply went ignored. “Well, I hope you find that place here King Anduin. Should any of the nobles come looking I’ll be certain to turn them away.”

“Thank you.” He said. “I’m much obliged.”

“Think nothing of it your Majesty.” She said. “Shall I show you to your rooms?”

“Please.”

They were led up the nearby flight of stairs and down a hallway to a door. The High Elf walked with more of a swagger in her hips than was strictly necessary. Valeera could tell, once they finally got into the room and the other woman had left after stoking the fire, that he was relieved she was gone.

“By the Light,” uncinching the antler clasp from around his throat Anduin hung the cloak on a peg. “I’ll be glad when I’m married, if only for the protection it will provide me from situations like that.”
“At least she could love you.” Spinning the desk chair around Valeera lowered herself onto it, straddling the back and watching him move across the room. “That’s what you deserve, at the very least. To be loved, or have the chance of it.”

Anduin sighed and sat on the edge of the bed, setting his cane down on the floor beside him with a thump. “What I deserve and don’t deserve isn’t the question here.” He pulled his leather boots from his feet and lined them up beside the night table. “I am a King. I have a responsibility, as my father before me, to my people. And, as I’ve informed Sylvanas, marriage for love, for me, was never in the cards.”

“There’s a difference between not marrying for love and marrying something that’s incapable of love.”

“What makes you think she is?”

“She’s undead.”

“And?”

“What do you mean ‘and’? They don’t feel the way that we do.”

“That doesn’t mean they’re incapable of emotion.” When he looked up at her again his eyes were the blue of the crystalized forest far below. “There’s about two hours left before I need to meet with the others and head over to the Violet Citadel. Wandering around in the cold and exasperating my leg doesn’t particularly appeal to me at the moment so I think I’ll try and get some sleep.”

An indirect signal that he was finished with their topic of conversation. Valeera sighed but nodded, resting her chin on top of the chair. “I’ll wake you in enough time to get ready.”

He nodded, pulled the sheets up over his chest and rolled onto his side. Twenty minutes passed before his breathing slowed and deepened into sleep. The angle of the light slanting in through the window changed, the tone darkening from pale to orange as midday latened into evening. With only ten minutes before she’d need to wake him a quiet knock sounded on the door.

Cautiously, Valeera crossed the room and cracked it open enough to peer through before opening it the rest of the way in surprise. “Broll!”

“The two of you are gossiping about me not only as if my wedding was today but as if I’m the one being given away as a bride.” Anduin pushed himself upright with the rustle of sheets, his long
golden hair hanging down about his shoulders in loose tangles he was already at work unraveling.
“Hello, Broll. It’s good to see you again.”

“You as well.” The Druid didn’t attempt to question whether or not the Human was sure of what he was doing, simply exchanging a weighted glance which spoke volumes to the fact that they both knew the last of the Wrynns would not be budged. “You’re well?”

“Well enough.” He said with a smile, small and somewhat taut, then looked over at Valeera. “How long do we have?”

“Five minutes.” She said. “We should get moving back towards the portals. The other leaders will be arriving any minute now and we don’t want to give the Horde the ammunition by being late.”

“No, we don’t.” Swinging his legs off of the edge of the bed, Anduin quickly pulled on his boots and lifted his cane from the floor. Heaving himself back onto his feet and three-tap stepping over to where he’d left his cloak. Pulling it on over his shoulders. “I know that you’re a member of the Cenarion Circle, a neutral organization which doesn’t really have a stake in all of this, but will you accompany us Broll? For moral support if nothing else?”

“I’d be glad to.” Broll said as he and Valeera followed Anduin out of the room.

The other leaders had already arrived, though some of them only moments before, by the time they made it back to the portal point. A few brief words were exchanged between them, largely greetings and a final check to ensure that everyone had their terms put in order, and then the Alliance party began the brief trek to the Violet Citadel. The Horde had not yet arrived when Khadgar met them outside of the Citadel and the Archmage led them into a lavish room to wait. It wasn’t a long one. Only a handful of minutes later the doors of the room opened once again and the leaders of the opposite Faction were led into the room.

Like him, Sylvanas hadn’t come alone: in her company was a bearded man Anduin didn’t recognize; clearly undead but not appearing in any way withered or decayed like the rest of the Forsaken did. He wasn’t given time to ponder how that could be because the Banshee Queen was circling around the table towards where the Alliance had gathered. Valeera and Broll both stiffened. Tyrande hissed.

“Warchief Windrunner.” He greeted, inclining his head while still sizing up the man who seemed insistent about staying at her heels.

“Come now Anduin, if we’re to be married you should use my name instead of my title.” Her attention shifted briefly to Broll. “So you’ve a pet Night Elf as well? I suppose I should be terribly surprised. Looking to complete the set?”

“They’re my pets in the same way he is yours.” His reply was calm and that seemed to annoy her. The man scoffed but didn’t speak. “I’m to take it, then, that you’re agreeable to my offer provided the accompanying terms are fair?”

“Your ability to play a long running game of Janus, Wrynn, has caught my interest though I have to wonder which face is your real one; the one you showed at Light’s Hope Chapel or the one you’re wearing now.” She said. “Not to mention, and I’ve said as much before, I’ve a bit of an admiration for those who prove themselves difficult to kill. Seeing as you’ve bounced back in the past from being squished by a giant bell I think you fit well enough among the ranks of those whom Garrosh Hellscream failed to kill.”

“Good company then.” Her eyes fell to his cane and one long eyebrow tipped upwards at the sight
of how short it was. Anduin shifted in discomfort. “My bones will never fully heal; I still need assistance to walk for long periods or when the weather is particularly wet or cold.” He said. “And Northrend is nothing if not cold.”

“So you robbed a Gnome?”

Taken by surprise he snorted, the sound remarkably undignified, and shook his head; the fur lined cloak around his shoulders rippling at the motion. “Light, no! This cane fit me much better when I was fifteen. It’s since become a bit too short but it’s better than nothing and I’ll admit to having allowed such smaller details to slip my mind until it was too short of notice to order a new one be made.”

So he was capable of putting together complex plans all on his own if they benefited others and yet his own needs were viewed as ‘small details’. After thoughts. Weak. Sentimental. How typical of the living.

“The Horde has come prepared with our desired terms in hand. I hope that the Alliance has done the same. We haven’t the time to waste.”

“We’ve come prepared as well, Sylvanas.” He said, stepping away. “Shall we get started?”

And that was how the summit commenced: the leaders of the Alliance and the Horde sitting down on opposite sides of the table with the Archmage between them, Anduin at one end and Sylvanas at the other. As expected, nothing got done the first night: it was all but a written custom that the initiating meeting of any summit between them was to be a party of insults and little more. The young King spent those five hours either commiserating with Baine via an exchange of put upon looks or engaged in a game of facial maneuvers-largely smirks and eye contact chicken—with the Dark Lady which, he was well aware, was being closely observed by both sides.

Needless to say he was grateful when it all came to a close, despite the fact that it signaled the commencement of the more serious meetings which would begin in the early morning and stretch into the late night with few breaks in between.

The first day began what was, baring perhaps one thing, the hottest and most volatile topic up for debate: territory. If the matter was going to dissolve anywhere it would be here and a large part of him, despite being terrified of that potential, was grateful for the fact it hadn’t been left to fester until later. Anduin had to admit that he expected the Horde to present a sweeping demand which they wouldn’t budge from and to which he couldn’t agree: total surrender of Kalimdor and of the Northern reaches of the Eastern Kingdoms including but not limited to Lordaeron. Seeming to anticipate this expectation the Banshee Queen sneered at him.

“I hope you’ve kept your Alliance in check on this matter. I’d hate for your little plan to crumble because you’re unable to follow our example and be reasonable.” She said. “Where is the mutt? Surely, if he was going to be present for any topic, it would be this one. I’m sure he’d be interested in knowing my people have determined a willingness to share the lands he claims are his.”

“Regrettably, on account of my proposal and the Alliance’s agreement to support such a move, Gilneas has…parted ways with us.” Anduin dropped his gaze. “Genn won’t be attending.”

“You seem sad about the mongrel’s departure. What’s wrong, Anduin, never had a pet run away before? I’m sure there are plenty of mangy curs on Stormwind’s streets with which you could replace him: beyond a doubt they’re better behaved than the Old Wolf.”

“I’ve come to consider him family and we’ve discussed family already, you and I.” He sat back in
his chair. “I’m sure that, for that, you consider me a fool?”

“Your bond with a beast is only one reason among many that I find you to be a fool.” She shot back at him across the table, then tapped her lip with the tip of a gauntleted finger. Her smirk taking on an air of snide amusement. “What an interesting scar you have there, Little Lion.”

“No interesting enough to halt progress to recount how I got it, I’m afraid. You said yourself, after all, that you haven’t the time to waste.” It was his turn to smirk as she leveled him in a glare which almost looked offended. “Onto the matter of boundaries…”

When Sylvanas had claimed that the Horde had remained reasonable she hadn’t been kidding. The Blood Elves drew their line at the southern border of Quel′thalas, staking their claim to Eversong Woods, the Ghost Lands and the Isle of Quel′danas. The Orcs, Tauren and Trolls wanted their holdings in central Kalimdor protected. The Forsaken demanded that their claim would be recognized but were willing to tolerate those with provable blood ties to Lordaeron in places like the Plaguelands.

The Alliance, in turn had their own lines to draw: Anduin himself had laid claim to Elwynn, Duskwood, the Redridge Mountains and Westfall. The dwarves staked their claim to Khaz Modan. The Azure and Bloodmyst Isles were claimed by the Draeni and the night Elves gave no quarter in claiming Teldrassil, Darkshore and Ashenvale as their own. Some haggling on the exact positioning of the lines was inevitably had but, to his surprise, they walked away that night with progress made. It seemed like the target points he’d chosen for their meeting at Light’s Hope Chapel had been even more effective than he’d thought.

His leg kept him awake late into the night.

The next few days passed with a comparative smoothness. Parameters for travel. Which places could be visited freely, which places required explicit permission and which places were off limits regardless. Trade, tariffs and trade routes. An end to the further exploitation of Silithus and coordination of the effort to heal their world’s wounds. Anduin should have known that three days of easy sailing was more than enough warning something was about to go sideways.

“I think, High King, that there should be some assurance put into place to make certain you’re not going to be dragged off to the Undercity and made into one of her Forsaken!” Tyrande snapped, glaring across the table. “If we’re to have a treaty with the Horde than the further spreading of undeath must stop!”

“My people have no other means of reproduction, Night Elf!” Sylvanas snapped.

“The Forsaken, having already died once, are immune to such things as illness and old age aren’t they? And with the warfare at end the Alliance won’t be killing them. Is there need to grow your numbers when there’s nothing stopping them from remaining as they are?” Anduin adjusted where his cane was propped against his thigh. “Having said that, I think a voluntary clause would be a better solution.”

“A voluntary clause?” Tyrande repeated. “No one would become one of them voluntarily!”

“Then it’s as good as outright banning it, is it not?” he said. “I can think of reasons someone would. If they’ve an illness or wound healers can’t treat but don’t wish to die or if their family are already among the Forsaken and they wish to join them. So long as it’s a decision made by an adult whom is fully informed of what they’re getting themselves into I see no reason to rob them off the avenue.”
“Careful, Wrynn. Someone might start to think you’re leaving that ‘avenue’ open for your own uses.”

“I’m not afraid of death, Sylvanas. No one so close to the Light as I am is.” He said. “Even were that not the case, would you really want me hanging around forever? You made it sound like I was merely a temporary amusement.”

“Just over fifty years if you will be more than enough!”

“You might get lucky and not even have to put up with me for that long.” Anduin said. “Dying young seems to be a hereditary trait of my family line.”

Reactions were mixed across the board: apparently black humor wasn’t something expected of him. Baine looked mildly disturbed. There might have been pity in Khadgar’s eyes. Valeera tugged lightly on his ponytail and hissed “we talked about this!”

With the revised terms having been edited into a treaty the parchment was passed around the table to be signed. Each leader made a point of thoroughly checking it over and eventually nodding with a grunt or smirk in affirmation. Once Anduin had looked it over for himself and attached his signature to the bottom, passing it back to the Archmage, Khadgar rose from his seat at the table and clapped his hands with a smile. “Now that that’s out of the way shall we move on to happier topics?” he asked. “We’ve a wedding to plan.

“Stormwind is willing to host the event, though it would take a couple of months for all of the preparations to be made.” Anduin said. “It would, at least, allow for a thorough courting process.”

Sylvanas scoffed. “Humans.”

“I’d prefer to know you a bit more than I currently do before we come to the point of consummation. Perhaps that’s just me.”

“I think you’ll find it is as I’ve little desire to ‘know you’ in any capacity, but as I’ve little choice but to tolerate you regardless it makes little difference where I’m doing so.” She drawled. “Under City is no place for such an affair and the large influx of the living it would cause is undesirable. Where Orgrimmar could do so, if the Alliance is willing to shoulder the burden than the Horde has no objections.”

“I’ll have word sent tomorrow. With just over two months’ time before the first day the wedding could take place and nine cities to visit we’d be able to spend a week of time in each.”

“If you’re to be wed in Stormwind perhaps your city is best visited last, Anduin.” Khadgar said. “Dalaran would be pleased to host the two of you for a further day while whichever city you’ll be visiting first makes whatever preparation they feel necessary.”

“Thank you, Khadgar.” Anduin said as conversation dissolved around him into grumbling about where they’d go first and why. It was going to be a long meeting.
Early morning sunlight filtered gently through the window of his room at the *Hero’s Welcome*. Spreading soft fingers across his cheeks and tugging him insistently back into the waking world, making sleep impossible. With the familiar weight of bleariness resting heavy on his chest and shoulders Anduin blinked sleep from his eyes and sat up. His spine and joints cracking as he stretched languorously before swinging his legs out of bed, grabbing his cane and lifting the time piece that he’d brought with him to check the set of its black and white face.

He had an hour to get ready before he was expected at *The Corner Dragon*, an out of the way notably high end restaurant near Krasus’ Landing. Setting the time piece back down Anduin scanned the room: at some point during the night, doubtlessly delivered to his room by Magic after being brought to the city by the Royal Guard, a scroll and his iron bound trunk had materialized against the wall. Unrolling the scroll and looking it over he found a copy of the agreed upon schedule for what was, essentially, a pre-wedding royal tour: Orgrimmar would be their first stop and Stormwind their last with Darnassus, Thunderbluff, the Exodar, the Wandering Isle, Ironforge, Silvermoon and the Under City in between. Pulling open the latch of his trunk and lifting the heavy lid Anduin was relieved to find a proper assortment of clothing for all weather in various colors and shades but all in some way hinting at Stormwind’s colors; most were cloth but there were riding leathers included as well. Whoever had put it together would need to be properly thanked but that was something which would have to wait. Sliding the scroll into the trunk for safe keeping and selecting clothing for the day he allowed the lid to drop shut with a clang.

As much as he would have loved the chance to sit in a warm bath for long enough that the drilling ache in his shorn together bones would subside he had neither the time nor the required access to a tub to do so. Picking up the soft washcloth which had been left over the lip of the wide ceramic bowl which sat on the table, pouring steaming water into it from the enchanted carafe beside it, he began the process of wiping down his face neck and chest. Checking the time again, the young King traded his loose sleeping pants for his chosen day clothes and picked up his cane before pulling on his cloak and heading out the door.

Though Broll had returned to the Cenarion Circle in order to assist them in beginning work on the expansive project of healing Silithus, Valeera was still in the city and rather expectedly had been waiting for him out in the hallway.

“Good morning,” he greeted, smiling despite steadily mounting nerves. “Did you sleep well?”

“As well as I ever do.” She said. “You?”

“My leg has continued its habit of making trouble for me; took me another few hours after the summit ended to finally find my way to sleep.” Anduin shifted more weight onto his cane, wincing. “The others have all left already?”

“On both sides, yes. The only two remaining are Sylvana and you.” Valeera told him. “You’re going to be able to find your way through the city to *The Corner Dragon*?”

That was a good question. “I hope so.”

“Luckily for you,” Valeera rummaged in her bag for a moment before pulling out what she was looking for, “I have a map. Are you ready to head over?”

“Yes. It’s better that we aren’t late.” They walked the rest of the hallway together and started down
the stairs. Valeera watched with some concern as he leaned heavily against both his cane and the railing as they descended to the bottom floor. “Your leg won’t hold up very well in Under City, even if you only spend the fall and the tail end of summer there.”

“It’s really not as bad as it looks.” Not terribly reassuring: it looked very bad. “I’ve gotten so used to it that I barely notice anymore. And winter and early spring in Stormwind aren’t terribly kind either. Short of moving to Orgrimmar there’s not a city on Azeroth with weather which wouldn’t exacerbate my condition on a seasonal basis.”

Admittedly he had a point with that one. “At least consider getting a properly sized walking aid.” Valeera said. “I don’t care if it’s just a stick you picked up off the ground, it’ll be more affective in relieving your pain than that and you’re likely to be doing a lot of walking in at least a few of these cities.”

“I’ll see what I can do about finding that stick.” Anduin grinned at her as he pulled his cloak closer around himself to block out the wind. “Where is this restaurant, exactly?”

Valeera unfolded the map in her hands and looked it over before indicating the proper street. “This way.”

It was a good thing that Anduin hadn’t walked off on his own in an effort to find his way there because *The Corner Dragon* was not the sort of place which could simply be stumbled across. In fact, even while looking for it, the restaurant was difficult to find. The logo shimmered over the door in a translucent shade of purple and they only reached it once they’d mounted three flights of stairs.

The foyer was dimly lit by a fixture of pale crystal. An arched doorway leafed with gold led away into the soft shadows of the restaurant itself. He’d never seen the Banshee Queen dressed any differently than she was now: mail armor complete with a hooded cloak all in shades of gold and violet, including a tasseled chest piece and feathered spaulders. The dim lighting only served to make the blue tinge of her skin more pronounced and the red of her eyes more stringent. After bidding Valeera farewell at the door, Anduin crossed the small entry room towards her.

“Lady Windrunner.” Bending at the waist, he brushed his lips against her knuckles.

“King Wrynn.” Her greeting was stiff. “Formal of you.”

“I’ve been schooled for years on what is proper. Part of being a royal, I’m afraid.” Anduin straightened and reached beneath his cloak, drawing a small box from his pocket. “Speaking of... well, this may simply be a Human thing, I’ll admit to not knowing much about Elvish culture, but I’d like to present it regardless. It’s been a possession of Stormwind’s Queens for a number of generations and was one of the few things recovered from the original city.”

A ring. The delicate golden band was impressed with a design of curling vines, its sides edged with dozens of small sapphires, and set into the center was a brilliant-cut blue diamond. Obviously old but well cared for, it gleamed against the black satin lining it sat against. She’d never been much of one for jewelry—there was one notable exception that she wore, and that was for sentimental reasons she was less than pleased with herself for harboring at all; the same sentimental reasons which had played no small part in her agreeing to the Young Lion’s bizarre alternate solution to open war—but it couldn’t be denied that the ring was a beautiful piece.

Not that anyone would ever see it under her gauntlets. The mail clattered as she pulled one off and slipped the ring onto her finger; it would have to be properly fitted in the future but the size was passable for now.
“I’ve something for you as well,” she turned and started towards the table which the Archmage had reserved for them-and really, a restaurant? Surely the City of Magic had enough of a wealth of activities that something so weighted towards the enjoyment of the living wasn’t necessary-pulling her gauntlet back into place as she went. “You look ridiculous half bent over that Gnomish staff.”

Shaking his head and fighting a small smirk Anduin followed her further into *The Corner Dragon*. Their table was tucked away into the furthest corner of the establishment, lit by a small cluster of white candles which gave off a soft orange glow.

“A proper cane, built in the Under City by the finest craftsmen among the Forsaken.” Picking the piece up from where it rested against the table Sylvanas thrust it towards him. “Here.”

The estimation of his size used to craft it had been accurate and the new cane had just over half a foot of height on his old one. It had been made from dark stained wood, its foot capped in gleaming silver. Carved at the top were a lion and a raven, the handle supported by the corvid’s spread wings. He took it, setting his old cane against the nearest chair. The red and blue stones set into the animals’ eyes flashed in the candlelight as he turned it in his hands. With his attention focused elsewhere the Banshee Queen took the opportunity to properly examine him.

As always, his hair was pulled back at his nape with that same blue tie. Beneath the thick fur lined cloak he’d spent the past near week wearing to fight off the chill of the far north he wore an admiral blue button up over black pants and boots with gold detailing, all perfectly fitted. Now that the shadow of Arthas was no longer wrapped around him like armor and the persona he’d put into play at Light’s Hope had been dispensed with his edges had visibly softened. The venomous spines he’d revealed himself to possess lain flat against his skin now that he no longer had need of them.

“Thank you.” He looked up from the cane as he set his weight against it. “I appreciate it. Truly.”

“If I’m to have a cripple as a husband he’d best be as functional as possible.” She turned and claimed the chair on her side of the table.

Again he failed to rise to her comments the way she wanted, simply sighing and sitting down himself. A High Elf appeared a moment later with two glasses and a bottle of Suntouched Special Reserve. After informing them that their food would be out shortly the waiter disappeared.

“I don’t mean to be offensive so forgive my mistake if I come off as such by asking this.” He said. “The undead…are you able to eat?”

“We are, but not many of us do so. Unlike the living, we don’t require food. Those who do, do so merely in pursuit of pleasure. Much like sex and alcohol.” Mentioning sex made his cheeks dust pink. “In the past I’ve had too much of immediate importance to bother between bringing justice to the Lich King and the war between our Factions.”

“And now?”

She leveled him in an even gaze. “Consider for a moment the fact that I’m marrying you.”

“I’d thought your motivations were relegated to self-preservation and reuniting with your family.” He said. “Not for the sake of using me as a scratch.”

Saying that made his blush darken from rose to strawberry but he didn’t drop his gaze. “Self-preservation was my main motive, yes. A tool to make a bed worth having is simply a bonus.” She said. “Alleria has been gone for a long time. Vereesa…I’ve yet to forgive her for not only allowing you to thwart our plan to give that ogre headed buffoon his just deserts but for snubbing my offer to
join me in Under City.”

“She has children.”

As if that was an excuse! “Her brats wouldn’t have been the first on Azeroth to lose their parents. They’d survive.”

“Were you planning to make her Undead? And, if so, were you open about that intention?”

“The Forsaken would never accept a living ruler!” Sylvanas refused to answer his other question.

Anduin sighed and took a sip from his cup. “So I’m going to be the equivalent of the powerless step parent? Good to know.”

The waiter returned, then, with their food and to refill their glasses before vanishing again. Blackened Dragonfin in some sort of butter sauce alongside steamed vegetables and a bowl of grain. The young King seemed mildly perplexed that such a thing would be served so early in the day but had no comment on the matter.

“The Broken Shore.”

He looked up from his food, fork halfway to his mouth, and then set it back down on his plate. “Sorry?”

“The Broken Shore. The Horde’s retreat. Your father’s death.” She said. “I was following my Warchief’s orders. Nothing more. Vol’jin had been fatally wounded. It wasn’t some dastardly plot to abandon the Alliance to die.”

“I never believed that it was. Never blamed the Horde for what happened at the Tomb of Sargeras. And I’m not naïve enough to believe that, had our positions been reversed, the Alliance wouldn’t have done the same.” Blue eyes, distant and pensive, stared into the amber liquid in his glass. Watching the little bubbles gather along the surface and pop. “Do I wish that things had turned out differently? Yes. Might my father still be alive had the Horde not retreated? Perhaps. But I can never know for sure and what’s happened is in the past, now. Clutching resentment to my chest won’t help my surviving people.”

Yet another freely given example of the weakness he wore on his sleeve like a badge of honor: where she viewed her people as arrows in her quiver, weapons to be used against her enemies, and always had. Anduin loved his subjects and was more than willing to suffer indefinitely for their sake. Love. Attachment. Loneliness. The flaws of the living. Things she was no longer meant for and would never bend to again. She’d seen enough of what it had done to her sisters to solidify her view that they weren’t something she’d wanted to touch with a ten foot, plague dipped pole.

The urge to abandon her family and people and chase the object of her affection through a collapsing portal into all but certain death on a dying alien world. Love was all it had taken to pull Alleria away. The total collapse of her own personal world around her. The flippant violation of the laws that she’d once upheld. A near abandonment of her children. Grief stemming from the loss of the Human she’d so foolishly tied her heart to had nearly driven Vereesa mad. ‘They took my Ronin’, the only motive she’d needed. And her little sister hadn’t even been capable of following through. Sylvanas would never allow herself to be brought so low, be made so weak, especially not by Anduin Wrynn. It didn’t matter that, if he had any judgement of her, he hid it well or that he treated her as if she were no different than anyone else or that he had an incomprehensible, infuriating way of somehow managing to turn nearly everything she did back on her. While he lived she’d amuse herself with him. When he died he’d be written off as a footnote with no emotion
attached. She’d wash her hands of even his memory.

“You’re a strange Human.”

He picked at the thin bones on his plate with his fork. “You’re far from the first to have told me that.” The young King didn’t comment on the fact that she’d barely touched her own food. “If you’re finished we can head out and try to find something better suited to both of us. Grateful as I am for Khadgar’s hospitality I don’t think he fully considered things.”

“I’ve no reason to want to linger here.” She rose from her chair. “You have something in mind?”

“We could explore the city. Get lost.”

The Banshee Queen scoffed. “How sheltered did Varian keep you that your idea of an activity is getting lost?”

He grinned, the expression slightly lopsided and revealing a chipped left canine. “Getting lost is the best way to find something interesting. To tumble off the beaten path.”

Perhaps if you found trouble ‘interesting’. Of course, given the fact that he’d come up with the idea of marrying her in the first place, never mind the fact that he actually intended to go through with it, Sylvanas should have known that the Priest didn’t have a single tight screw in him. “Very well.” She drawled. “I’ll indulge you.”

That smile grew slightly wider, and, leaning on his new cane, the Young Lion started back towards the door. “I doubt there’s anything we’ll run into here that one of us, never mind both of us, can’t handle.”

The idea that she was in any way concerned they might come across something which could actually pose a threat to her was preposterous. So much so that it wasn’t worth dignifying with any sort of response.

His walk, even with the cane, was almost a stagger-likely owing largely to the agitation the arctic cold caused to his brittle bones-and the display the young King made clattering down the stairs to the street was graceless in its entirety. Sylvanas made a half spiteful point of sauntering down them with all the poise he’d lacked, lips pursed and head held high, but it didn’t seem to bother him. He was still smiling, effervescent. An infuriatingly stubborn flame which refused to be extinguished. “Left or right?”

Perhaps he was twenty one, but he was acting more like a child: small and overly excited, full of a boundless energy for which she had little patience. “I can’t bring myself to care.”

That was when he gave the first sign of being in any way affected by her attitude, his eyebrows drew together briefly. Only for a fraction of a second but she held it out as a victory none the less. The Priest looked down the road that they were standing on to the left and then to the right before saying “let’s go this way,” and trotting off. Rolling her eyes, Sylvanas followed him.

Stained glass windows and latticed balconies seemed to have been built into the side of every building. Well-groomed hedgerows lined the streets on either side. People, mostly Mages, passed around them without sparing much more than token glances.

“I’ve spent a fair bit of time in this city in the past but even still I don’t know it very well. Valeera’s a Godsend when it comes to finding things: as a member of the Uncrowned, she spent a good deal of time in his city while it floated off the shore of the Broken Isles.” Anduin said. “She
said that the Uncrowned operated out of a hidden section of the sewers. I’d love to see the place myself but, well…I don’t want to get stabbed in the back.”

It seemed that, if she didn’t take action of her own to maneuver the conversation into meaningful waters, the day was doomed to a spew of inane prattle. “I’m more interested in where you developed such manipulation skills than in a portion of the sewers reserved for an order of Rogues.”

His innocent mask didn’t falter in the slightest. “What do you mean?”

“You know precisely what I mean, Wrynn.” She said. “What you did at Light’s Hope was no accident and you’ve admitted that it was your work alone. The only way you could possibly have picked up on such things is if you’d been watching closely every time you came into contact with the Horde. If you were actively, and constantly, compiling knowledge on those around you. And the only reason one would have to engage in such an activity was if they intended to use it.”

The innocence shifted into the half smirk of someone who’d been caught out and wasn’t in the least bit guilty over what they’d done. “I’m not a Warrior, Sylvanas. I don’t have size or brute strength like my father did, nor do I have his martial prowess though, make no mistake, I am not helpless.” He said. “Even from early childhood I knew that I’d need another avenue through which I could affectively exercise power over friends and foes alike when need be. Another avenue through which I could make myself dangerous. Luckily for me I was raised—and I use this term in the loosest possible sense—by the Broodmother of the Black Dragonflight. It was while living under her tyranny that I learned the two valuable lessons which held the answers I needed: the necessity of hoarding information and the value of allowing others to hold a perception of you which leads them to lower their guard.”

He’d been raised, ‘loosely’ or not, by Onyxia. Out of left field as the revelation was, ‘Black Dragon’ actually made a ridiculous amount of sense as a solution to the matter. Shrewd. Calculating. Measured. Now that she looked at him from that angle the Human did indeed operate in a manner strikingly similar to a member of the now near extinct Dragonflight, though without the blatantly malicious intent.

“Am I to suddenly discover the truth that you’ve been a Black Dragon posing as Varian’s son all along?”

His chuckle only edged on amused. “I think Wrathion would have offed me in the night at some point while I was staying at the Tavern in the Mists if that were the case.”

“Ah, yes. The current Earth Warder. I recall seeing you in his company quite often back at the Tiger Temple.” She said. “You considered him a friend?”

His expression tightened, eyes narrowing into a glare which was very close indeed to something she’d have expected from Varian. “We’re all stupid when we’re young.”

Stupid indeed.

Sylvanas heard the babble of falling water long before they turned the corner and the Dalaran Fountain came into view. The same fountain beside which she’d once stood with her sisters, throwing coins into water and wishing to soon be married. To have husbands and families of their own. But that had been a long time ago, now. Half against her will she found her eyes drawn to the replica of Frostmourne’s broken hilt mounted atop the short pillar. Anduin pulled a gold coin from his coin purse, balanced it on his thumb and flipped it into the water with a splash.
“Alliance and Horde, side by side.” His voice was almost inaudible over the play of the water. “May that be how things are from this point onwards, Light willing.”

The Banshee Queen smirked. “Naturally you’d believe in that childish wishing business.”

He smiled again but remained silent. They stood there for a small eternity before Sylvanas realized that he, too, was staring at the replicated hilt. “May I ask?”

“You may not!” She snapped. “If I ever tell you it won’t be here. Don’t ask about such things again!”

He seemed to have expected at least something of her reaction, his own largely relegated to a widening of his eyes and slight paleness of his face though she noticed, take a small step away. “I apologize.” The young King said. “I hadn’t meant to stir up bad blood and will respect your wishes. My curiosity was out of bounds.”

A swift demure recovering, rather like a cat landing on its feet after falling from a ledge. Sneering, she turned her back on him and flounced towards a street they hadn’t taken yet. “Find something else in this city to amuse yourself with. I’m more than finished staring at that hunk of rock!”

Anduin paused long enough to tie up his coin purse and hung it from his belt again before he followed her away.
The Wolf and the Anchor

The Moonspray’s triangular sail snapped stiffly in the chill, brine laden wind of Tiragarde Sound, wine toned waters lapping gently against the hull in a series of white caped waves as the ship rolled and bobbed atop the surface, flanked on either side by two other previously decommissioned Night Elven vessels which Darnassus had given them for the sake of moving his people to what, to the Alliance, were parts unknown. They’d assumed, it seemed, that Gilneas would strike out to find their own way, discover nothing and come slinking back with their tails between their legs but they seemed to have forgotten what his people were at their most fundamental level: self-sufficient and more than able to survive on their own under most circumstance.

But they wouldn’t be alone.

Having been a part of the now defunct Alliance of Lordaeron prior to its dissolving in the wake of the Second War he remembered that there was one nation left which would be willing to help. One nation which wasn’t already a part of the current Alliance, staunchly neutral or itself defunct. One nation in which they had a contact whom hated the Horde more, perhaps, than even he did and would have reason to come to Anduin’s aid.

Kul Tiras.

Genn turned from the hull of the ship at the sound of paws on the deck behind him and caught sight of Ivar approaching.

“My King,” he growled, the sea wind whipping through the ruff of fur along his neck. “We’ll be coming up on the gate into Falrevere Harbor in another few minutes.”

“Thank you, Ivar.” He said. “I’m leaving you in charge of watching over our ships while Tess, Darius and I are away in the city.”

“After spending so long managing the battle with those withered fiends even after Darius buggered off like a beaten dog looking after a small handful of boats is child’s play.” Ivar growled. “Are you sure about this Mage? From what I’ve heard of Jaina Proudmoore she holds the same sickening views about peace that that useless whelp on the Lion Seat does.”

“Anduin is not useless, Ivar, and he is not a whelp!” Genn snapped, sharpening nails pressing into his palms. “He’s not of his right mind, and once he’s shaken free of her hold he’ll marshal the Alliance to war just as his father would have. As for Jaina Proudmoore, she hasn’t held aspirations of peace with the Horde for years now. Theramore woke her up to the reality of what they are the way that Varian’s death should have woken Anduin.”

“You only assume he’s not himself.”

“He would never have sold out the Alliance to the Banshee Queen if he weren’t under some sort of compulsion!” A few of the other sailors milling on The Moonspray’s deck jumped at his snarl and looked around, their ears lying back. “She will not take Anduin the way she’s taken Liam, I won’t allow it! Once Kul Tiras is on our side we’ll have a place to take him to that will be beyond her reach and once he’s recovered we’ll wipe out the Horde once and for all! Now I’m sure there are things on this ship which require your attention: see to them!”

Ivar growled but did as he was told, slinking back across the deck. The massive harbor gate reared ahead of them, its wood and iron doors propped open just wide enough to allow for ships to
squeeze their way through and casting its shadow far across the water. A harbor bell clanged in the
distance, its dulcet tones echoing to and passed them far off towards the horizon. In the distance, at
the docks of the Admiralty, the iron-sided multi-sailed ships of the Kul Tirian’s fabled navy
bobbed on the surface of the water. On the stretching fingers of the wooden docks of the Old
Mariner District reached across the harbor and as their ships drew up alongside them and moored
they were spared barely a glance: just a small handful of other ships floated all around them, most
barring merchants come from distant lands to trade their wares at market.

*The Moonspray*’s boarding ramp slid from the deck and down to the dock below with a resonant
clatter and was secured with latches to the side of the ship. With a final glance over the hull of the
ship, this time greeting him with the sight of an eclectic city of hanging clothes lines and oxidized
copper roofs, Genn left where he’d been standing for the better part of the past three hours and
disembarked the ship for the floating dock they’d been anchored beside.

Darius and Tess were both already on the dock waiting for him.

“Father.” Tess greeted him. “Do you think Jaina will be willing to hear us? And do you know
where to even begin to look for her in this city?”

“Jaina has no reason not to help us, Tess. And from a state visit made some years prior I believe I
do: more than likely the former Archmage of the Kirin Tor will be somewhere in Proudmoore
Hold.”

“Are you sure about this, Genn?” Darius asked. “Is it really worth all of this when our people can
simply return to their homes in peace?”

“You’ve always been an Alliance sympathizer, Crowley. It’s what led to your being imprisoned in
the first place. I have to say that, given that, I’m surprised that you’d suggest we simply sit back
for our own gain while our friends and allies are being bowed before the Horde. While Anduin’s
been collared, somehow, by Sylvanas.” He said. “No. Gilneas abandoned the Alliance before and
when we did it collapsed. Though we’ve been forced to secede again to spar ourselves her claws
we won’t allow such a thing to happen again. We will not stand for Anduin being used as a
marionette by the Banshee Queen!”

“As you say, Genn.” Darius said, though he didn’t look happy about it.

“Ivar will watch the ships while we’re gone. If memory serves we’ve a bit of a walk between us
and Proudmoore Hold: there’s little point in wasting time.” Greymane said, turning and starting
down the dock. “Let’s get moving.”

Gulls shrieked and flew overhead. Water slapped against the rocky shore. Sailors shouted to each
other in hoarse voices. Their footsteps clapped against the dock’s salted, sundried wood. The
cobbled streets were damp and sun warmed and the smell of brine and fish was difficult to fully
escape from. They were paid about as much mind in the city as they had been at the docks.

It wasn’t until they reached the hulking form of the Hold that they were stopped by one of the city
guards, his emerald tabard baring the design of a golden anchor.

“Halt!” The man approached, armor clattering and a hand resting on the hilt of his sword.
“Proudmoore Hold isn’t a tourist attraction. This part of the city is off limits to the general public.
Unless you have business here I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“We’re here to speak with Jaina Proudmoore.” Genn’s amber eyes seemed to make the other man
uneasy.
“You’ve an appointment?”

“It’s a bit short notice.” He said. “Tell her that Genn Greymane is here to speak to her about Anduin Wrynn.”

Invoking the names of two separate Kings, one of whom was currently positioned at the head of one of Azeroth’s most powerful Factions, seemed to shift the guards attitude more towards surprise than suspicion. His posture straightened further. “One moment.” After calling over another guard and instructing him to deliver the message he said “if Lady Proudmoore is willing to see you I’ll let you pass. If not, I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do.”

“Thank you.” Genn said stiffly, shifting his gaze to the door of the Hold to await the other guard’s return. After another few minutes the second man hurried back out of the Hold and hissed something to the first who turned towards them again.

“Lady Proudmoore will see you now.”

They were led into the gigantic building and up numerous flights of stairs to a study and were let inside. Jaina turned from the window and leveled all three of them in a frosted gaze.

“Genn.” She said coldly. “Anduin has sent you because he’s finally realized what the Horde really is? The Alliance is looking for Kul Tiras’ help because now, after countless deaths and far too much destruction which could have been avoided, they’re finally willing to wipe them out?”

“Gilneas is no longer a part of the Alliance.” Genn said. “Sylvanas has bewitched the High King somehow and he’s succumbed to utter madness! The Horde is set to control all of Azeroth soon: Anduin and the Warchief are going to be wed!”

“What?” she hissed, frost forming along the window pane as the chill in her eyes was replaced with an indignant heat. “What do you mean he’s going to marry her? That’s preposterous!”

“Were he in his right mind it would be but, as I’ve said, she’s done something to him! After he found Shalamayne at Wrynnfall he regained his confidence; was willing to hear me on the necessity of bringing justice to the Horde. Then he disappeared without warning to Light’s Hope Chapel and came back claiming the solution to all of this was still peace! And that he’d achieve it through aligning the Factions. He admitted to encountering Windrunner at the Chapel; her having meddled with his mind is the only explanation!”

“And the other leaders went along with it?” Jaina scoffed. “Even Tyrande? Or did he simply over rule them?”

“They agreed. Some more reluctantly than others.” Genn growled. “He was persuasive. Frightened them into compliance with the threat of annihilation at the hands of the Horde! Anduin would never do such a thing of his own will!”

“And what did you come here for?”

“For help in freeing him! In saving the Alliance! Getting him away from here and allowing whatever she’s done to ware off, or to find some way to break him free.” He said. “I consider him a son. He calls you his Aunt. I know that you care for him even if your last parting was on bad terms.”

“Anduin sided with his father’s murderers, Greymane! Varian was a dear friend; one of my last connections to my past!”
“And Anduin is barely more than a child, Jaina. He hasn’t had the chance to learn what you have!” Genn said. “If you abandon him to this, leave him enslaved, he’ll never get that chance. Please. We can’t do this alone.”

Jaina remained where she was, standing rigid and fighting to keep her face set in a cold expression but eventually she broke. Sighing. Shoulders sagging. “As much influence as I once had here, Genn, and as powerful a Mage as I am I can’t simply conjure Kul Tiras’ navy from thin air like a basket of mana buns.” She said. “I will try to convince this country to lend you aid but I can offer no promises. And even if I’m successful going through the proper channels will take months.”

“But you’ll do what you can?” Yellow eyes bore into her from across the room.

“Yes.” She said. “I’ll do what I can.”

The Worgen King nodded, drawing his coat tighter around himself. “That’s all I’m asking. Archmage.”
The Heart of Durotar

Dreamer tossed his head and snorted, his white mane and golden coat catching the morning sunlight. The guard who had a hold of him-Ames, Anduin thought his name was, though underneath the standard issue helm he had on it was difficult to tell-sent the Palomino an uneasy look as if he expected the horse to suddenly buck or nip at him. An idea which was preposterous to the young King, knowing his mount as well as he did: he could be a bit excitable, so much so that he’d more than once found himself wondering if ‘excitable’ wouldn’t have been a better name for him, but Dreamer was all together well mannered. Ears perked and large black eyes focused on his approach, the horse whinnied and tugged against his reins, almost dragging the guard off his feet.

Clopping down off the stoop of A Hero’s Welcome with a smile on his face, Anduin reached up the pat the horse’s head. Dreamer shoved his snout into his hand. “Are you making trouble for my guards?” though it was worded like a question for the horse he looked over at the man holding the reins. Green eyes peered out at him through the holes in his helm.

“He’s spirited, your Majesty, but nothing we can’t handle.” He said. “Gideon and Cira will be down with your trunk in a moment; the three of us will be accompanying you on your tour to ensure that you’re well protected.”

Anduin hadn’t had any delusions that he’d been allowed to just run off on his own to any Horde city, let alone its capital. Treaty or not there was no assurance that years of pent up ill will towards the Alliance, some deserved and some not, wouldn’t motivate soldiers or even civilians to attempt to do him harm. And he wouldn’t be surprised to find Sylvanas with some form of guards as well, even if it only consisted of the slate faced red eyed man. “Of course.” He said. “I understand.”

Ames seemed relieved when the Priest took the horse’s reins from him but that relief was short lived as he quickly had to grab his helm to prevent Dreamer from tugging it off by the plume. The Palomino made a disappointed noise and instead sought amusement in making an obligatory half serious effort to eat his rider’s hair. “We’ll be taking the portal to Orgrimmar that’s in Sunreaver’s Sanctuary. Are you ready to leave, Sire?”

“I am.” Valeera was already mounted atop Anur. After a brief moment’s struggle to tie his cane to the back of his saddle, Anduin braced one foot in the stirrup and swung himself up onto the horse’s armored back. His other two guards reemerged from the inn a moment later with his trunk slung between them and, after securing it to a small cart, mounted their own horses. “Shall we be off, then?”

“Of course, King Wrynn.” Ames said as he nudges his horse forwards. “Right this way.”

Exiting the Silver Enclave and crossing the floating city through the Runeweaver Square, they arrived at the Sunreaver’s Sanctuary a handful of minutes later. Horde banners blazed red against the white stone of the gateway they stood in front of. The Blood Elf Mages stationed beside them eyed their party with no small amount of distrust but made no effort to stop them from entering the area. Unlike in the Silver Enclave the windows in the Sunreaver’s Sanctuary didn’t bare anywhere near the number of the Horde symbol motifs but Anduin couldn’t help but notice that there was an astounding amount of blue in the area, largely due to the diaphanous drape of mana woven curtains which had been hung across many of the doorways.

Sylvanas was already there, accompanied by the man and two of her Dark Rangers. Her own mount was a red skeletal horse with a tangle of horns jutting up from the back of its skull. Anduin wasn’t certain on precisely what reaction he should expect from his own horse, but luckily at least
for the time being Dreamer seemed relatively disinterested in the unliving equines and nickered as he was pulled to a stop.

“Good morning, Lady Windrunner.” Pleasant. Polite. They’d spoken little after their visit to the fountain the day before and Anduin was painfully aware that his curiosity had led him to inadvertently stirring at least some small portion of the Banshee Queen’s not inconsiderable ire, and was equally aware that having her any more upset with him than absolutely necessary would only lead to their arrangement being more uncomfortable than need be. Ever the diplomat, and having weathered any number of various breeds of anger including but not limited to a belligerent mountain of an Orc and the misdirected rage of Goldrinn which his father had had so much trouble controlling in his earlier years, rather than shrink away and hope the matter would blow over in time Anduin was determined to smooth things over properly.

“Wrynn.” It was difficult to tell if her words were more clipped than usual. Red eyes panned across his guards. “Quite the entourage.”

“They’re a part of Stormwind’s’ Royal Guard: Ames Cromwell, Gideon Reid and Cira Leighton.” He introduced them each in turn, pretending not to notice their discomfort at his doing so. “And Valeera, of course.”

“Of course.” That same drawling tone. Anduin couldn’t help but think that at least she hadn’t referred to Valeera as his ‘pet’ again. Removing one of her hands from the reigns of her mount and indicating her own guard, she made a disinterest point of returning the favor. “Lyana, Vorel and my personal Champion Nathanos Blightcaller. Any one of them alone would be more than enough to deal with anything your Alliance might attempt to do in one of your cities but for the sake of appearances I thought it best to roughly match your number of guards. Are you prepared to leave or would you like to ‘get lost’ once more first?”

Ames and Gideon exchanged glances. Valeera looked confused. Anduin grinned and adjusted his grip on Dreamer’s reigns. “If I’m going to purposely get lost again, Lady Windrunner, it will be in Orgrimmar. I think we may have managed to find our way to everything of interest in this city already.”

“I won’t be held responsible for your own stupidity leading to you being torn limb from limb by a pack of Orcs.” Sylvanas’ horse’s hooves clattered against the cobbled street as she turned her mount around and prodded it towards the swirling red portal. Vaguely, Anduin could make out a distorted image of rusty sand and towering walls on the other side. “We’re expected.”

The Banshee Queen and her Dark Rangers disappeared through the portal. Dreamer snorted and tossed his mane as the young King turned him towards it as well and followed her through.

He wasn’t even the given the chance to adjust to the by now familiar sensation of post portal travel before the heat slammed into him like a rampaging murloc. Half reeling in his saddle the Priest fumbled with the clasp of the fur lined cloak he’d been wearing, ripped it from his shoulders and draped it across the back of his saddle before hastily undoing the first two buttons of his shirt and rolling his sleeves up to the elbow. Forced into a choice between looking dignified and not dying from boiling in his clothes Anduin would choose the latter without thought every time.

He felt incredibly sorry for his guards despite the fact that they were currently wearing summer armor.

Sylvanas seemed vindictively amused by his reaction. “What’s wrong? Not dressed for the season?”
Maybe there was something to being little affected by temperature. Anduin shook his head. “Nothing’s wrong, just a bit of a miscalculation: I’m alright.”

She scuffed and redirected her gaze forward. He allowed himself to slump a bit further in his saddle once she was no longer looking at him. At least he didn’t need to worry about his leg further troubling him at night.

Valeera wrenched off her hood and let down her hair, blonde tresses spilling over pointed shoulders and down her back. Feeling certain doing so would only serve to make him even hotter than he already was Anduin left his own hair firmly tied back.

Blinking hard against the sting of salt and sunlight Anduin turned his attention to his surroundings. The Dalaran portal had deposited them atop a cliff face which boasted several other permanent portals which, if the area was anything like Stormwind’s Earth Shrine, led to such places as Deepholme and Mount Hyjal. Below them was a valley populated with tents and totem poles which were clearly of Tauren origin. He vaguely recalled seeing a rough sketched map of the city once, years ago now, but wasn’t given the necessary time to decipher what part they might have ended up in before his attention was drawn to the Orc who had approached them, hair silvered and movements slowed by age. From the dark tint of his skin, Anduin would have pegged his clan of origin as Blackrock.

“Warchief.” He greeted Sylvanas with the appropriate amount of respect.

“Eitrigg.” There was little inflection in her voice.

The Orc, Eitrigg, didn’t seem to have expected much else and turned his attention to Anduin. Nodding at him and saying in accented, but unbroken Common “High King.”

Anduin nodded back with a small smile. “Hello.”

“Varok has much he has to see to, regrettably, and won’t be able to see either of you until tonight’s feast. I’ve been tasked with showing you to where you’ll be staying and giving you a tour of the city.”

When the Banshee Queen rolled her eyes it was nearly audible but Anduin got the impression that she’d have reacted in a similar fashion no matter what activity had been suggested. Half of it likely was disinterest but the other half…putting on airs at least to some degree.

“That sounds quite pleasant.” He said. “I’m always one for seeing new places. It’s made me a bit of a nightmare for my guards in the past.” Valeera covered a small cough with her hand. Anduin turned far enough in his saddle to send her a playful glare. “You act like I’m a misbehaving child.”

“I wonder where anyone could possibly have gotten that impression.” Sylvanas snipped.

“You wound me!” The Priest pressed a dramatic hand to his chest but laughter slipped his control and overflowed. “Mildly troublesome is a much more accurate description! At least give me some credit where it’s due.”

Eitrigg seemed bemused by the exchange. “You seem better dressed for cold weather, Young Lion. Coming from Northrend, I suppose I’m not surprised. We’ll stop by your rooms at the inn so you can relieve yourself of you things and change into something more suitable: you won’t make it to nightfall dressed like that.”
Considering half of his shirt had been darkened from powder blue to navy by sweat Anduin was inclined to believe that statement.

They navigated a harshly slanted set of ramps down off of the cliff face that they’d ended up on and charted a meandering path through the Horde Capital’s dusty streets. The city was much more lively than he’d expected it to be, considering that it had been built in the middle of a brutal desert, but in retrospect such a thought had been foolish on a number of levels: for one thing, at least from what he’d heard, Orgrimmar had been built around a comparatively verdant oasis and for another, desert or not, this was the capital of the only Faction of Azeroth able to rival the Alliance’s size and strength.

The inn where they’d be staying for their time there possessed the same esthetic as most of the buildings which he’d already seen: largely built from wood and iron, the red scaled roof was decorated by bladed spikes. In place of a door a tanned hide hung over the entry way, flapping gently in the arid wind. Painted in Orcish glyphs on the wooden sign outside was The Broken Tusk. A small cluster of cacti sprouted behind it.

They were greeted at the door by an Orc woman clutching what looked like a meat hammer in one hand.

“This is Gryshka, the inn keeper. She doesn’t speak much Common but she’ll be able to provide anything you find yourself needing.” Eitrigg said.

“Come, kitten lion. Show room.” She grunted, gesturing him towards the door. “Stable back.”

“Make it quick, Wrynn.” Sylvanas said as he dismounted, pulling the cane and cloak from where he’d stashed them on his horse. “Let’s get this over with.”

He glanced at his guards-Gideon and Cira were pulling his trunk from the small cart, leaving Ames and Valeera to handle the horses-then followed Gryshka into the inn. The Broken Tusk’s interior was dim and smelled of smoke and spiced meat. An admirable assortment of alcohols decorated a set of shelves behind the bar. A few of the tables were occupied-Orcs, Trolls, a Tauren half bent over a mug-but none of them bothered to pay him much mind.

“Up.” She informed him, already having started the process of thumping up a set of stairs. With his cane in one hand and his cloak folded over his other arm Anduin quickly followed.

“Thank you.” He preempted whatever she might have struggled to say upon reaching a door towards the end of the second floor hallway. Apparently he’d caught her by surprise because she took a step back in alarm.

“You speak Orcish?”

Anduin nodded. “I learned some years ago; figured I might need it one day.” He said. “The Alliance and Horde have differences in spades as it is without adding in a language barrier.”

Gryshka grunted in reply and returned her attention to introducing him to where they’d be staying just as his guards lugged the trunk up the last few stairs. “From what I’ve heard about Human royalty this is far from what you would be used to, but mine are the finest fur pallets in all of Orgrimmar! And the meat products I serve here are the best on all of Azeroth: be sure to try some while you’re here. You’ll find yourself wishing to arrange imports to your castle, I promise you.”
She was proud of her business, that much he could tell. “I’m afraid we’re expected at a feast tonight,” he said, “but I’ll be certain to do so before we leave for Darnassus.”

“You’ll regret missing the opportunity if you don’t. I don’t know much about Human tastes but even Murlocs agree with the quality of my wares.” Gryshka informed him. “Call me should you need something, as Eitrigg said. The fur over the doorway is pinned aside by this hook here; should you and the Warchief wish privacy simply unlatch it and pull it over the door.”

They would not be using that ‘privacy’ for anything more than sleeping. “Thank you.” Gideon and Cira set his trunk down beside the window I’ll be out in a moment.”

“We’ll be just outside, King Wrynn.”

Anduin sighed but nodded and watched them both exit the room before he turned his attention to the trunk and popped it open. Hastily pawing through it until he located his ‘height of summer’ clothes and pulled them out. Replacing his long sleeved button on and thick pants with a sleeveless shirt and thinner pants of silk and cotton.

Already feeling cooler, Anduin closed his trunk and with his cane still in hand—for the moment held like an ornament rather than a walking aid-made his way back out of the inn. Dreamer, Anur and all of the other mounts they’d come in with had been taken to the stables. Valeera and Ames had clustered slightly off to one side while Sylvanas and her cadre had done much the same. He thought he might have caught her gaze linger on the curve of his collar bone but couldn’t be certain.

“When Thrall led our people to Kalimdor in the wake of the Third War we founded this city here, in the land named for the former Warchief’s father, with the help of our then recently won Tauren friends.” Eitrigg said once Anduin had rejoined them. “A city of warriors, for all Orcs are Warriors at our core regardless of the class we’ve chosen. I understand that there are those among your race who are the same.”

The young King’s smile was brittle as he nodded. “Some among us, yes.” He said. “Though I think my father would have preferred that I had more than just a Warrior’s spirit.” Resignation and later recognition had both been hard won. He’d had such little time with his father without some chasm or another cutting between them, and even now all the moments that had been lost still pained him. “If I can ask this without seeming rude, Eitrigg, where did you learn to speak Common?

“Tirion Fordring was my Human brother; he suffered great losses to save my life.” He said. “It was through working with him, largely in Zul’drak, that I learned to speak your people’s tongue.”

Anduin’s smile widened. “I’ve always believed that we didn’t have to fight forever. That our differences could be overcome if only we were willing to try. Hearing of such things is encouraging: now that our Factions are finally at peace I hope that more of those friendships can occur.” He said. “That we can reach a greater understanding that will last into the future.”

“I hope for the same.” The Orc said. “Tirion was a good man; it’s not often that you find one willing to sacrifice so much for an enemy. You’re cut from the same cloth it would seem, King Wrynn.”

“That’s high praise. I only wish I could be such a man.” Anduin said. “And please, call me Anduin.”

“Did you know him, Anduin?”
“No.” He shook his head. “Not personally, at least. But all those connected to the Light are connected to each other in turn, in some way. The Ashbringer was one of too many good men lost to the Legion on the Broken Shore, but those of us left behind have a duty to move forwards towards the future. To make their sacrifice worth something.”


“I apologize. The point of this tour is for the two of us to get to know each other better, I hadn’t meant to make you jealous.”

“What an utterly preposterous suggestion!” The Banshee Queen snapped. “I simply refuse to be reduced to a silent ornament while being patronized over the layout of a city I already know my way around on your account!”

That sounded like what someone who didn’t want to admit to being jealous would say. Anduin didn’t breathe a word of that thought but Sylvanas’ death glare made it rather clear his face had betrayed him. “What part of the city is this?”

“I am not a tour guide, Human!”

Anduin aimed a glance at Valeera which plainly said ‘I tried’. The Rogue’s look in response said ‘what did you expect?’ and he had to admit that she kind of had a point.

“Orgrimmar is divided up into a number of Valleys, largely due to it having been built into the side of a mountain.” Eitrigg said. “This is the Valley of Strength, the main center of trade of both wares and ideas. You’ll find things like the bank and auction house here: a good place to go if you wish to deal with Goblins.”

The way he said ‘Goblins’ made it seem like dealing with them in any connection to money was an endeavor more troublesome than it was usually worth. Palm trees reached towards the periwinkle sky on occasion but, for the most part, everything around them was steeped in tones of red and brown. The sounds of voices and footsteps were all around them, interspersed on occasion by announcements of a zeppelin’s arrival or the metallic clang of a blacksmith’s hammer.

Anduin looked into the open door of the auction house as they passed and found that it was, indeed, staffed entirely by Goblins. One of them caught him looking and flashed a wide grin.

“Come on in, Human; money’s worth the same no matter where it comes from and I’m sure a King has money to spare. We get your coin, you see something you like and take home a piece of Orgrimmar as a souvenir. A win-win situation if I do say so myself.”

“They’ll rob you blind.” Eitrigg made a point of steering them in the opposite direction. “Ignore them.”

“If an imbecile makes the choice of getting fleeced, Orc, it’s against the laws of nature to attempt to intervene.” Nathanos said. The other Dark Rangers tittered. Sylvanas said nothing.

“Survival of the fittest has no place is civilized society, Blightcaller.”

The man’s response was a sneer.

Anduin endeavored to change the subject as they turned down an open air street lined with more vendors. “The architecture used here is interesting.” He said. “The giant spines and metal wolf heads are…eclectic.”
“The legacy of Garrosh Hellscream. During his brief time as Warchief he had much of the city’s infrastructure outfitted to weather a siege.” The Orc said grimly. “I think we both know how well that worked out for him.”

“Yes.” Anduin said, staring at the fang lined entrance to the Cleft of Shadows as they passed. “We do.”

A gust of wind rushed down the curve of the street, pushing ahead of it a cloud of dust. Again blinking salt out of his eyes Anduin reached up and wiped the sweat from his brow. They crossed through a gateway into another valley.

“This is the Valley of Honor. It’s recently come to be something of a second Trade District but it’s more importantly-.”

“Oi!” A harsh voice barked in half slurred Orcish. Anduin turned his head in time to catch sight of a pair of Orcs dressed in rough leather stumbling towards them. “Human swine! They only place you have in this city is hanging from the ramparts!”

“Look at his hair.” The second grunted. “Would make a nice pelt.”

Anduin saw his guards reach for their swords but they didn’t get a change to draw them before Lyana and Vorel, acting on some signal he hadn’t caught, drew down on the pair immediately halting their approach. Apparently being in the sights of a Dark Ranger was enough to cut through even the red haze of drunken malice.

“A few of our citizens are a bit too excited to wait for tonight’s festivities to greet you, Anduin.” He didn’t miss the tightness in the corners of the old Warrior’s eyes. “The vast majority are better behaved.”

“I appreciate the effort,” he pulled his gaze away from the pair, “but I’m fluent. Understood everything they say. I’d have mentioned the matter earlier but…there didn’t seem to be a good time.”

The aged Orc threw a last glare at the pair as they walked away, the two Dark Rangers at last dropping their aim and slinking after them. “There are still hard feelings. Some among the Horde find moving passed them hard.”

“It’s understandable.” Anduin said. “I don’t expect my Alliance to be any better behaved. Though, in a perfect world, they’d make things easier for me and respect my decision instead of claiming such ludicrous things as that I’ve somehow been enthralled.”

Sylvanas hissed like an angry cat, nearly making him jump out of his skin. “So that’s Greymane’s line, is it?” she snapped. “Any chance the Old Wolf has he takes! How dare he suggest I’d do such a thing to anyone, even my worst enemy, knowing what it’s like to be reduced to nothing but a mindless puppet!”

The three Dark Rangers appeared equally offended. Valeera’s ears had pinned back again and she’d had placed herself between them; the Banshee Queen’s outburst had left his other guards stiff.

“That was what Genn said, yes. All things considered and seeing as, if anyone is on the hook for manipulation in this situation it’s me, I consider the idea to be more than a little bit unreasonable.” Anduin said, not allowing his own surprise to startle him into giving ground. “Unreasonable has been a good, if intermittent, descriptor for the King of Gilneas throughout history. Where I
understand that he’s lost much to the Forsaken, the cycle only stops if one side decides to walk away instead of avenging themselves against the other.”

“If ‘being the bigger person’ is how you wish to present the reality of the fact that your Alliance is no longer capable of matching up to the Horde, Wrynn, so be it! You’re not fooling anyone!” Her tattered cloak fluttered with a sharp snap as she turned on her heel and flounced up the street, her entourage not far behind. “Finish up with this farce of a tour on your own, Human. I’ve better things to do with my time.”

Set off, this time, by a seemingly innocuous comment. Hopefully he’d get better at avoiding landmines in the future. Anduin sighed and ran his fingers through his sweat soaked hair before turning back to Eitrigg with a semi-embarrassed smile. “So, you were saying?”
The First of Many

There had been a few further incidences but, for the most part, the day passed well. Anduin had adhered to the remainder of the tour and had been shown to each part of the city in turn and given an explanation of each which, he couldn’t help but notice, had been carefully redacted to exclude any information which might have been of use to a military campaign. Old cautions, much like old habits, died hard he supposed and it was also perhaps unreasonable to expect either the Alliance or the Horde to immediately drop their walls and become the best of friends so it didn’t come as a terrible surprise. As the day had grown later the temperature had only mounted and, even in the shade of the towering rock walls which hemmed in the city on all sides, there’d been little escape from the brunt of the desert’s fury. By the time he was returned to The Broken Tusk, parting ways quite amicably with Eitrigg, Anduin’s leg had begun to ache again and he felt as if he’d been boiled in his skin but now that evening had arrived things seemed to be cooling off.

As he mounted the steps of the inn with Valeera and his guards on his heels he nodded at Gryshka and smiled. The Orc returned the gesture before going back to wiping out glasses. Most of the patrons he’d seen earlier had filtered out and now only the Tauren remained.

“Looks like they’ve all gone to watch the formal announcement to the public.” Valeera smirked slightly and bumped her shoulder against his as they crossed the room towards the staircase to the upper floor. “Hopefully she’s finished biting your head off for the day. Do you have a speech prepared, dear King, in case you’re asked to say something?”

“Not a formal one, no. But there are a few things I could say and I’ve always been fairly able to improvise when it comes to speech.” He said as they crested the stairs. “I’d say that I hope to impress them, but in honesty as long as I avoid being pelted by rotting vegetables I’m happy.”

“Rotting vegetables are of least concern, I think. Of course, seeing as your Power World Shield can withstand blades and arrows trash will hardly be an issue.”

“Thank you, Valeera.” He chuckled, stepping into the room he’d been shown to earlier. “I feel much better now.”

“Happy to help.” The Rogue said, smirking back. “You’re grabbing Shalamayne?”

“Tonight qualifies well enough as a ‘ceremonial event’.” Sylvanas wasn’t there. Anduin hadn’t really expected her to be but he couldn’t help but wonder where she’d run off to after leaving him in the Valley of Honor. “And Shalamayne is a part of my ceremonial dress.”

“Oh, did they pack the heirloom plate as well? No wonder that trunk is so heavy.”

“No, they didn’t pack the heirloom plate as well.” He said. “Thank the Light.” Not only was he not a warrior and not really cut out to wear plate for long periods, the helm that went with it…there were more embarrassing things, sure, but still.

“The Young Lion doesn’t sound fond of the lion-face shaped bucket.”

“Because I’m not fond of it.” He opened his trunk again, bent over it and dug out the blade. “It wasn’t even my father’s thing, it was my grandfather’s thing. And where I’m sure he was a good man I never met him. That isn’t me.” Anduin secured the weapon to his belt, then turned towards her with another one of his pinned-on smiles. “Well, how do I look?”

Sleeveless silk shirt dyed the same pale blue as the day’s sky embroidered with burnished gold.
Thin cotton pants in a charcoaled grey color. Hair damp and sword almost disproportionately large at his hip. Pale skin slightly reddened by exposure to the harsh sun. “Hot,” she informed him, “like the weather.”

“I’m assuming that’s not a good thing?” Anduin asked.

“It’s not a bad thing either, it’s just…a thing.”

“Well I am hot, it’s hard not to be out here, so it’s an honest impression. “He said. “I’ve got to head out to the stage in front of the city. Coming?”

“Did my brother expect I’d simply leave him to the Orcs?” shaking her head, the Rogue trotted back out of the room after him. “Do you think your shrew tempered fiancé will be there, or has she abandoned you entirely for the announcement and the feast?”

“I hope I’m not abandoned.” He said as they exited the inn. The sun had set far enough now that the stone walls of the city left Orgrimmar’s streets steeped in lavender shadows. The cooling dry air rested softly against the bare skin of his arms. "Only one way to find out.”

The towering front gate looked even more forbidding in the gloom of near night. Their footsteps echoed against the metal plates bolted along the ground. The open track of rutted soil just outside of Orgrimmar was crammed with the residents of the city, all gathered around the great construct of wood and metal which had been assembled in only a handful of hours. More than a few of those who saw him started hissing at each other but at that distance Anduin couldn’t make out anything of what was being said. Eyes lingered on him, gazes ranging from cold interest to mild hostility to outright malice. On his form. On his sword. On his cane, against which he was only leaning on occasion.

Sylvanas watched him too, standing atop the stage along with Varok, her Dark Rangers and a number of others he didn’t recognize, her expression more unreadable than any of the living owing largely to the lack of the slight twitches which revealed the tilt of one’s thoughts to which the Priest had long ago learned to pay close attention. She only looked away once he’d summited the stairs which led up the side and came to stand beside her and didn’t speak to him.

He’d take the burden on himself then. “I’m not entirely sure what’s expected of me here.”

“Holding your tongue until told otherwise is always a wise start, Wrynn.” So it was still ‘Wrynn’, was it? Why had expected anything else? “Cute of you to have pulled out your father’s sword. You may have grown since your teenaged years but it’s still far too big for you; having trouble staying upright?”

“Not at all.” Anduin said, folding his arms at the small of his back and following her example in staring out over the crowd. The vast majority of the faces looking up at him were Orcish ones, but a number among them belonged to Tauren, Trolls, Goblins, Blood Elves and Pandaren as well.

“Shalamayne is lighter than it looks.” Though that wasn’t to say he wouldn’t still be irredeemably clumsy in using it as a weapon in a real fight.

“I’ll be doing the majority of the speaking, as I am Warchief.” She told him. “Doubtlessly they’ll expect you to say something and you’ll have your chance to repeat your witless spiel about wanting to be ‘friends’. Until then, sit still!”

Biting down on the desire to grumble about being treated like a child Anduin rocked back on his heels, turning his head just far enough to make eye contact with her over his shoulder. “I’ll
behave.”

“You’d better.” The threat which laced her voice made him smirk. Sylvanas glared. The Young King got the distinct impression that, much as she had at Light’s Hope Chapel, she’d have loved nothing more in that moment than to strangle him to death.

A couple of the nearest Kor’kron were now regarding him as if he were mentally unstable. He smiled back at them, a fact which only seemed to cement their opinion, and returned his attention to the sea of faces below the stage though he kept an ear on what the Warchief was saying. The expected basics were all present though they were delivered in an uncompromising manner which made it clear the matter was one of little choice for them. It wasn’t the way Anduin would have done something similar, wasn’t the way he’d announce the news in Stormwind when they made it to the inevitable end of their tour, but perhaps things were simply done differently in the Horde.

When it eventually came to be his turn to speak, indicated by an expectant glare and sharp insistence that a translator would be unnecessary, Anduin murmured a brief prayer to the Light that he’d find the right words and stepped to the edge of the stage.

“I’ve always held respect for your Faction and believed that, at our core, the Alliance and the Horde were little different. Certainly not enough to justify the years of bloodshed which had already come to pass. Neither side is without blame. Neither side is exempt from the damage it has caused. But it is my hope that this can be the beginning of healing. That, one day, we can look at each other and see friends instead of enemies and move on for the good of the world that we share.”

He wasn’t greeted by any sort of standing ovation but more than a few of the nearest members of the crowd seemed at the very least receptive to his words and none of them attempted to pelt him with anything. Most of the crowd seemed more focused on the beginning festivities than him and had started filtering back into the city’s gate. All in all, he’d take it for what it was worth.

“You’re certainly more of one for words than your father was, King Wrynn.” Varok said. “Though, as a Warrior and a man, I respected Varian. He did me a great service in Icecrown. I’ve not forgotten that.”

“He respected you as well, High Lord Saurfang. My father once told me that you embodied all that was good about the Horde.” Anduin replied as they dismounted the stairs, joining the rest of the crowd heading back through the gates. “And, please, call me Anduin.”

“Then call me Varok.” He said. “As a father himself, I think he understood. My son was my pride and joy, as you were his. Had our positions been reversed surely he’d have wished that I would have done the same. Had our positions been reversed I like to think I would have.”

“Let’s hope that fewer sons will die, now.” Anduin said, eyes on the rutted ground at his feet. “And fewer fathers.”

“Spirits will it.” The Orc agreed. “Eitrigg treated you well?”

Pulling a smile onto his face the Priest nodded. “We got on famously; I enjoyed the tour of your city immensely. But, well…” his eyes flicked to Sylvanas who curled her lip.

“Yes.” Varok said. Apparently, he’d been informed that the Warchief had parted ways with him quite quickly that morning. “Gallywix, Ji and Bwemba will be joining our table, Anduin. They’re all eager for a chance to speak with you, though I advise you mind anything you agree to where the Trade Prince is concerned.”
“I’ll keep that in mind,” Anduin said as they reached on of many food laden tables which had been set up outside Grommash Hold; music and chatter and laughter seemed to come from all directions. The first thing which came to mind was ‘any excuse for a party’, “thanks.”

Already seated at the table were Trade Prince Gallywix, the Goblin’s small eyes locked on him in a calculated gaze, Ji Firepaw, regarding him with a similar concern as the Kor’kron had, and a Troll wearing a tiki mask over her face whom he assumed was Bwemba. Knowing that this was merely the first of many nights of announcement speeches and uncomfortable feasts Anduin wasted no time in taking the seat he was directed to. Sprawled across the table were so many platters and flagons of food and drink that the wood creaked and swayed beneath their combined weight. Rougher food than what he was used to seeing in Stormwind, largely consisting of meat and seafood very little of which he recognized. Sylvanas took the seat beside him and prodded moodily at the flagon of red mead in front of her.

“I hope you’re hungry, Wrynn.” She said. “Rejecting Orcish hospitality would be a bad idea.”

“I learned what it means to ‘eat properly’ in Pandaria.” He said as the first platter started making its rounds. “It’s been a few years, I’ll admit, but even out of practice I think I’ll be fine.”

“You seem like a good sport, High King.” The Trade Prince said, shark’s grin still in place. “But, then again, I guess you’d have to be.”

“Anduin, please. We’re all friends here.” Though he made a point of keeping his tone mildly aggressive. “Though I must admit to being curious as to what you mean by that.”

“I think it’s self-evident.”

“No.” He said coldly. “It isn’t.”

Gallywix tilted his head towards Sylvanas. “You make an interesting couple.”

The implication was enough to make his hackles rise. “I hope you’re not intending ‘interesting’ to be a place holder for something more offensive, Trade Prince.” He growled, eyes like sharpened chips of cobalt. “I don’t know about how such things work for Goblins or Elves, but in Human culture partners reflected upon each other. Insulting her is insulting me.”

Those around him at the table were now watching the Priest with everything ranging from detached interest to alert wariness. Sylvanas lightly traced the claw on her gauntlet around the rim of the flagon in front of her, looking the now quite indignant Human up and down. He’d drawn himself up straighter in his chair, his presence suddenly that of a much larger man, and had begun to faintly glow gold in the settling night. The flame bracketed between Shalamayne’s blades, too, seemed brighter than before.

Perceived injustice, it appeared, got under his skin like nothing else.

“Insulting you is the last thing I want to do, King Anduin. It would hardly be good business to offend the regent of a Kingdom I’m hoping to have profitable trade with.” Gallywix said. “Quite the opposite. I wish to extend hospitality of my own. You do intend to spend at least a day at my Pleasure Palace in Azshara don’t you?”

“I do believe that’s on the itinerary.” Anduin drawled, lifting his flagon with mild difficulty. “Along with a visit to Sen’jin Village.” The alcohol was stronger than he’d expected, faintly tinged with the iron tang of blood, and he quickly covered up a sharp cough.

“Da Darkspear be lookin forward ta ya visit,” Bwemba excitedly informed him. “Da baby raptas
are always excited by new faces, though ya’d best be a bit careful. Dey’re fond of bitin toes.”

“I’m sure you’re thrilled by the prospect.” Sylvanas drawled. “You seem to type to mindlessly
fawn over baby animals of all stripes.”

Anduin turned wide eyes on her and asked in faux horror, “what gave away my fatal weakness?” a
number of those around them laughed. “In seriousness, though, aren’t you a Hunter?”

“Not all Hunters require the aid of beasts!”

“Is that any reason not to have a pet?”

She scoffed at him and turned away.

“You speak Orcish quite well, Anduin.” Ji said, pulling his attention away. “Where did you learn?”

“It was a part of my training as a Prince, though the lessons weren’t terribly extensive. Had I
allowed myself to depend on them alone I’d have ended up only knowing about as much as my
father did: enough for a broken conversation, a few colorful threats and a litany of curse words.”

He said. “I’ve always had an interest in culture. What’s different. What’s shared. It’s led to me
becoming something of a polyglot: I’m fluent in Common and Orcish and fairly proficient in
Draeni and Darnassian. I find it’s easier to connect with someone if you can speak their tongue.”

“It seems to have served you well in making concessions.”

“You seem to find me more of a mildly amusing burden than a victory, Lady Windrunner, so is it
really I who made the concession?” Anduin grinned around the rim of his flagon as, for the sake
appearances, he took another drink. “Ostensibly, it would seem I came out on top in this matter.”

“Oh?” narrowed red eyes focused on him in an unwavering gaze, equal parts hostile and curious.
“Do explain how that could be.”

“I’d be more than pleased to.” Setting his flagon down, Anduin propped his chin up on his hand.
“We’ll start at surface level, shall we? I’m well aware that I’m not the only one on Azeroth who
thinks you to be beautiful, though most are too terrified for the rose’s thorns to do much more than
think. And that’s the way you prefer it: I’ll admit I like a challenge.”

“And what challenge could you possibly glean from my not wanting to entertain the fantasies of
drooling sycophants?” she had enough of those among her Forsaken without adding in the living as
well.

“You’re lonely.” He said. “But you won’t admit it. Won’t let anyone near arm’s length of you
because you’re afraid they’ll turn around and leave again and you’ll be left alone.”

Autumnal forests and soft sunlight; songs sung amongst tall grass and swaying leaves with her
siblings; golden coins tossed into the Dalaran fountain and wishes made over them. Then Lirath
had been killed and Alleria had vanished through the Dark Portal and Arthas had taken her life and
her freedom and even her death from her. For years she’d had nothing but revenge and then she
hadn’t even had that and then she’d allowed Vareesa, her Little Moon, in. Her own sister. Flesh
and blood. And she’d betrayed her. “It seems like more of that bell landed on your head than
anyone realized.” She hissed, crossing her arms and she leaning back in her chair. “What could
have possibly given you that idea?”

“That same thing that gives me most of my ideas: observation.” He said. “I’m a Healer, Dark Lady.
We’re trained to recognize something that’s in pain.”
“Clearly you’re in need of more training because you’re yet unable to distinguish the truth from your own projections!”

“Oh, of course. My apologies.” He was grinning, stretching the scar on his lip taut. “Though I think you’re underestimating the stubbornness of a Wrynn.”

“And I think you’re over estimating your charm.”

“I’ve been unflatteringly compared to mold before so I’m rather confident I’m not.”

“Confident enough to place a bet on it?” the Goblin asked eagerly, ignorant of the Warchief’s scandalized noise.

“I don’t normally approve of gambling myself, but in this case,” Anduin shrugged, “five hundred gold, within one year.”

“I hope you won’t be needing that coin, Wrynn,” she said, “because you’ve just thrown half a thousand gold into a bottomless pit.”

The young King seemed unfazed, his eyes darkened by the shadows to the same blue as the night’s open sky above them. “I wouldn’t be so certain that you’re safe from me.” He said. “What’s easier to bring down than that which believes itself invulnerable?”

The rest of the night passed in a haze of laughter, quips and almost too much food to stomach. The half-tensed atmosphere had long since faded, at least around their table, and when they walked away Anduin was left with the knowledge that a surprising amount of a cactus was edible.

“Nathanos will stand guard tonight.” Sylvanas removed her cloak and hung it on the peg on the wall. Her hair was longer than Valeera’s, a darker tone of blonde with tints of bronze. He’d never seen her without her hood before and watched as she freed herself from her spaulders as well.

“Which of your little entourage will be the first to join him?”

“That’s up to them.” Anduin headed across the room to where he’d left his trunk, freeing Shalamayne from his belt and putting it away before pulling out sleeping clothes. The temperature had dropped considerably and frost had settled along the rutted roads outside. There was reason, it seemed, for the thick furs. “Valeera will be joining them and they’ll rotate throughout the night. I’m not certain precisely how they determine who goes first but I trust them all equally so in the end it doesn’t matter.” He said. “Do the undead sleep?”

“Sleep? No. Not like the living do.” She watched him move towards the bed. “Not that we need the rest. It’s simply a means of passing hours; something close to the death that we were robbed of.” Removing her boots Sylvanas crossed the room herself, watching blue eyes watch her as she crawled up the pallet towards him. “You seem calm, little King. Calmer than you’ve any right to be.”

A gilded eyebrow rose. “What do you mean?”

“You’re not at Light’s Hope anymore.” Her hands slid up along his clothed chest, wrinkling the fabric; warm, like the living skin beneath. “You’re little more than a boy and I’ve felled many greater than you with little effort. For all that you know Nathanos and my Dark Rangers have already taken care of all three of your guards and your pet Rogue.” Long fingers wrapped around the pale column of his throat and applied light pressure, feeling his pulse pick up slightly as she leaned over him. Her hair brushing his cheeks. “It would be simple to kill you.”

“Maybe.” He said. “I’ll bite, Sylvanas. Play along and say that you intend to; that all of this was
some elaborate ploy to behead the Alliance at your leisure. You wouldn’t do it tonight.”

“You sound sure of that.”

“I am sure of that.” He said. “I haven’t made your bed ‘worth having’ yet.”

She sat back, hand dropping from his throat to his chest again before she pulled it away. “You’ve a spine, I’ll give you that.” Sylvanas turned her back on him and pulled the furs up over her shoulders. “We’ll just see if you wake up tomorrow.”

“Yes, we’ll see.” He said, curling up beneath the furs himself. “I’m confident enough to take my chances.”
When Jaina had left Kul Tiras for Kalimdor years before many of the cities inhabitants had left as well, some going with her and others simply choosing to seek their prospects elsewhere. When she had returned, however, they hadn’t come with her and by consequence a large portion of Boralus’ eastern most district had been left abandoned: large homes once inhabited by rich merchants now little more than shells in varying states of ruin. Not good for the nations prospects. A sad reminder of what once was and still could have been if some choices made had been different. Though in the wake of what she’d helped the Horde to do in the past and the hand that she’d had in the deaths of her father and brother, Jaina Proudmoore wasn’t regarded with a terribly great amount of trust by the citizens of what had once been her city—which was in large part why convincing Kul Tiras’ navy to aid them was going to take so long—it was good for Gilneas as the general lack of care for what stood to happen to the abandoned district had saved them from living out of the boats that they’d come there in.

For the better part of the week they’d been there he’d seen very little of the former Arch Mage of the Kirin Tor. Most of that time Genn had spent mired in ever mounting concern for the young man they’d been forced to leave behind. Anduin, who was still too young and would always be too good of heart to have his father’s mantle dropped upon his shoulders; too kind to bear being forced into making time and again the hard decisions which would truly secure the Alliance’s future on Azeroth but would in consequence leave his hands soaked in blood. Anduin, who’d been imprisoned within his own body and mind: bewitched into doing the Banshee Queen’s bidding while still under the honest impression he was of his right mind. And that was the saddest thing about it all: that the strength of his will could do nothing to save him because he didn’t realize he needed to be saved.

When they’d first met Anduin had still been very young: only a Prince. Softer spoken and cooler headed than his father. After the shaky start Gilneas had had with the pride of lions whom called Stormwind their home and Genn had come to stay in the keep they’d soon grown close, though for much of those first few months Anduin had been away at the Exodar learning from the Draeni. He’d reminded him, in many ways, of the son that the Forsaken had stolen and, not wanting to see the young man meet so terrible a fate himself, Genn had taken it upon himself to take Anduin under his wing. To fill in the gaps between his father’s lessons on how to rule with lessons of his own in the hopes they’d protect him when he someday came to rule.

He hadn’t expecte that that day would come so soon. None of them had. Anduin hadn’t been ready. Genn had known that and maybe his mistake had been not staying when the mask of happy optimism the youth had all but welded over his true face years before they’d ever met shattered and the emotions he’d always seemed to view as a burden to those around him pooled at his feet like a puddle of shed blood but what was done was done. And though he would never say that he regreted his campaign in Stormheim, regretted destroying that unholy lantern and sealing the Dark Lady’s fate, there were times that he wished he’d sent Crowley and the others on the mission alone and had remained with Anduin instead.

Maybe if he’d been there things wouldn’t have come to this.

How much was the boy suffering, reduced to a pawn in whatever sick game Sylvanas was currently engaged in playing? What was he being forced to do? What would she do to him once his uses, his amusement, ran out? Would she kill him, or would she deny him even death and enslave him again in a wholly different manner by making him one of her Forsaken?
He was drawn from the rapidly darkening spiral of his thoughts by a knock on the door of the house where he’d been staying with the remnants of his family. When he answered it, he found Jaina on the other side, dressed in Kul Tirian colors and looking very much exhausted.

“The place doesn’t look so bad on the inside,” she said once the door had closed behind her, blue eyes sliding curiously over the half-melted furnishings. “You’ve been working on it.”

“I needed something to do while we’re stuck waiting or I’d have lost my mind by now.” He said. “You have news?”

“Not good news.” Reluctance laced her every word. “I already knew convincing Kul Tiras of anything when I’m testing them enough by daring to come back after what I’ve done would be fighting to push a boulder up a vertical cliff face but it’s looking to be even more difficult than I thought.”

“You already put the estimate at months-.”

“And it might turn out to take years instead. I’m trying, Genn, but there may be nothing I can do.” She said. “Many of the nobles here have a hand in the military and very few of them are pleased by my return and my ‘entitlement’. Those that don’t think I’m outright trying to finish this nation off by delivering the whole of the military into the Horde’s hands aren’t sympathetic. They see Stormwind’s decision as reducing the Alliance to the same level. A few want to go to war with Anduin because they see it as a betrayal of his Humanity after all the Orcs and their allies have done.”

“Have you told them-?”

“That he’s likely not himself? That’s a bit too important of a detail to just leave out, Genn!” She snapped. “They don’t care. To them Anduin is just a name and Stormwind just a kingdom. They’ve no personal investment in any of them and no reason to give a damn what fate he meets.”

“If you’re about to suggest that we abandon-!”

“I do have a suggestion, Greymane, but it isn’t that!” She aimed a cold glare at him. “I’m suggesting that we seek insurance.”

The Worgen King’s harsh face shifted from indignant affront to confusion. “Insurance?”

“I’ll continue my efforts to convince them to help us, we’re going to need their help either way as the Alliance is certain to take exception to our kidnapping their King regardless of whether it’s for his protection or not.” She said. “But hiring help may get him out of Sylvanas’ grasp faster.”

“Hiring help?” Genn repeated. “You mean mercenaries?”

Jaina nodded. “The Defias have had success in kidnapping Wryns before. When Varian went missing on route to a summit in Theramore they were responsible.” She said. “They all but surely had help from Onyxia, but they managed it all the same. If they’ve done it once they can do it again, Anduin has no reason not to trust me so similar information can be provided with a fair amount of ease, and for the right amount of coin we can assure his safety.”

“You’re going to gather that information yourself?”

“You’ve already sent Bloodfang to keep an eye on the Forsaken, and with Gilneas’ withdrawal from the Alliance and my relationship with Anduin my doing so personally will raise less questions.” She said. “Not to mention travel is much easier for a mage than for most others.”
“I’ll concede the merit to that,” he said, “but the Defias? Are you certain they’re worth the risk? What about the Bloodsail Buccaneers, or some other group which wasn’t founded on the goal of seeing Stormwind burn?”

“No other mercenary group has successfully kidnapped a King before, Genn. It’s worth the risk.” She said. “When I see him, I’ll check on him. Though I doubt he’ll be in Stormwind currently.”

“Likely not.” Distaste was clear in the Gilnean King’s voice. “He’s likely being shown around like a trophy. Are you leaving now?”

“There’s no point in waiting.”

Jaina’s recollection of the street the house in which the Gilnean King was staying stood on was murky at best but she did recall that the ragged hedgerow, heavily overgrown now and with gnarled roots pushing up the cobbled streets in ragged tendrils, had once been well tended and vibrantly aflour. Kul Tiras had withered in the years which had passed since her childhood and the fact that that withering had taken place in no small part because of her wasn’t lost on her. Nor was it lost on her that the Horde had only truly formed, truly survived, because of her actions. If she hadn’t made even one of the mistakes that she had they’d never have made it to Kalimdor. None of what had come to pass would have happened. Bitter as she was over everything that had come to pass, as many hard feelings as still persisted between her and the boy-now young man-who’d all but come to her adopted nephew Genn was right about one thing: he was young. And with Varian gone and the same pipe dreams of peace in his head which had led her to this, to ruin or at the very least to ruin’s edge, it was up to her to stop him from making the same mistakes. To help him when no one else would because they didn’t even realize he needed it.

The sensation of travel through Mage Portals was so familiar to her by now that it no longer registered. If the Mages who frequented Stormwind’s Mage Tower were surprised to see her—and they were; she knew they were. After how she’d left and so long away there was simply no way around it—Jaina didn’t give them the chance to comment on the matter, sweeping out of the chamber and down the ramp which ringed the tower’s sides.

Stormwind City was awash with more activity than usual, swamped with tides of gossip, all about the same thing. Oh, the royal wedding. Should Goldridge be prepared to take an influx of visitors from all across Azeroth or would Stormwind be able to take them all? How many people would attend? How long would the celebration last? Countless questions, and yet none of them were what Jaina felt they should have been asking. Maybe things were different among the nobles—though even there there were likely to be more concerns about allowing ‘smelling animals’ into their city rather than the fact that they were handing over the Alliance by proxy—but the general populace seemed far too relieved by the end of the constant threat of war to be in any way concerned or wary.

Jaina almost lost her grip when she saw a pair of children playing in the streets of Trade District: the girl proclaiming loudly that she was the ‘Queen of the Horde’ and that the boy, who was apparently meant to be Anduin in their imagined scenario, was going to be her perfect husband and give her all of Stormwind’s jewels. Fists clenched at his sides, the Mage hurriedly made her way to the Keep.

Anduin, as expected, wasn’t there. The Lion Seat, massive and imposing and built from gold and white marble, had been budged slightly aside to make room for a second throne to be put beside it at some point in the near future. In the King’s absence a length of deep blue silk had been draped across it and the guards in the room had been cut in half.

One of them approached her with caution clear in his eyes; in the wake of her less than stable
behavior prior to her departure from Stormwind it didn’t come as a surprise. “Lady Proudmoore.” He said. “The King is away and won’t return to Stormwind until the week leading up to the royal wedding.”

That damned term again; it was difficult to contain an annoyed twitch. “Is there someone I can speak with that knows where King Wrynn is? It’s urgent that I see him.”

The guard sighed and nodded. “One moment.” He called over another and said something in a tone too quiet for her to hear. The second guard hurried out of the room a moment later. “The Spymaster will decide whether or not your concern is truly urgent enough that King Anduin has to handle it himself.”

Mathias. Of all the people that she had to deal with on this matter it had to be the one who was most likely to make the matter difficult for her. If there was one thing that could be said for the Master of SI:7 it was that he was fiercely loyal, a trait which was so rare in Rogues it was all but considered the stuff of story books. A shame that loyalty prevented him from challenging Anduin on his decision or even considering something might be off with his motivations.

Whatever Mathias had been doing at the time must have been immediately dropped because he arrived at the Keep in impressive time. Alert tawny eyes regarded her with a pointed caution as he came to a stop, tar soled boots silent against the patterned tile flooring, and folded his arms at the small of his back.

“Lady Proudmoore.” His tone was all business with no trace of the rapport which once had been there. Briefly Jaina wondered what he must consider her. Unstable? A deserter? If that was really what putting her foot down to prevent service from coming between her and her beliefs he’d gone too far down the hole to ever be pulled back. “An unexpected development to have you return. I’ll admit to being surprised by your…shall we politely term it nerve returning to Stormwind after insulting the King directly to his face hours after the death of his father and abandoning the Alliance in the middle of the Burning Legion’s invasion of Azeroth.”

“The Horde-.”

“To hell with the Horde, you respect the crown!” He snapped. “What do you want? I’ve been told you came here claiming to have urgent information.”

“I need to speak with the King, Mathias.”

“His Majesty is abroad on the first leg of his wedding tour. He’s not to be disturbed until the matter is truly one or urgency.”

“I-.”

“If you think I’m simply going to take you at your word, Jaina, you’re wrong.” His voice and gaze were stony. “You’ll tell me what you have to tell the King. If things are as you say then we’ll call him back to hear you.”

And this was where it all fell apart. There was nothing she could say that he wouldn’t see through and tear down, not just with prejudice but with some measure of pleasure. There’d never been any doubt in her mind about his nature as a vindictive bulldog. Jaina sighed and folded her arms, aware and not caring her posture was defensive. “Fine.” She hissed. “Fine, Shaw. This has nothing to do with ‘urgent’ anything. It’s a personal matter. I need to speak with Anduin, not as the High King of the Alliance but as my adopted nephew.”
“Your ‘personal matter’ can wait until after the wedding, provided that his Majesty has any desire to speak with you at all.” He turned his attention to one of the guards. “Show her out of the city.”

“Please, Mathias!” She hated those women who used large wet doe eyes to pry what they wanted out of men but desperate times called for desperate measures. Mathias Shaw was as cold as the metal that made up his blades and she knew it wouldn’t get her far but she had to try. “Anduin is all I have left and Sylvanas is dangerous! I want to make sure he’s ok.”

The Spymaster showed no sympathy but let out a sigh which almost sounded annoyed. “The High King is, at current, in Orgrimmar. Next week he’ll be in Darnassus. I’m not telling you anything else.”

“Thank you.”

He grunted at her in disinterest reply. “You’d best not linger in Stormwind, Lady Proudmoore. You may find yourself in the stockades for a court martial which, if you ask me, is long overdue.”

Not that containing a Mage as powerful as he would be easily done. “Of course.” Though it wasn’t a terrible amount of information that he’d given her it would be enough and there was no reason for her to further test Mathias’ patience or that of the guards. “I’ll drop by Darnassus while Anduin will be there. Thank you again, Spymaster. I’ll return to Kul Tiras now.”

“See to it that you do.” He watched her make her way back towards the door of the Keep. “I’d advise against making any detours.”

Her smile in response was tight. Jaina was well aware, as she made her way back through the city towards the Mage Quarter, that at least one SI:7 Agent was following her through Stormwind’s streets.
Gold and Gossamer

Anduin had never seen a Wyvern up close before, though from one of many conversations with Baine he knew that they were sentient and highly intelligent in much the same way that Griffins were. Rarnok eyed him thoughtfully from atop his perch, long barbed tail draping down over the back; the wyvern’s face was canine but its mane and body were those of a lion and its wings were large and bat like. Altogether it wasn’t the friendliest looking of creatures, even when it was just sitting there.

“They understand Orcish, Anduin.” Vallera grinned at him as she stroked her fingers through Bristlefur’s mane. “He’ll be less inclined to bite you if you talk to him first if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Usually,” he said, looking back at her, “it’s better to tell someone who’s worried about something with fangs that size biting them that it won’t rather than insinuating it might not. Not that I am concerned he’ll bite me.”

“Then why so skittish?”

“I’ve seen what Griffins are capable of if they’re offended. And they don’t have teeth, Valeera! It’s easy to offend something you’ve never worked with before.”

“Wyverns aren’t as uptight as Griffins. And I’m sure they understand the old saying ‘it’s easy to forgive children, drunks and foreigners’.” She told him. “See, I think he likes you.”

A short muzzle nudged against Anduin’s back and he jumped. Coming face to face with yellow eyes and long canines when he turned around. “Oh, hello.” The Wyvern replied by almost knocking him over.

“Looks like he’s eager to get going, Anduin.” Bristlefur snorted as Valeera swung herself up onto his back. “You two seem to be getting along.”

“Getting along?” He repeated with a sigh, cautiously scratching behind the Wyvern’s ears and receiving a deep purr as reward. “In the past four days I haven’t seen her much. Any of them really.”

“You managed to corner Nathanos yesterday for long enough to have a conversation.” Her green eyes were alight with mirth. “How did that go?”

“Well, I learned that I’m not stepping on the toes I thought I might have been.” Anduin said as he pulled himself up onto the Wyvern’s back. “He’s not and never has been involved with Sylvanas. At least not in that way.”

“So we don’t need to worry about you being murdered in your bed for that reason? Good to know.” She said. “Learn anything else?”

“His favorite word is ‘imbecile’ and he knows a surprising number of synonyms for it.”

“I never would have guessed.” Valeera drawled. “Is she coming?”

“No? Maybe? Later, if at all.” He said. “Apparently I’ve a business deal to arrange.”

“I don’t recall that being a part of Princely training.” She said. “Do you have any idea what you’re
doing?”

“I learned a few things from watching Wrathion.” Bristlefur and Rarnok began to trot towards the nearby ledge.

“You’re not a fan of the Trade Prince.” Valeera said. “Forming an opinion of someone so quickly is rather unlike you.”

“When someone’s that type of person I don’t need to know them very well to know all that I have to.” Anduin hissed. Rarnok’s claws curved around the lip of the ledge. A small stone, dislodged from where it lay, clattered away towards the Valley of Strength below. “I see people, not coins. And I don’t tend to get on well with those who see the opposite.”

“Yet you’re not going to allow your compassion to cause a diplomatic incident.”

Anduin shook his head and the Wyvern he was perched on leapt into the air. Valeera nudged Bristlefur forwards after him.

It was a short flight to the rear gate of Orgrimmar and soon they’d left the city behind. Azshara was steeped in tones of gold and brown, its rolling plains marred by quarries and machinery. The warm summer air-humid and less oppressive than Durotar’s arid climate-was tinged with the chemical scent of pollution that stung the back of his throat.

Gallywix’s Pleasure Palace was a sprawling manor stretched atop a rugged plateau; a jarring track of emerald grass studded with the sand pits and ponds of a putt-putt course and the cerulean waters of a pool the size of a small lake. Expansive well-built decks reached around the crenulated edge of the plateau, tracing along the curve of the palatial mansion built from gold and granite. Prowling the grounds, a number pausing to look up as they flew overhead, were a pride’s worth of jeweled onyx panthers.

“So this is the Trade Prince’s fabled Pleasure Palace?” there was distaste in the Priest’s voice. “By the Light, it’s ghastly.”

“It’s even worse than you think, little brother. You haven’t seen inside yet. Gold. Jewels. Silk. Gossamer. This place would give a Dragon a hard on.”

“Colorful.” He said as their Wyverns banked around towards the Pleasure Palace’s landing point. “Have you been here before?”

“On Uncrowned business. For Noggenfogger.” She told him, grinning. “Not that Gallywix knows it was me.”

Clawed paws thudded against wooden slats as Bristlefur and Rarnok skipped to a stop and shook out their coats. Anduin slid from his back and turned back to the Wyvern. “Thank you.”

Rarnok huffed at him and trotted away towards the raised nests which had been prepared for any arriving Wyverns.

Flanked on either side by towering ash skinned mooks wielding hammers as large as he was the Goblin Trade Prince stood smiling at them, clad as ever in furs and precious jewelry. Gallywix’s small pitiless eyes, set deep into the folds of his fleshy face, took in Anduin’s state of dress with what appeared to be approval.

Good. He’d gone out of his way to present himself as the aspect of his position of High King of the Alliance that he knew the Goblin was most likely to respect: rich. Collared watchet shirt woven
from fine Westfall linen worn open at the neck to leave the heavy rose gold clasp of his mother’s locket on display. Heavy riding boots, gloves and pants all threaded with gold. Raven and lion cane in hand for use, now, as a swaggering tool rather than a walking aid. “Trade Prince.” Anduin inclined his head as they approached. “Quite a place you have here.”

“Of course it is. I do deserve the best, after all.” He said. “Seeing how you’ve greeted me, Anduin, I take it you’re fine with a first name basis?”

Anduin blinked. “Your first name is Trade Prince?”

“It may as well be.” The Goblin said, fur lined cloak flapping around him as he turned. “I didn’t get a chance to talk business with you in depth at the feast those brutes in Orgrimmar held so I’m glad you’ve taken me up on my offer. The Warchief is coming around at some point?”

“To be honest,” Anduin said as he trailed after the Goblin, “I’m not certain.”

“Trouble in paradise so soon? Well, you should have known what you were getting into.” He said. “It’s better that she doesn’t show. Nowhere on Azeroth is more prepared for a royal bachelor’s last hoorah before he’s tied down to a homicidal dead woman than here, but even at the Pleasure Palace business comes first.”

The young King kept his expression calm. “Business is what I’m here for.”

“You put on a good show, Human, but I know your type. Compassionate. Bleeding heart. You’d never make it a single day as a tycoon. Greed and ruthlessness: vainglorious as your Race is you consider these things to be shameful. But me? I’m proud to have those traits.” Gallywix pulled the thick cigar from between his teeth and blew a ring of smoke. “And I don’t hide what I’m proud of.”

“We all value different traits.” He said mildly, twirling his cane in one hand as they mounted the stairs. “And we all have our reasons for it.”

“And yours are whatever will lead to you being ‘loved’ by your people.” The Goblin scoffed. “Compassion doesn’t pay. Hell, if this world were to split in half tomorrow I’d buy the Dark Portal, slap a toll on it and charge the refugees to get through. Not just the last of their pocket change, but the rings off their fingers, a bite of their sandwiches and a contractual obligation to build me a rocket palace in the skies of Nagrand. Supply and demand: that’s the only doctrine a true leader should abide by.”

“That would be where our views differ.” Anduin said, tight lipped. “I prefer to take good enough care of my supply of subjects that they’re able to fulfil the demands required to keep my Kingdom running.”

The Goblin huffed and shoved the butt of the cigar back between his yellowing teeth. “You said that you’re a Healer. Healers have a duty to alleviate the pain of those around them, right?” he grunted. “Even if that pain is caused by loneliness, yeah? That’s part of why you’ve taken on Sylvanas as a pet project: because that black hearted bitch is ‘lonely’.”

“I’ve a number of reasons for my choice, some I’ve voiced and some I don’t intend to. Not to you, at the very least.” A haggard looking maid paused in her work to send them a wary glance before she hurried off. Anduin couldn’t help but wonder how terribly the Goblin treated his employees. “Like you said, I have a bleeding heart.”

“Well, I’m in pain! Dogged by my regrets. I exiled the love of my life within ten minutes of meeting her, you see, and later arranged for the thoroughly accidental death of my never to be
father in law. Everyone I’ve ever known has betrayed me, Anduin, and my limitless wealth and power are all I have! I’m alone! Isn’t it tragic?"

“Very.” He drawled.

“I’m certain, though, that the cure to my woes lies in Stormwind’s coffers. If you’d be so inclined as to heal me with your medicinal skills.”

The Priest snorted. “I got my business sense from a Black Dragon, Gallywix. You’re going to have to do better than that.”

The goblin sized him up as his ring spangled fingers splayed across the wooden door in front of them, pushing it open to reveal the luxurious room beyond. “Maybe you’ll last longer than I thought.”

At some point Valeera had disappeared from sight but Anduin was well aware his sister of choice and, for the moment, sole guardian was still nearby. Drawing generously upon all the grace and poise he’d been taught while growing up in his father’s court, Anduin sauntered across the room and perched regally in the offered leather chair. “Shall we get on with matters?”

“Straight to the point. I always have appreciated that about Humanity.” The Goblin waddled over to a cabinet of alcohol and pulled down a carafe of amber liquid. “Drink, your majesty?”

“No reason to avoid a libation, provided one restrains themselves.” He said. “I’ll drink if my host does.”

“I’m not one to miss an opportunity to indulge.” Pouring two glasses, the Goblin put away the carafe and handed one over before throwing himself into his own chair with much less grace and a tidal wave of confidence. “The finest Suramar Cognac: a recent acquisition to my collection. Perfect for even a royal pallet. Do you smoke?”

Anduin shook his head. “No.”

“After you’ve had one of these,” the Trade Prince opened an ivory case and presented him with it, “you’ll start.” The cigars were thick and nearly black in color, strongly smelling of spice and tobacco. “Use the thumb razor to cut off the tip and then light it with the matches.”

Rather clumsily Anduin did as instructed, snipping off the tip and then lighting the cut end with the match. Hesitant but not showing it he set the cigar between his teeth and inhaled.

Gallywix cackled as he collapsed into a coughing fit. “Like every other first timer.” He said. “Breathe a bit shallower. You’ll stop coughing eventually.” The Trade Prince puffed another few half taunting smoke rings. “On to business, then?”

Eyes watering, Anduin nodded. Looking to relieve the burning in his throat he quickly took a sip of his drink. The well-aged liquor went down warm and smooth: it, at least, was something he’d have to look in to getting more of. “Stormwind has a number of lucrative trade ties with our long standing friends in the Alliance and do quite well for ourselves in terms of textiles and lumber. As outlined in the summit, when matters of trade were discussed, a number of new deals were struck and are even now grinding into motion. You were quick to get a handle on some aspect of most of them.” He took another, shallower drag on the cigar and managed to-barely-contain his coughing. “I take it, from this meeting, that you’re hoping to strike another more specific deal?”

“Luxuries are my forte, Wrynn. Having spent even a moment here in my Palace that much should be obvious.” The Goblin said, tapping the ashes off the tip of his cigar. “I’ll be approaching the
other leaders of the Alliance in due time, and I’m already dealing with the Horde, but since you were around I figured the Lion of Stormwind would be a good place to start. Your court, I’m sure, has a taste for finery. The Bilgewater Cartel would be happy to provide.”

Anduin took another sip from his glass and nodded. “On a theoretical level, that sounds like it could be lucrative on both ends. The Wrynn court, both under myself and under my father, does have a…hunger for the more luxurious things in life.” He said. “But it would all depend on exactly how you intend to go about this.”

“Why, it would be a one stop shop for all your luxury needs. Everything ‘high society’ from all corners of Azeroth available all in one place, only a word away, at your very fingertips regardless of whether you’re looking for Iron Wine or Frostweave Curtains.” He flashed those pointed teeth again. “For a handsome fee, of course.”

Setting his half smoked cigar down on a crystal ash tray which sat nearby Anduin leaned forward, his blue eyes sharp. “How handsome?”

Three hours passed of haggling, more like dogs circling each other than what Anduin would have expected out of a business meeting; dealing with a Goblin in any capacity which attempted to lower the price they were working with was harder than pulling teeth from a badly tempered Naga and the cigar he’d barely touched crumbled to ashes in the tray beside him. The young King finished his drink and twice turned down a refill. Finally, leaving the Human exhausted and the Goblin looking more satisfied than Anduin felt he really should have, their negotiations came to an end.

“Now,” snipping another cigar, Gallywix lit the tip and shoved it between his teeth, “that we’re finished with business we can move on to the ‘Pleasure’ aspect of my lodgings. A taste of a few of the wares I have to offer.” Slipping the box of cigars back into the drawer that it had come from the Trade Prince’s grin grew wider and more wolfish. “Given your clearly displayed taste for Elves, I’ve taken the liberty of procuring a last bit of warm blooded bed company.”

Taken aback, Anduin spluttered “my taste for…? Bed company?” as the door to the office swung open again, allowing a trio of scantily clad Blood Elven women into the room that immediately closed in on his chair. Face aflame the blonde shrank into the leather behind him as if the wings of the chair would be of some protection. “What in the Light’s name are you attempting…!”

He refused to acknowledge the fact that his voice had shot up a number of octaves.

“What’s wrong?” the Trade Prince watched the scene play out in front of him in vindictive amusement. “Don’t you have brothels in Stormwind?”

“I’ve never had interest in such seedy establishments, not to mention such behavior would be unbecoming of the heir to the throne!” One of the Elves had thrown her arms around his shoulders and perched atop the arm of his chair. Another was running her fingertips along the curve of his bicep, applying a light pressure with her nails. The third had begun to crawl into his lap, back arched and ample bosom nearly spilling from the strip of ruby cloth covering her chest. Pants feeling uncomfortably tight he quickly averted his gaze elsewhere. “I can’t-t! T-This isn’t proper! I’m a Priest, and trothed!”

“From the look of him, Gallywix, one would think you’d bought him zombies instead of whores.” Sylvanas’ arrival in the room had been as silent as her sudden appearance at the crypt and, this time, Anduin wasn’t the only one who jumped. Red eyes followed his swift action to extricate himself from the highly compromising position he’d been cornered in and subsequent retreat to the safety of a nearby wall. Confident that the shade of red his face had turned perfectly matched the Horde’s banner Anduin kept his gaze on his boots. “No need to look so ashamed. As much as I
value loyalty, the experience you’d gain from bedding a few like these might keep you relevant a while longer.”

His ears were burning. “And here I’d thought virginity was worth something.”

The Banshee Queen snorted and turned to exit the room, her heels clicking against the marble floor. “I heard rumors that your putt-putt course came equipped with exploding balls, Trade Prince.” She said. “If they’re as capable of damage as I’ve been made to believe it may actually be a game that I can get behind.”
A Day With the Dark Spear

Anduin had spent most of the night prior strategically avoiding Gallywix’s paid company, much to the amusement of both Sylvanas and Valeera, and was beyond relieved to finally be well away from the Trade Prince and his Pleasure Palace. They’d flown back to Orgrimmar late the night before and now, in the still persisting chill of early morning, the young King found himself stood in front of Dreamer’s stall—clearly made to house war wolves, but still workable—patting the horse’s snout as he ate his way through a bucket of grain.

“I think you left those three nice ladies disappointed yesterday.” Valeera snickered, tightening the straps of Anur’s saddle. “Though, I suppose, they got paid either way.”

Anduin aimed a tired glare in her direction and grumbled a half serious “traitor” at her. “I expected Sylvanas not to care, though I’d thought she might be a margin more protective of her new ‘toy’. My sister, however, I thought would have my back.”

“I did have your back. The wingman is meant to encourage that sort of thing not shut it down.” She said. “You didn’t have to go with all three of them, but maybe one…?”

“It’s a matter of personal morals.” He said. “I don’t believe that’s something which should be bought or sold. Not something that should be done unless you’re going to be bound to that other person in some sort of permanence.” Pulling open the door of the stall Anduin stepped inside and slid the bridle between the Palomino’s blunted teeth. “Call me a prude but it’s saved me before. Things could have been a lot worse otherwise.”

Valeera propped herself up against the door of the stall, watching him with a shade of mild concern on her face. “You were more than friends.”

“I was nothing to him. Not really.” Dreamer’s hooves clopped against the hay strewn floor. “He claimed that the Legion was his foremost concern and yet when they returned to Azeroth…Black Dragon? What Black Dragon, they’re all dead!”

“Well, it seems you’ve been once bitten by your bleeding heart already, Wrynn.” Sylvanas brushed passed him and stepped around Valeera to open the stall her mount had been locked in with Nathanos and her Dark Rangers just behind. “Pity you seem slow on the uptake if ‘twice shy’.”

“‘Black Dragon’ is a poor milestone by which to judge society.” He said. “At least you’re upfront about my standing. Perhaps a bit offputtingly so, at times.”

“Perhaps,” the Banshee Queen drawled, leading her horse from the stable, “off putting is the point.”

The sun had begun to peak over the top of the canyon walls, the chill in the air rapidly vanishing. Orgrimmar in the early morning was still as vibrant as it was during the day, if more sluggishly so. They’d be returning the next morning to take a portal to Ruth’aran so it wasn’t the last time he’d be seeing the city but he took the time to take a last look around before pulling himself up onto Dreamer’s back regardless. “Is Sen’jin Village terribly far from here?” he asked, catching Anur fluttering his wings out of the corner of one eye.

“About a two hours ride, most of it through canyons and ravines.” Sylvanas said. “You’re dressed properly, now, so you’ll survive long enough to make it to the Trolls.”

The tone used when she said the word ‘Trolls’ wasn’t lost on him: it was rather similar to when she
talked about anything connected to the Worgen, though it possessed a rounded, weathered quality. As if it were an old grievance stemming from somewhere far in the past. “You don’t seem overly fond of Trolls.” Less so than she was of anything else.

“Elves and Trolls don’t have a friendly history.” She hissed. “When the Horde first came to Azeroth they only made it through my people’s protections because of the Amani. My family suffered great losses because of them.”

The gates of Orgrimmar fell behind them, a dry wind rattling through the rugged scrub growing wild on the craggy ground. The wheels of the cart trundled against the rutted road. One of the boars roaming in a nearby pen squealed. An insect whined near his ear.

“I can’t speak to personal losses as it happened long before I was born but Humanity has a history with the Trolls, too.” Anduin said. “We used to be a tribal people who didn’t really get along in any meaningful capacity, but the threat from the Troll Empire forced us to ally. That was how the Kingdom of Arathor came to be, which then later split into the seven Kingdoms of Alterac, Dalaran, Gilneas, Kul Tiras, Lordaeron, Stormwind and Stromgarde. Now, Stormwind is the only one left: Humanity’s last bastion on Azeroth.” He shook his head bitterly. “If that doesn’t show the cost of war…”

The jagged mouth of a canyon rose before them, throwing heavy shadows across the dry ground. The clopping of their horse’s hooves bounced off the looming walls.

“How did you come to join the Horde?” Anduin asked, cautiously, chancing a brief glance at her through his lashes. The Banshee Queen was making a point of not looking at him. “You and the Blood Elves for that matter. If it’s true that you lost so much to the First Horde?”

“The Forsaken didn’t join the Horde by choice.” She said. “My people were a part of the original Alliance. Most of my Forsaken were Lordaeridian Humans. By the time I freed them from the Lich King’s control the Alliance of Lordaeron had collapsed but a new one had risen in its place.”

Anduin sat back in his saddle in surprise. “You approached my father?”

“Varian wanted no part of ‘abominations’.” Now it was her turn to sound bitter. “The Forsaken needed allies if we were to stand any chance at survival, let alone revenge. It was a matter of any port in a storm.”

“I’m sorry.” He trusted his father’s judgement, though. Seeing how the Forsaken had reacted in the past Anduin could understand the former King’s misgivings, but a part of him couldn’t help but wonder whether or not they might have been able to control them.

“The portion of my people who survived Arthas’ attack on Quel’thalas and renamed themselves the Sin’dorei came into conflict with the Alliance of Lordaeron when they allied themselves with the Naga: Garithos, racist trog that he was, already had a low opinion of the non-Human races under their banner and with the help of his vocal influence this choice was viewed as a betrayal. This view bled over into the new Alliance, until your father found it pertinent to his own ends to attempt to tempt them away. The addiction to Fel Magic developed in the wake of the destruction of the Sun Well led the Orcs to feel something of a kinship with them, which assisted in pacing the way for their inclusion, but it was in large part my support and influence which led to their acceptance into the Horde. Lor’themar and I have a history of friendship.”

“Do you spend time in Quel’thalas often?”

“No.” Her tone was clipped and her horse picked up its speed to a canter. “Unless you’re able to
talk and ride without falling from your saddle cease this pointless questioning. We’ve a long way to ride as it is.”

“I am able to talk and ride without falling from my saddle, yes, but seeing as I’m well aware that was meant as an attempt to make me stop talking, I will.” He said, smirking. “Shall we make this interesting then? Have a bit of friendly competition?”

“That depends on what sort of childish nonsense you have in mind.”

“A race.” He said. Dreamer snorted, picking up his hooves far more than necessary. “Is that the sort of ‘childish nonsense’ which sounds interesting?”

“Your nag doesn’t stand a chance against Geryon.” Sylvanas said. “It’s better you save your pride the blow.”

“Dreamer’s swift enough.” He said, half-challenging. Lips tugging up into a smirk. “I’ll take my chances.”

“Very well, Wrynn.” The skeletal horse’s ragged ears perked up, the pinpricks of lich fire rolling in its sockets. “We’ll race.”

Both horses lunged forward, taking off down the curving canyon at a full gallop. Over the wind rushing passed him Anduin heard one of his guards yelp “King Wrynn!” before the thudding of the hooves and talons of Anur and the mounts of the Dark Rangers and Stormwind guards quickly fell in a ways behind them. The sun flashed in brief glimpses overhead through the overhangs of rock. Dreamer’s hooves broke through chips of fallen sandstone, throwing up a cloud of dust behind. Geryon kept level with no trouble. Sylvanas sent him a smug glance before she dug in her heels and pulled ahead.

“Come on, Dreamer! Faster!” Grinning like a child Anduin leaned forwards over his horse’s neck and prodded him onwards. Leaning into the canyon’s curves. Leaping over logs and large stones. Though he managed to keep Sylvanas in sight the snorting Palomino was unable to keep pace.

The Banshee Queen had dismounted by the time he made it to the end of the canyon and Geryon stood motionless beside the silver curve of a shallow stream. Below, a handful of miles still distant at the sea shore, their destination was visible.

“Well, fairs fair.” He said, dismounting and leading his horse to the stream to drink. “You win.”

“And what, Young Lion, have I won?”

Anduin turned in alarm, blue eyes wide; it would take quite a bit of getting used to before how quickly and silently she could move ceased to surprise him. “Stormwindians usually call bragging rights and leave it at that.”

“Interesting.” It didn’t sound like she meant that. Sylvanas closed in. One step. Then another. Anduin could have given ground, there was nothing behind him to halt any attempt at escape he might have made, but he didn’t. If anything, that only seemed to amuse her more. “The Forsaken don’t function on a system of reward. They function on a system of punishment.” Again, he ignored the urge to retreat which shot up his spine. “If they fail at something it’s clear they require further education. That they still need to learn. And, given your telling reaction at Light’s Hope, you, Wrynn, have a lot to learn.”

“A lot to learn?” he repeated, face rapidly tinting a pleasing shade of pink. “And who’s going to teach me?”
Her black lips curled into a pouty smirk. “Since you seem so adverse to paid company, I’ll have to.” The tip of her gauntlet was sharp against his lip, almost cutting the scar open again. “Though, I suppose, that’s preferable. If I could teach a Human how to properly use a bow than I can teach a Human how to conduct himself to please me.”

“I always have been a quick study. You’ll find, I’m sure, that I make a marvelous student.” His blush had darkened; not quite red, but a pretty shade of rouge. “Though I’m not certain that any such ‘lessons’ can be had in the five minutes we have before they catch up to us.”

“For something so short lived you’ve little grasp on just how much can happen in five minutes.” He wasn’t taken by quite so much surprise this time and unfroze much quicker. One hand finding her shoulder and the other her lower back; gloved fingertips tracing, hesitant, over the exposed skin. Her hands were on his chest and in his hair to better direct him, talons scraping against his scalp.

He still tasted like citrus, this time undercut by the salt of sweat. The struggle he put up against her, now, was more affective but that wasn’t saying much though when she subdued him and drew back he nipped at her.

He had prospects after all.

“I expect you to live up to the beast you use as your standard.” The sound of hoof beats had begun to become audible as their guards approached. “Don’t disappoint.”

They’d each returned to their respective horses by the time their entourage rounded the corner. As Valeera and his guards dismounted and led their mounts to the water the Blood Elf asked “who won?”

“Well.” Anduin said, patting the neck of his mount. “I don’t know if Geryon is simply faster or if it was a matter of stamina but Dreamer did his best and that’s all I can ask for.”

The horse chuffed and pressed his dripping muzzle into Anduin’s chest.

“Your Majesty!” Gideon’s tone was scolding, his expression stern beneath his helm. “With respect, I’m going to have to ask you not to do that again!”

Looking appropriately admonished Anduin ducked his head. “My apologies, Gideon. I’ll do my best to behave.” He said.

The Rogue snickered and muttered “hope you like grey hairs.”

He prodded her gently with his elbow, grinning. “Be nicer to my guards. They’ll look good with salt and pepper.”

“I think we’d prefer to have another few years before we end up with salt and pepper hair, King Wrynn.” Cira said. “We aren’t quite old enough for that yet.”

“We’ve still another hour’s ride before we reach Sen’jin Village, Wrynn. If your mounts are quite finished?”

He glanced at Anur, Dreamer and the other horses which all seemed to have finished drinking. His guards had already refilled their canteens. The temperature would only continue to rise the later the day grew, and things were likely to be much cooler at the coast where they were heading. “We’ll be ready to head out into another moment.” Pulling his own canteen from his hip, Anduin unscrewed the lid and dipped it into the shallow stream. Once it was full, he tightened the lid and
reattached it to his belt.

He pulled himself back up into Dreamer’s saddle and turned the Palomino towards the path. “No more instigating races,” he told his guards, “I promise.”

The fact that he hadn’t promised not to participate wasn’t lost on anyone.

“Getting beaten once wasn’t enough for you?” she looked at him with raised eyebrows, the trickling of the stream falling away behind them.

“You’re only truly beaten if you give up, Lady Windrunner.” He said. “How am I ever to redeem myself if I never accept another challenge?”

“Accept all the ‘challenges’ you like, Wrynn.” Sylvanas said. “The outcome will always be the same.”

The majority of the last leg of their journey was largely open ground but the rapidly increasing nearness of the ocean kept the temperature manageable though that admittedly did little to relieve the fury of the glaring sun. Resigned to the inevitable sunburn the young King shielded his eyes with one hand.

Heat rose from the uneven ground in a distorting haze, a few cactus and ragged scrub joining the occasional jagged stand of boulders in breaking the horizon. Ahead and rapidly growing closer, the Great Sea formed a deep blue line between the red land and powder sky.

Sen’jin Village was comprised of stilted buildings with slanted hay lined roofs, many with multiple levels and open walls. The spread fronds of palm trees and crimson Horde banners waved in the wind and the familiar scent of salt was thick in the air. They were met at the village limits by Bwemba and a pair of male Trolls Anduin didn’t recognize, one considerably older than the first.

“Da Darkspear be excited ta have ya both here Warchief, King Wrynn.” Bwemba said. “A Troll can’t call demselves a Troll if dey turn down an excuse for a celebration.”

“Da baby raptas aren’t da only ones who’ve been lookin forward ta dis.” The younger Troll said, grinning widely around his tusks. “Da little ones have never seen a live Human before, only dead ones.”

O-Oh, that was…nice.

“Don’t mind my student.” The older Troll said. “Bom’bay talks too much.”

“It’s quite alright.” Anduin said, smiling. “I appreciate the enthusiasm.”

“And I’d appreciate not having to stand out here any longer.” Sylvanas snapped, voice sharp.

“Your lodgings aren’t far from here.” Bwemba said, beginning to walk away. “We’ll get ya all settled in and get ya mounts and tings put away. Der’s a lot ta do.”

“Meetin da hatchlings; rapta ridin, provided one of dem will take ya; spear fishin.” Bom’bay prattled on happily, to Anduin’s amusement and the Banshee Queen’s annoyance. “Da last time I was anywhere near a Human was during da Siege, and dat was more cooperating dan getting along. Sure, dere were those Northwatch folks but dey weren’t friendly.”

“It’s my hope that that’s over now. That even if we can’t immediately be friends we can at least get along.” Anduin said. “That aggression can be transmuted into good spirited competition.”
“So that was the point of your bringing up the Argent Tournament.” Sylvanas said.

“It’s a viable option: a non-fatal outlet for grievances and cultural need for honorable combat. And another means through which we can bring the Alliance and the Horde together. Form stable bonds of friendship which will last.” Anduin said. “I’m under no illusion that, if I leave things at our marriage, the treaty won’t dissolve once I’m dead.”

When he looked at her, then, it was with half-suspicion in his eyes, lightened to an arctic blue by the glaring sun. Maybe he wasn’t quite so blindly trusting as she’d first thought and suspected there was more to the swiftness of her agreement than the pegs he’d put on the board at their meeting. “You’d better make certain that your tournament won’t have its own ‘Black Knight’.”

“Of course.” He said as they stopped outside a two story hut near the middle of the village.

“Dis where you’ll be stayin for da night.” Bwemba said. “Ya can tie ya horses ta that bar over der.”

Anduin looked up at the building they’d be staying in as he dismounted, leading Dreamer over to the bar. “I’ve never slept in an open air building before.” He said. “The closest thing would be when Nazgrim locked me in a cage.”

Sylvanas looked at him sharply. “What?”

“I spent a few days in Horde captivity in the Jade Forest.” He told her. “I managed to slip my bonds and get away quickly in the ensuing chaos of Serpent’s Heart, but…shall I say I got a bit more familiar with Hozen than I’d have ever liked to.”

“Nazgrim knew who you were?”

“Yes.”

“And he didn’t try to kill you?”

Anduin shrugged; if any part of that experience had been traumatizing for him he did a good job of not showing it. “I can’t be certain, but I think he may have planned to deliver me to Garrosh.” His guards had returned from moving his trunk into the hut. “Though I’ll admit to wondering how affective just a roof is when it rains. Having grown up in Stormwind I know from experience how wild ocean storms can be.”

Apparently, Sylvanas wasn’t interested enough in his observation to grace him with a reply.

“Da toe biters be on da Echo Isles.” Bwemba said. “Der are bridges between da islands now, so we can get dere without getting wet.”

Having never had the opportunity to see a baby raptor before Anduin eagerly followed the small ground of Trolls with Valeera and his guards close behind.

“How happy he is is utterly repugnant.” Nathanos grumbled. “I’ve no idea how you stand him, my Lady.”

“For the time being, the amusement I can gain from him outweighs the annoyance he poses.” She said. “Once that’s no longer the case I won’t be ‘standing’ for him anymore. But we’ve already discussed this.”

They joined the Stormwind party in heading for the bridge.
The nearly mile long stretch of wood and lashings was secured to the sand by massive stakes of bane and kept afloat by a number of gourd buoys which had been secured down its length at even intervals. The going was somewhat unsteady, the wood planks creaking as the structure dipped beneath their weight. As usual, the members of the royal guard seemed more concerned with the potential the bridge had for giving way than either Valeera or their King and were clearly relieved for the respite offered by each little island in the chain until they finally reached their destination.

The mid-sized island was covered in a grove of towering palm trees and the pale sand was studded with nests of pale pink eggs. Toddling around ungracefully, largely on account of their disproportionately large heads, was a swarm of hatchlings under the watch of a handful of full grown Bloodtalon Raptors. Blue eyes wide as coins, Anduin knelt down in the sand and held out a hand as the nearest hatchling wandered over. Smiling when it sank its tiny teeth into his gloved finger.

“Your Majesty!”

“It’s alright, Ames, I can’t even feel it.” He waved away his guard’s concern and gently freed his finger from the reptile’s grip, scratching under its chin. The raptor peeped at him. “They’re adorable. Hard to believe what they grow into.”

“Grown raptas aren’t dat bad; come and see for yaself.” Bom’bay said. “We got some who are old enough ta be in training ta take a rida. Dey not be an easy ride like ya horses, will try an throw ya off with everything dey have, but if ya up for da challenge…?”

Anduin sent a questioning glance at his guards all of whom looked equal parts bemused and resigned. Valeera laughed. “For their sake, Anduin, at least try to be careful.”

“I wouldn’t be opposed to making the attempt.” He said, looking over at Sylvanas. “Provided there are no objections?”

“They do say variety is the spice of life.” She drawled. “I see no reason to deny myself the pleasure of seeing you get catapulted off the back of a giant lizard.”

The Priest grinned and looked over at the Troll. “Lead the way.”

Half-grown raptors trotted about in lashed together pens, not yet big enough to take a Troll but plenty able to support a Human though the way they looked at him made him feel more like a snack than a rider.

“Ya be nice now.” Bom’bay said to a hissing raptor which had run up to the fence. “Eatin guests be bad manners.”

The raptor didn’t seem to agree, flexing its talons and baring large teeth. That would definitely be a bite he’d feel through his gloves. “Maybe this isn’t such a good idea.” Another raptor attempted to jump the fence with a ferocious screech. Anduin was immediately seized by his guards and dragged to a safe distance. “I do appreciate the offer, though. But I think I’ll stick with the hatchlings: they seem more fond of me.”

“They tried to eat your fingers.” Valeera said. “I don’t think that’s the sort of ‘fond’ that ought to be encouraged.”

“Well, da canoes won’t try ta eat ya.” Bwemba said. “We’ll head back ta Sen’jin Village after we’ve caught dinna.”

Anduin hadn’t spent much time on the sea despite having grown up beside it, a fact which became
almost immediately clear through his graceless struggle to clamor into one of the canoes which they were led to. Unwilling to run the risk of being dumped into the ocean by an unsteady Human Sylvanas made a clear point of choosing the canoe he wasn’t in.

The expected splash occurred almost as soon as they made it out to the fishing spot, though he didn’t take the entire canoe with him. Somewhat of a shame: it would have been entertaining to see his fully armored guards struggle to keep their heads above water.

As with most things Anduin took the matter in stride, laughter coming easily as soon as he’d spit out a mouthful of water. Holding up the spear and the fish he’d managed to capture in his tumble. He was joined in the water by several Trolls and, eventually, Valeera.

Chasing fish through the water wasn’t the smartest way to go about catching them so it was no surprise that the size of the pile of fish in their canoe was much larger. Knocking another arrow on the string of her bow, Sylvanas pegged the Firefin Snapper which Anduin had lunged for with his spear and missed entirely.

Rolling his eyes, the Priest grabbed the arrow and swam over to their canoe. Passing it over and draping his arms over the side. His shirt clung to his shoulders and water trickled down along the contours of his arms. “Showing off, my Lady?”

“It’s hardly difficult to do so when you’re currently the least graceful thing in the Great Sea.”

Pulling the fish off the tip of the arrow, Anduin tossed the Snapper into the pile and handed the arrow back to her. “I think I’m doing fine, seeing as the only other time I’ve really been swimming was when the royal flagship ran aground on Pandaria.” He said. “Coming in? The waters nice.”

“I’ve no interest in getting wet.” She returned the arrow to her quiver. “You’re aware there are sharks in this water?”

“I am.” He released his hold on the edge of the canoe, bobbing freely in the waves. “But with how clear this water is I’m sure someone will see one coming before anyone gets hurt.”

They remained out there another hour more before managing to catch enough fish and then returned to Sen’jin Village. The first thing Anduin did was peel off his soaked shirt, draping it over one shoulder before he turned to help unload the catch.

For a royal, he certainly wasn’t concerned with having to get his hands dirty. Raised scars reached around his back and chest like veins of silver ore on the walls of a mine and the skin beneath them, after a week spent in the desert’s baking sun, had darkened from white to a light tan; the back of his neck, the apples of his cheeks and the bridge of his nose were red with a sunburn which only served to make him look even younger than he was.

He seemed to have made fast friends with Bom’bay and trotted passed her in deep conversation about the merits of cooking fish in an oven versus over an open fire according to the Royal Chef of Stormwind. The smell of smoke from the bonfire which had been built up on the beach nearby was carried back to them on the salt laden wind. They were intercepted halfway there by a swarm of curious children, a few staying back behind the others but most jostled eagerly for a place at the front.

“A Human! It’s really a Human!”

“It doesn’t have tusks!”

“It’s hair is yellow!”
“Stay back, Malta! Mother says they’re vicious!”

“Vicious?” smiling, which seemed to make a few of the children even more nervous, he crouched down to their eye level. “That’s rather silly; I may be a lion but I promise I don’t bite.”

Leaving the Priest to entertain the young Trolls under the watchful eyes of his guards Sylvanas and her Dark Rangers headed over to the fire. The sun was hanging just on the edge of dipping below the horizon and the night was growing darker every moment. The fish they’d caught had been hung across the roaring fire on a handful of spits. Over the sounds of drums and singing splashing and laughter could be heard as Anduin and the children chased each other around in the shallows.

“I’ve never understood how he can be so good with children regardless of what race they are.” Valeera, carrying the blonde’s damp shirt in one hand, had left the Stormwind guards standing at the water’s edge and approached the fire. The Rogue didn’t come any closer than was necessary to be in earshot and dropped the sopping fabric over the back of one of the logs which had been dragged around the fire to dry. “He’d have made a good father.”

“It’s hardly difficult to be ‘good’ with children when you’re little more than an overgrown child yourself.” Sylvanas drawled, watching Anduin get swamped by a pair of splashes from the front and the flank. “For a cripple he can certainly run.”

“He’s better in warm weather.” Valeera said. “And it probably hurts to run around like that, but he’s doing it anyway because he’s having fun. That’s always been how he is.”

The uneven splash fight had come to an end, the overwhelmed King admitting defeat. The children had gathered around him in a conspiratorial huddle and Anduin, when he caught her looking, plastered an overly innocent smile onto his face. “What are you up to now, Wrynn?”

“Nothing with ill will behind it.” The Blood Elf said, watching the exchange as well. One of the children took off running back towards the village while the others snickered among themselves. “He’s mature beyond his age, always has been, and because of that bitch he never got to have a real childhood. Is it so unreasonable that he’d want to relax when given the chance?”

Sylvanas didn’t bother to reply. The Troll had returned holding one half of a coconut which he handed over. Anduin took it, grinned, and dripped it into the water.

“He tries to be optimistic and happy all the time no matter what he’s really feeling, how much he’s really hurting inside, because Katrana made him think that showing emotions beyond that was to burden others unduly.” Valeera said. “But sometimes it’s too much even for him. After Varian… it’s as much encouraging as it is concerning that he can put forward that front again though I know he’s still in pain.” Her green eyes narrowed, ears laying back. “He doesn’t deserve to be shackled to you.”

The hiss of Anduin’s footsteps in the sand put an end to their conversation and both turned to look. He’d rolled his pants up to his knees and a thin layer of sand clung to his bare skin half way up his calves. He was holding something behind his back and mischief was aflame in his eyes. “I hope you two are at least trying to get along.”

Valeera’s response was a tense smile.

“What are you hiding?” Sylvanas demanded.

“Nothing.” The reply was made too quickly to be in any way believable.

“What-?” she saw the movement coming before he made the attempt to dump the water on her
head and was able to dodge the prank with ease. The coconut half hit the sand with a soft thump as he turned on his heel and bolted a split second before she was up on her feet and after him.

“Wrynn!”

Sylvanas came within a hair’s breadth of grabbing him before Anduin darted to the left and into the water. Turning back once he was up to his shoulders, grinning ear to ear. “If you want to get me you’re going to have to come in here.”

The Banshee Queen looked down at the water, back up at him and then lunged into the surf. Apparently Anduin hadn’t expected her to actually come into the ocean because he turned a slight shade paler and attempted to swim out of reach but didn’t make it very far before she caught him by the ankle.

“He’s lively enough for da both a dem.” Bwemba said, watching Anduin attempt to squirm out of the Dark Lady’s grasp.

“He’s lively enough for the entirety of the Forsaken and then some.” Valeera said. “The brightest burning flame I’ve ever seen.” And she worried for him every night because of it.
Connections

As far as Tess Greymane was concerned there’d been enough fighting already. Yes, she’d lost her home. Yes, she’d lost her brother. Yes, she’d lost her land but where did it stop? At what point did ‘retribution’ become ‘predation’? At what point did they themselves become the monsters that they claimed to be hunting? She’d been concerned about the way that vengeance had consumed her father in the wake of the Broken Shore but had allowed assurances from Lorna and others as well as her own denials to placate her as he twisted more and more into a man she barely recognized. A man who wasn’t her father. When news of Anduin’s decision had come down, along with her father’s choice to leave the Alliance behind in response, Gilneas had split down the middle but it wasn’t until she’d caught wind of his plan to kidnap the King that she’d been forced to move from her position of neutrality to join Lorna and her father on the opposite side of the divide from her own though she’d still kept quiet on it for the time being.

And then there was the matter of Ivar Bloodfang and his pack, which was an entirely different concern all together. She’d thought that her father’s desperate obsession with the narrative that Anduin was bewitched had been bad enough but that was before she’d learned of the Bloodfang Alpha’s-admittedly more grounded in reality-belief that her friend ought to be condemned as a traitor and ripped limb from limb in the streets. Invaluable as he’d been in the battle for Gilneas, now his brutal nature only served to make her nervous on the best of days and she couldn’t help but consider it a small mercy he’d been sent away to Silverpine to keep an eye on the Horde.

And then after that she came to the matter of Jaina’s plan to hire the Defias and use them to separate the King and the Warchief during their visit to Darnassus. She’d been forced by her membership in the Uncrowned during the Legion’s invasion of Azeroth to work with the woman—which was, in large part, why she’d been selected to approach the crime syndicate on the matter and knew from that experience that Vancleef could be kindly considered unstable.

Tess would be lying if she tried to claim she hadn’t been tempted, more than once, to fly to Stormwind instead and warn the Alliance of what her father planned. The only thing that stopped her was the desperate hope that he would reconsider before he went through with something which they’d all end up regretting and could very well end in Anduin being killed.

Hesperus rustled his black plumage, tilting his wings downward and beginning a steep descent towards Moonridge. The years which had passed since the Cataclysm had done nothing to change the plight of Westfall from when she’d last seen it, an area which had been beset with poverty and homelessness even before then. All of the funds which might potentially have gone towards relief for the suffering and starving had instead been pumped into funding the endless war efforts against the Lich King and the Twilight’s Hammer and the Horde and it was in no way lost on Tess that the treaty the wedding which her father was trying desperately to prevent would seal might finally change that. The village was rundown, quiet as the grave and all but entirely abandoned. Darkened windows and broken doorways staring out into the ravaged streets like vacant eyes and gaping mouths.

The Griffin’s talons clattered against the broken store as he landed out front of the inn and allowed her to dismount before taking off again, blending in with the dark night above. The Defias’ predictable tendency to return time and again to the Dead Mines left her wondering why Stormwind’s guard hadn’t put a final stop to them years ago but at least it worked to her advantage in that it made Vanessa and her pack of violent thugs easy to find when there was need of them.

Despite being there for business Tess didn’t trust a member of the gang not to knife her in the back
if she simply walked in so she slipped into the thick shadows and made her way across the
creaking floorboards as quietly as she could, down into the curving tunnels below. Slipping around
gang members which crowded the pick scarred passages and out onto the floating docks. Where
they’d gotten their hands on another ship—if it was stolen or if they’d built it themselves, though
that raised a whole new set of questions regarding where they’d gotten their hands on the necessary
materials—floated in the choppy waves.

Cannons lined the decks, their pewter muzzles gleaming in the moonlight and each with a pallet of
cannon balls beside them. The upper deck, unlike those below, was empty. Tess scanned the area
with caution before she crept across it towards the Captain’s Cabin but only made it half way there
before a glowing blade was slipped around her throat.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t Little Miss Greymane.” Vanessa hissed in her ear, voice as sharp as her
blade, “What are you doing here, Princess? Did Wrynn get tired of sending in guards and SI: 7 and
hired bands of marauding idiots after us so he thought a one women army would suffice in their
place? The King didn’t strike me as the type to send in an assassin and even if he was I’d have
expected the one he chose to be Shaw. Or am I not worth Mathias’ effort?”

“I wasn’t sent by Anduin, I was sent by my father.” No matter have much she might wish
otherwise. “Gilneas is no longer a part of the Alliance.”

“Oh, yes, the Royal Wedding. We did hear about that.” She said. “Leave it to a Priest of the Holy
Light to be so incredibly deviant as to have a taste for the dead.”

“He doesn’t!”

“Ohh? It sounds like someone’s upset on their friend’s behalf. Or maybe they’re just jealous?”
Vanessa simpered. “Everyone thought he’d marry you, with how close Gilneas and Stormwind
have become. Do you feel scorned? Rejected?” Gloved fingers picked at her hair. “Sorry dear, but
you’re nothing next to a High Elf and men are all the same when it comes to certain assets you’re
somewhat…lacking in.”

Tess was perfectly secure in her appearance, thank you very much. “This has nothing to do with
anything of the sort!”

“Family loyalties, then? How cute.” Vanessa’s grip on her tightened, rapidly making Tess’
shoulder go number. “What are you here for then, Greymane?”

“Gilneas would like to hire the Defias for a job, by recommendation of Jaina Proudmoore.” She
said. “You have experience doing what we’ll need you to. And we’ll pay well, provided
that you deliver Anduin Wrynn to Kul Tiras alive. Preferably before the wedding.”

“Gilneas wants to hire us to kidnap the King of Stormwind?” the other woman released her and
stepped away, dark eyes narrowed and gazing hawkishly over the top of the red bandana secured
over the bottom half of her face. “You’d better pay more than well if you want to convince us
better of keeping the Young Lion for ourselves. No better taxidermy to make a trophy out of than
the King of Beasts, after all.”

“You’ll be paid well if you turn him over to us alive, Vancleef. If one of your thugs kills him it’ll
mark the end of the Defias, I assure you.”

“Why? Because the Alliance will be after us? Because the Horde will approve of our goals but not
our methods?” Vanessa scoffed. “I’ve got news for you, Princess, that’s nothing new. Varian
Wrynn’s hired mutts took my father’s head, so why shouldn’t I avenge him by taking the head of
Varian’s son?”

“The price is 120,000 gold.” Tess said. “If you bring Anduin to Boralus alive you can negotiate for more but if you kill him you’ll never see a single coin.”

“And what makes you think that monetary gain is worth more to me than long awaited revenge?”

Tess looked away, her grey eyes panning out across the moonlight gilded waves. “There will always be another chance at revenge; you’ve waited this long so what’s a little longer? But there won’t be a chance to get the money after this one: if the Defias won’t do it we’ll hire someone else who will.”

The other woman huffed and folded her arms. “Tell your father that we’ll do it for no less than 150,000. 200,000 if he wants Wrynn is one piece.” She said. “And we’re going to need to know where he is: I hear the Kings not in his city at the moment and won’t be coming back for a while.”

“I’ll let him know. You’ll have your gold.” Tess said, reluctant. “He’ll be in Darnassus by tomorrow. Will stay there for the rest of that next week. We don’t know anything beyond that but I’m sure there’ll be plenty of time for your people to find a chance to make a move.”

“So we have to do all the work, Princess?”

“Isn’t that what we’re paying you for?”

“Mostly for the King’s safety.” She said. “We’ll be paid when we get him to you?”

“The gold is the only thing keeping Anduin safe.” Tess said. “We’re not about to hand it over to you beforehand.”

Vanessa sneered. “We’ll make a move in Darnassus.” She said. “If we don’t get him then we’ll crash the wedding, but we’ll expect another couple thousand added on to the price for our efforts.”

“That’ll be between you and my father, Vancleef.” Tess said. “We have a deal?”

“The Defias Brotherhood are happy to do business with Gilneas.” She turned her back on her and began walking back into the Captain’s Quarters. “Don’t expect to have Wrynn for very long.”

Soon after, Tess found herself alone on the ship’s deck.
Easy as the sweltering climate had been on his old wounds Anduin wouldn’t miss Durotar’s oppressive heat overly much. Their time in Orgrimmar and the surrounding areas had, at least for him, been enjoyable even when one factored in the debacle at the Pleasure Palace and the instances of persisting tensions with some of the citizens which had taken place.

“Sad to be leaving?” Valeera asked, pushing her hair out of her face.

“A bit.” He said. “Though it will be nice to get back to a bit of cooler weather. Even knowing that this is likely to be the most…uncomfortable leg of the trip.”

“If nothing else it’ll be an interesting test of Tyrande’s ‘tolerance’.” She said. “I didn’t get to ask you earlier, during the ride in from Sen’jin Village. How was last night?”

“Fine.” Anduin said, adjusting his grip on Dreamer’s reigns. “What do you mean how was it?”

“She tried to drown you on the beach yesterday. I think I’m right to worry about how seven hours alone in the dark with her went.”

“I’m crippled, sure, but that doesn’t mean that pushing me into the ocean equates to trying to drown me Valeera. She only held me under for a handful of seconds.” He said. “Considering her reputation I think that’s small punishment for trying to dump water on her head.”

“You’re forgiving nature is going to get you killed, Anduin!” She said. “You do realize that?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Better to take the risk, I think, than to live a bit longer curled up in a corner.” Anduin lay his weight into the stirrups, raising himself up a bit from the saddle and looking around. The Mage who was scheduled to open the portal they’d be taking over to Ruth’aran had yet to arrive. As had come to be somewhat of the norm Sylvanas had sequestered herself off to one side along with her Dark Rangers and was paying him so little attention he may as well not have existed. Considering the fact she could have been glaring instead Anduin supposed he’d take things the way that they were at current, at least for the time being. “Sleeping all but under the stars was nice. I could hear the ocean and the other night sounds without having to go through the trouble of opening a window.”

“Oh, terrible trouble.” Valeera snickered.

“Well, when Maria seems hell-bent on keeping every window and door in the Keep closed at all times it is a bit of trouble.” He said, grinning back at her. “Though I suppose it’s understandable, considering the trauma.”

“Trauma?” she repeated. “What trauma?”

“While the Legion was still on Azeroth a Fel Bat flew in through one of the windows. The window was closed at the time so closing open ones doesn’t really solve the matter and…oh, don’t look so upset about the fact that I didn’t tell you earlier, you were busy with the Uncrowned the thing was simply disintegrated with a handful of Smites and it’s hardly important now.”

“Did anything else happen while I was working with the Uncrowned that I don’t know about?” Valeera asked, tone half amused and half resentful. “I know that Mathias got replaced by a Nathrezim, but did an Annhili walk in through the front gate? Maybe a couple of Eredar were patronizing the bars?”
“Nothing else happened, I promise.” He laughed. “By the Light, Valeera, you’re such a mother hen!”

“Someone has to keep an eye on you! You find more trouble now than when you were a Prince!” Valeera said. “Your guards deserve a raise for the undue stress you put the poor things through.”

“You act like I’m a magnet for disaster.” The Blood Elf raised her long brows. Anduin huffed. “Fine, I am a magnet for disaster but I don’t do it on purpose.”

“I wish you did, because then you could stop.”

“Well,” he said with a small smile, “I’ll concede that point. Oh, I think the Mage has arrived.”

Valeera followed his gaze and soon caught sight of an Orc dressed in blue robes hobbling closer with a staff in his hands. She couldn’t dredge up much more than a vague relief to see him, trodden on quite thoroughly by heat exhaustion. “Though admittedly I’d take the Kal’dorei over the Quel’dorei I’m not the biggest fan of Night Elves either. Broll being the exception.”

“The wide spread view of the younger races as needing their guidance can be grating at times but I respect them all the same. Tyrande and Malfurion have both been important aids in the past and though I know I’ve tested their patience terribly with this…I’m thankful that the Alliance didn’t fracture even more than it already has.” Anduin’s eyebrows drew together into an expression of concern which, from afar, might have appeared to be a wince against the glaring sunlight. “I know it hasn’t been terribly long but I wonder…” he shook his head, cutting himself off mid-sentence. “I shouldn’t be dwelling on it.”

“Gilneas?” she asked. The Mage had completed the process of etching out the necessary Runes to stabilize the portal for use by non-Mages and had moved on to creating the Portal itself.

Anduin nodded, the skin around his eyes tightening. “I promised to respect their decision and I intend to. Whether or not they come back is their decision as well. I can’t will it to happen or not to happen and I can’t make it happen any faster by continuing to think about it but…”

“You’re worried.” The young Priest’s answer was an almost helpless shrug. “I can’t tell you that you’re wrong to be because I don’t believe you are. Genn Greymane is nothing if not stubborn and he’s shown himself capable of holding out one hell of a grudge. But if there’s anything we really need to worry about Mathias and the SI: 7 are all but certain to know about it.”

“Provided that it happens somewhere they have eyes.”

“Which is nearly everywhere. And if any Worgen do attempt to pull something I’m sure your wife to be would protect you from them purely out of spite.”

His attempt to look disapproving was ruined by the ongoing effort to fight off a smile. “Valeera.”

“Don’t scold me, little brother, we both know it’s true.”

Losing the fight quite spectacularly Anduin switched tactics, trying to hide his smile by turning away from her. “It looks like the Portals just about ready. We should start moving over.”

A call to similar affect went up moments later and both nudged their mounts over towards the swirling portal. Vaguely, through the glittering distortion, Anduin could make out what looked like green grass and the dark blue waters of the ocean.

“I’ve never found Night Elves to be terribly compelling.” Geryon’s glowing eyes rolled in the
horse’s empty sockets to focus on Anduin as the Banshee Queen pulled level with them. He couldn’t help but find the piercing gaze unnerving. “I do hope your nature loving friends can work up the necessary effort to make this coming week something more than dull.”

‘Dull’ wouldn’t have been the thing Anduin would have chosen to hope their coming visit wouldn’t be. In fact, he’d gladly exchange ‘dull’ for the more likely reality of ‘uncomfortably tense’. “I thought High Elves had a connection with nature as well.”

“There’s a difference between a connection and an obsession.” Sylvanas said. “My people never went so far as to inhabit a giant tree!”

“I think that’s just a story.” He said. “I’ve been to Darnassus before, just prior to the Cataclysm. We took a Mage Portal straight there so I didn’t get the chance to see Teldrassil’s surroundings but…it would take quite a tree indeed to have mountains on top.”

Red eyes fixed him in a steady, unimpressed gaze. “It’s utterly unbelievable that a man whose so incredibly sheltered could have found himself at the head of one of Azeroth’s strongest Factions.”

Anduin couldn’t help but think that she’d brought up a fair point; perhaps had his father not been quite so protective he might have been slightly better prepared for the realities of not just leading one single Kingdom but being the final arbiter of choice for many. Any of the other leaders, arguably, would have been more qualified for the position of the Alliance’s leader owing to years more experience and a knowledge of what it truly meant to be at war. “All things considered, Lady Windrunner,” he said, nudging Dreamer towards the portal again, “I think I’m doing well enough at managing my position. ‘Sheltered’ or not.”

Passing through the portal felt like walking through a curtain of cold water, a brief arcane charge lingering over his skin as his new surroundings sharpened into focus. Ruth’aran Village was drenched in the cool violet tones of the pseudo twilight which always seemed to accompany the Night Elves wherever they went. Green grass and wild flowers hedged along white, cobbled pathways and the violet leaves of towering trees hissed softly in the winds. After so long beneath Durotar’s harsh sun and baking heat, the sudden chill sent gooseflesh racing up his arms. His guards kept quiet but he could practically feel the relief radiating off of them and it made him smile. Not long after the last of their party stepped through the portal collapsed behind them.

A Night Elf man stepped forward and bowed, drawing Anduin’s attention away from his surroundings. “Elune adore, High King. Warchief. High Priestess Tyrande and Shan’do Stormrage are both waiting to speak with you at the Temple of the Moon.” He said. “It’s been arranged that your mounts will be taken through the portal to Darnassus while you’re given the chance to take in Teldrassil’s true scope from Hippogriff back.”

“Thank you; it’s an honor to be given the chance to stay in Darnassus this coming week.” Anduin said with another smile before sliding off his horse and turning to his guards.

“King Wrynn?” Gideon asked.

“I’ll keep Valeera with me and I’m able to defend myself should push come to shove so there’s no need to worry.” He told them. “The flight up to Darnassus should take the better part of an hour. Please, take the time to rest. Dressed in full plate I know that Durotar was hard on all of you.”

Relief waring with reluctance the three Stormwind guards bowed their heads. “Of course, your majesty. We’ll rendezvous with you at the Temple.”

Seeing as they were now in a firmly Alliance holding Anduin had hoped that they’d have agreed to
take a bit more down time than that but, well aware all three of them would sooner drop dead than
leave him undefended and within ten miles of the Warchief he wasn’t about to order them to.
Affixing his smile in place rather than attempting to argue, he nodded. “Thank you. I’ll see all
three of you then.”

Cira took Dreamer’s reigns in her free hand and led the Palomino alongside her piebald horse
towards the pale pink portal which glowed beneath the stilt-like roots of a particularly tall tree.
Nathans had hold of Geryon and led the way for the small party of Dark Rangers Sylvanas had
brought with her. Anduin sent her a look of mild confusion and was greeted with a sneer.

“I don’t require protection from anyone, Wrynn, even in an Alliance holding.”

“I hadn’t meant to insinuate that you did,” he said, aware of the Night Elf’s somewhat nervous
stare. “I simply didn’t realize he was capable of being more than twenty feet away from you. Or,
perhaps, the other way around?”

Sylvanas scoffed. “You’re already well aware that the history between Nathanos and I is nothing of
that sort!”

“A foolish presumption on my part in retrospect,” Anduin stepped around her, smirking, “seeing as
then I wouldn’t be needed.”

She hissed at him as he sauntered down the cobbled path towards the Hippogriff stand, barely
registering the fact that the Night Elf was staring at him in what clearly amounted to concern for
his mental state. It spoke to how often he’d been subjected to similar looks recently that he barely
noticed.

Hippogriffs were another creature the like of which he’d never had the chance to ride before.
Unlike Wyverns they didn’t possess sharp teeth and massive fangs so he was much less leery of
approaching them. One of the massive bird horses raised their antlered head, blue toned feathers
glinting in the dim light, and clicked its matte black beak. His father had told him, a few times and
only in passing, of Sharptalon. Run through by another stab of bitter nostalgia Anduin extended a
cautious hand and the nearest Hippogriff examined him briefly before allowing him to touch its
feathers.

“Spryclaw and Softscreech will get both of you safely to your destination, High King.” The Night
Elf told him. “I’ll set your friend up with one of the others; her mount will be able to catch up with
yours in a handful of minutes.”

“I did promise Gideon and the others that I’d be guarded.” He said, feeling only mildly guilty at
the prospect of going on alone. Even if it would only be for a short time. “Should we go ahead,
Valeera, or would you rather we wait?”

“I’m sure that you’ll be fine for five minutes, Anduin.” She said, though Valeera allowed her gaze
to linger threateningly on Sylvanas. “I wouldn’t be able to do much to help you anyway if she
decides to knock you off that Hippogriff or shoot both it and you out of the sky.”

“I doubt she’d resort to that, seeing as there are countless more satisfying ways to kill me. And
that, by this point, she’s had about a week’s worth of chances.” Turning to Sylvanas, he asked
“shall we?”

“I’ve no want of lingering here all day!” The Banshee Queen pushed passed him, mounting
Spryclaw with an effortless grace which Anduin was well aware he could never emulate.
Especially not now that his leg was the way it was.
Pulling himself onto Softscreech’s back and settling his cane across his lap, the young King nodded at Valeera once more before being whisked away.

There were patterns of white and grey feathers in the Hippogriff’s wings which reflected the glint of sunlight off the waves below. Ruth’aran fell away rapidly behind them, replaced soon after by a cluster of uninhibited islands and the breaching tips of what looked like giant roots which flashed by in quick succession. And then, through the evening mist and twilight, Anduin saw it.

Teldrassil really was a giant tree; the biggest that he’d ever seen; bigger than Anduin would ever have imagined. It was difficult for him to conceive of how it could be possible that such a tree could actually exist. The bark held the faintly metallic silver sheen of star light and was latticed with graceful lines and patterns. Undulating and curving around and upwards higher and higher until trunk gave way to bows as thick as air ships, gnarled and overgrown with great leaves which were even at their smallest many times his height and shined with dew drops which held the milky white gleam of the moon. Mesmerized and enchanted by the scenery which rushed around and passed them the King felt like a child again.

They were approaching the canopy of the great tree rapidly now, the Hippogriffs which they were perched atop bobbing and weaving between the curling leaves without touching even a single one of them despite how impossibly close they seemed to press together. Up, up, up and then, finally, they were free of the canopy. Rising upwards along the dark rock of what he realized with a start was land. A whole continent’s worth of land perched as securely atop Teldrassil’s branches as if it were attached to the rest of Kalimdor far below. Mountains and forests. Hills and meadows and glens. All of it on top of a tree.

Anduin would never be able to look at the place the same way again, half out of appreciation for the magical nature of it all and half out of the-perhaps irrational-concern that one misstep and he’d send them all crashing back to the earth. Darnassus opened up below them; a majestic pairing of graceful marble architecture stunningly blue canals and lush well-tended gardens maintained by Druidic magic. Glowing will-o-wisps whizzed around lampposts and played among the branches of the trees and the air smelled strongly of silverleaf and night blooming jasmine.

Spryclaw and Softscreech, swiftly tailed by the Hippogriff Valeera was perched atop the name of which Anduin didn’t know, swooped in for a soft landing at the mouth of a graceful causeway leading across the particularly large stretch of water which separated them from the Temple of the Moon where Anduin’s guards were already waiting. He couldn’t be certain how restful the break that he’d assigned them had been, but the layer of red dust which had formed across their silver plate had been removed, leaving their armor gleaming so it could at least be said with certainty that they’d used the time productively. All three of them saluted crisply as he dismounted the Hippogriff’s back with a quiet word of thanks.

“There’s no need for that.” He waved the formality away. “Tyrande and Malfurion are waiting for us inside?”

“Yes, your Highness.” Gideon said. “We were informed by one of the Sentinels while we waited for you that you’re free to proceed into the Temple at your leisure.”

“Thank you, Gideon.” The foot of his cane tapped against the stone path as he turned again to Sylvanas. The three Dark Rangers had gathered around her and all four were staring coldly at him like a murder of hungry crows. “There’s little we can really do here without properly announcing ourselves first. If you’re ready to continue, Lady Windrunner, we’ll head into the Temple?”

“I see no reason to sit here.” Sylvanas sent a vicious glare at a passing Huntress whose gaze lingered a few moments too long and then shifted her eyes to his cane. “Leg causing trouble
already?"

“Hm?” realizing he was leaning on the cane, Anduin straightened up in surprise and flashed a small smile. “Oh, no. Simply a habit of having something in my hands.” Stepping slightly aside, he gestured to the causeway. “Ladies first.”

She scoffed at him and swept passed. Snickering Anduin trotted after her, spinning his caje in one hand.

The ancient temple complex was a beautiful building: all domed roofs and stout pillars with windows patterned in violet and blue. Moss grouted the massive stone blocks from which the Temple had been built and thick serpentine vines threaded emerald pathways up the glossy sides. The rippling of the water below the causeway and the hiss and sigh of the wind through the trees and gardens combined to create a soothing ambience.

The interior of the Temple was dim, filled with small trees and more of the same graceful architecture. At its center stood a towering statue of a Priestess of the Moon which emitted a faint, pale blue glow. Standing at the base of the steps leading up to it, recognizable from both their dress and their familiarity, were Tyrande Malfurion and…

Anduin stopped dead in his tracks, caution and surprise mixing with accents of resentment and hope to whiz up his spine like electricity. Sylvanas paused as well, sending him a look of annoyed confusion which he failed to process. “Jaina?” The Banshee Queen’s red eyes flicked to the former Arch Mage of the Kirin Tor and her ears pinned back.

Jaina turned at the sound of voice, sparing the Warchief only the briefest of caustic glances, before her blue eyes settled on him. He could still clearly remember how sharp and cold they’d been when last he’d seen them: like jagged ice. Now they betrayed little, though he thought he might have seen a glint of concern buried in their depths.

Her greeting lacked the familiarity which might once have been there, though whether that was because she still carried resentment and anger over his choices or because she believed he did wasn’t clear; a half bow and impersonal greeting of “King Wrynn” was all he received. Sylvanas went entirely unaddressed. Anduin raised an eyebrow. “With respect, I’d like to request a brief audience with you in private. Once you’ve spoken with Tyrande and Malfurion.”

There was a time where his adopted aunt would have championed his choice but now she was more than likely less than pleased and Anduin was well aware of that. She’d condemned him for forgiving his father’s ‘murderers’. Abandoned him when he’d needed her most. Disappeared off the face of Azeroth for years and now she returned? Wanting to speak with him? For what? Jaina Proudmoore was no longer the woman he knew, hadn’t been for a long time, and he’d have been forced to confess if asked that he no longer trusted her.

Still, they’d been family once. She’d been the closest thing to a mother that he’d ever known. For all the times that she’d been there for him in the past, Anduin supposed he owed her this much.

Primly, he responded with the same waxy formality. “Of course, Lady Proudmoore. Once I’ve spoken with the High Priestess and Arch Druid I’ll grant you the ‘brief audience’ that you’ve requested. Provided that it’s truly brief.” He said. “And, out of custom if nothing else, I’m going to have to ask that at least in my presence you show my betrothed the proper respect.” The last bit was frosted. Anduin knew he’d hit a nerve when her controlled expression twisted.

The former Arch Mage drew herself up to her full height but gave no other sign of her not insignificant indignance. “Of course. My apologies.”
Aware that all eyes in the room were on him, his guards and Valeera prepared to intervene if hostilities emerged and the rest of his audience ranging from vindictive amusement to calculating interest. Anduin turned his full attention to the co-leaders of the Darnassus. “Your city is as beautiful as I remember, though it’s been a number of years since the summit to decide Gilneas’ fate.” He said. “I understand how difficult this is for you. I offer my heartfelt thanks and a promise that we will not bring trouble to your city while we are here.”

Malfurion’s lips twitched into a smile. “Keeping you from trouble, Anduin, is keeping a NightSaber from the hunt.” He said. “Experience shows that, if you do not go looking for trouble then it will come looking for you. All the same, the sentiment is appreciated.”

Anduin grinned and dipped his head. “I must admit you have my number, Arch Druid.”

Tyrande stepped forward, her white eyes centered on Sylvanas in a clearly communicated threat. “With all due respect, if only because of your new position connected to the High King, we are watching you.”

The Banshee Queen’s response was, as expected, thoroughly snide. “Oh, I’m sure.” She said. “It seems we’re done here, Wrynn. Speak with your Mage. We’ll be outside.”

He watched her flounce away for a few moments before turning back to the Night Elf leaders with a sigh. “Is there somewhere Lady Proudmoore and I can speak in private?”

“There is a small room just this way.” Tyrande said, still looking hawkish as she stepped down off the steps. “I’ll take you to it.”

“Thank you, High Priestess.” Jaina walked beside him in silence as they were led down a short hallway tailed by Valeera and his guards.

The door which they stopped outside of led into a sparse room the use of which he couldn’t guess at and, he supposed, didn’t really matter. “Take all the time you need, Anduin.”

Nodding as the Night Elf left he turned his attention to his guards. “Wait for me out here, this should only take a few minutes. Should I need assistance I’ll call.”

With murmurs of ascent his guards took up positions outside the door. Anduin stepped through with Jaina close behind. Slowly, leaning again against the cane as the uneven ground began to get the better of his leg, he made a circuit of the room before turning to face her. When he did he found her gaze lingering, with no small amount of distaste, on the carved figures of the lion and raven just below the handle.

“Your leg has gotten bad again?” the sudden casualness, cold as it still admittedly was, wasn’t lost on him. Nor was the redundancy of the question given exactly how aware she was of the state of his injury.

“What are you here for, Jaina?” there was sharpness and exhaustion in his voice but at this point Anduin couldn’t bring himself to care. “It’s been almost four years. Not a word from you. Nothing after you insulted me gravely in front of the entirety of the Alliance’s leadership at my father’s funeral and then abandoned me to hold the reigns alone with the Burning Legion at our doorstep! Genn ran off after the Forsaken. Velen had to withdraw to protect his people and grieve the loss of his son. I had no one when I needed them most and yet now that I’ve finally gotten on my feet of my own accord you come back? I don’t want to hear a word about the Horde: there is peace, finally, and Light damn me if I allow anyone to bugger that now!”
The look she sent him then was rather cross and mildly offended. “I heard about what you planned to do.” Jaina said. “I just wanted to make sure that you were alright.”

He grumbled something under his breath and gripped the cane tighter. “I find it difficult to believe that the Warchief could possibly be more dangerous than the entire Burning Legion.”

“The ‘entire Burning Legion’ won’t be in your bed.” The look that Anduin sent her was far from impressed. “I regret what I did. There’s no excuse for it and I’ve already received a dressing down from Shaw…as I suppose I deserved.” He responded with a noncommittal noise. “I want to come back, Anduin. With your father gone you’re all I really have left.”

The young King let out a heavy sigh. “You’re family, aunt Jaina, and though I’ll admit that what you did hurt me deeply I’ve forgiven you. At least in a personal context.” He said. “However I can’t forgive you as the High King of the Alliance. The law is the law and I’m morally bound not to show favoritism. Not only that, but I must now consider how such a thing would affect our still shaky relationship with the Horde. The Sin’dorei, most specifically.” Anduin paused to examine her again before he continued. “I may be able to lessen your sentence but the only promise I can make is that if you return to the Alliance you’ll have to serve something.”

“And if I’d prefer not to spend time in Stormwind’s Stockade?”

He shook his head. “Then we’ll have to part ways permanently.” Anduin said, expression pained. “Though I’d rather have you at my wedding.”

Jaina stepped forward and pulled him into her arms, feeling his wrap around her waist a moment later as he dropped his head onto her shoulder. The last time she’d hugged him had been years before at the last peace summit in Theramore. He’d been barely fourteen, then; small and thin boned like a bird. Now his relation to Varian was clear, both in the breadth of his shoulders and the rapidity with which he’d shot up in height. The roundness of youth had faded from his cheeks, leaving his jaw square and his sweet face fire featured. “When did you get so tall?” he was a man, now, and a King and had found himself into worse trouble than ever before.

“I don’t know.” He said softly, sadness in his voice. “It just sort of happened.”

She stepped back and gently gripped his shoulders. The shirt he wore was rumpled, red dust faintly visible trapped among the fibers, and his skin had the beginnings of a golden tan. “Are you alright?”

Anduin nodded. “Fine.” He said. “You know me, Jaina; traveling to see new places and meet new people. To make friends across boundaries. That’s the sort of thing I’ve always dreamed of doing.”

“And the Warchief?” she asked. “Are you ‘friends’ with her?”

The Priest’s brows drew together in a troubled expression which lasted only a few moments before smoothing out again. “That’s…complicated. I wouldn’t call us friends, more…”

“More what?”

He pulled back and turned away, shaking his head again. “Please, Jaina. I’m exhausted from the ride in from Sen’jim Village and still have a feast to attend and a speech to make before I can properly rest for the night. With your refusal of the conditions of return this is more than likely the last time we’ll see each other.” Anduin said. “Don’t make this end badly.”

“I didn’t come here to upset you.” She watched him hobble slightly as he drew further away. “I think I’ve done enough of that in the past.”
“Yes.” He said wryly. “But that’s in the past. I really will miss you, aunt Jaina. If you ever reconsider…”

“A cell in the stockades will always be open?” she snorted. “I can’t say I appreciate the sentiment.”

He laughed, then, and briefly the man in front of her looked like the boy that she’d known what felt like centuries ago. “No.” Anduin said lightly. “I don’t suppose you would.” His face fell again. “It was good to see you again, but…”

“I won’t keep you.” She said, watching him circle slowly back around to the door. “I won’t be at your wedding either, it seems, but… I’ll send something.”

With one last smile, tight with what might have been regret, Anduin nodded at her and exited the room.

“What did she want?” Valeera asked almost the instant he was out the other side. The slight clatter of their armor was the only sign of his guard’s curiosity.

“To check on me. And to come back, or so she claimed.” He said. “I told her that she’d have to take punishment for what she did—abandoning her assigned military post she signed onto without permission or warning dead center of an apocalyptic war—and, well…we didn’t part badly at least.”

“At least.” She grumbled. “Do you think we need to be concerned?”

“If she was going to return and be in common contact with the Horde my answer would be yes. But, seeing as she isn’t, I don’t believe we need to be.” He said. “Not to mention that these concerns, at current, shouldn’t be mine.”

Valeera couldn’t argue with that much.

“Did you have fun on your playdate?” Sylvanas drawled as they exited the Temple. “Will Proudmoore be babysitting you again any time soon?”

“I’m afraid that’s a matter of Alliance concern.” He really didn’t want to rehash any of this at current. Especially not with her.

“Am I not, in technicality, now a member of your Alliance?”

“As I’m, ‘in technicality’, a member of your Horde.” Anduin said. “Would I thereby be included in a matter of Horde concern?”

The Banshee Queen narrowed her eyes. “Fine, Wrynn, have your ‘private audience’.” She said. “Now, this Night Elf has tested my patience enough with its hovering. If you’re finished here, allow it to lead us to where we’ll be staying.”

From the offended expression on the sentinel’s face Anduin could tell she didn’t appreciate being referred to as ‘it’. Sending her a look which clearly read ‘I’m sorry’ he said “thank you for waiting for me to get out of that unexpected meeting. I think we’re all ready to head over to where we’ll be staying now.”

“Of course, High King.” The Sentinel said. “I’ll be glad to.”

They were led through the streets of Darnassus, down a handful of winding cobblestone pathways and over to a dwelling carved out of a tree. Anduin was sure he’d be delighted by it when he wasn’t so tired.
“You have about three hours before your presence will be expected, King Anduin.” The Sentinel said. “Will you be needing anything in the meantime?”

“No, thank you.” The Sentinel nodded and exited the room. Anduin turned to his guards. “You all know where you’re staying?”

“Yes, your Majesty.” Cira said. “Will you be leaving prior to tonight’s feast?”

Anduin shook his head, leaning his cane against the wall. “I can’t speak for the Banshee Queen, but I’m going to use the time we have before the feast to get some sleep.”

“Oh course, King Wrynn. We’ll leave you be.”

Kicking off his shoes rather ungracefully he stumbled towards the bed as Valeera and his guards filed out of the room, collapsing onto it and lying half askew atop the woven comforter without bothering to attempt to change into more appropriate dress.

“Wrynn.” No response beyond even breathing, though it wasn’t quite deep enough to make her believe he’d already fallen asleep. Annoyed Sylvanas stalked across the room and none too gently removed the tie from his hair. Slightly curled, golden tresses fell atop his head and across the pillow in a haphazard heap and Anduin made a noise of protest, muffled where his face pressed into the mattress, but didn’t move. “You’re not getting sleep until the matter of what the former Arch Mage wanted is properly addressed.”

“We’ve just discussed this.” His voice was low, tone heavy with nearness to sleep.

“I’m not asking for specifics about what you spoke about; in fact I’ve no interest in a careful log of pointless chatter! But this must be addressed.” Sylvanas snapped. “Surely you’re not so entirely hopeless as to fail to have found the timing of her sudden reappearance at least vaguely convenient.”

“We were family.” The use of past tense stood out as being odd; the earlier hours of travel in the heat had exhausted him enough that his walls had fallen so far that he failed to realize he’d revealed just how much their relationship had crumbled. “She wanted to make sure I was alright.”

“Wanted to make sure you were alright or make sure you weren’t ‘bewitched’?”

Laboriously, blinking something close to an appropriate amount of awareness back into unfocused blue eyes, Anduin pushed himself up into something close to an upright position. “You think that Genn sent her?”

“They both hate the Horde.” She said sharply. “And Genn Greymane is old enough to have, potentially, some lingering connections in Boralus. Kul Tiras would be a place where the Old Wolf could plot and hide.”

“Jaina was exiled after the hand she had in her father’s death. I don’t think it’s wise to jump to the conclusion that she’d have returned there when there are other places on Azeroth which would receive her more kindly.”

“Not everyone’s concerned, Wrynn, with being received ‘kindly’.” Sylvanas snapped. “And the draw of home can be difficult to resist.” She’d found herself struggling against the urge to relocate to Eversong, opinions of the Sin’dorei be damned, a number of times throughout the years which had passed since Arthas had cursed her.

“For that matter,” Anduin continued, “I don’t think she was sent by Genn. She didn’t mention him
at all and didn’t repeat any of his talking points. Didn’t say anything that didn’t sound like her.”

Sylvanas flung the tie back at him, this time succeeding in hitting him just below the eye. “You’re even more useless when you’re tired!”

“Best to learn from the mistake of trying to get something coherent out of me when I’m less than half awake.” Successfully pulling the tie back around his wrist he slumped back onto the bed and burrowed beneath the sheets, paying no attention to the fact that Sylvanas had swept from the room.
Advancing in the Opposite Direction

The night before had gone just about as well as Anduin had thought to expect. This time around he’d been given the majority of the speaking time at the announcement speech and Sylvanas’ comment when it had been her turn had not been helpful. The feast which had followed had consisted of Darnassian wine, honeyed pinenut bread shaped into the image of leaves, spider kabobs, still living baby octopi, wild rice cakes and a healthy side of uncomfortable tension. The last Anduin could remember close feeling anything close to that was at the peace summit in Theramore just prior to the Cataclysm where he’d sat kitty-corner at the table to both his father and Garrosh Hellscream. Thereby he’d taken it upon himself to try to lessen the tension as best that he could but his success was inarguably poor. The Kal’dorei, unlike the Orcs, weren’t a particularly vocal people when it came to the communication of general displeasure. He wasn’t insulted or threatened with being turned into a pelt rug but from the stiffness of posture and clipped tones they spoke with no matter what topic Anduin attempted to engage them with he could tell that the vast majority if not all of them were only barely tolerant of his decision.

When the feast at last came to an end he was more than merely relieved and had returned back to bed. What Sylvanas did that night and where she went, if anywhere, he didn’t know.

Telling precisely what time of day it was simply by looking at the lighting was difficult due to the ever present violet tinge of twilight but, when he woke up, the young King thought that it was early morning. He stretched, joints popping, then sat up and slid out of bed still half-bleary as he padded over to his trunk. Opening the lid. Rustling through it until he found one of the sets of riding leathers which had been packed and pulling them out. Where Durotar had been much too hot to tolerate wearing such a thing Teldrassil’s cooler climate was much more permissive and with a long ride out to one of the nearest Moon Wells it struck him as the most appropriate dress for the occasion.

Running on autopilot, allowing his mind the wander along the path laid by the tidbits of information which he’d gained over the years which concerned Moon Wells and to languidly circle around the fact that though he’d wished for the chance to see a Moon Well during his last visit to Darnassus but in the near chaos of the summit on Gilneas and the intrigue over the Highborne murder case and his fight with his father he hadn’t had the chance, Anduin pulled the sleep shirt he’d been wearing up over his head and replaced it with a black jerkin, quickly lacing up the front. Pulling on the matching pants a moment later.

It was while he was freeing the tangles from his hair with his fingers that Sylvanas made her presence known, making him jump in surprise. “In the future, Wrynn, consider your surroundings before you take off your pants.”

“My apologies. Though I fail to see why the sight of me briefly in a state of undress would be a terrible shock when you’re set to see it eventually.” He resumed his efforts of untangling his hair.

“The only shocking thing about this is your apparent comfort with being seen without pants.”

“A lot of people have seen me without pants; it’s all a part of being King.”

The Banshee Queen let out a delicate snort. “And you’d made such a convincing show of being a virgin.”

“I didn’t mean it that way!” Red up to his ears, Anduin hunted down his boots and sat down on the edge of the bed to pull them on. “The simple fact of matters is that, at least in the Alliance, when
people need something they’ll take the time to knock but won’t wait for you to answer. I left my right to privacy at the door of my coronation ceremony, apparently, abbreviated as it was.” He said. “How long have you been there?”

Sylvanas blinked at him the way a sunning panther might look at a deer it was considering attempting to eat, comfortably reclined in a chair with one leg crossed over the other and her unstrung bow leaned against her leg. “If you’re expecting to be told I wasted hours watching you drool on a pillow like a Brewfest Hound then you’re flattering yourself unduly.”

Anduin turned his head to stare at the pillow he’d been using, searching for any signs of the truth of her claim. “I don’t drool!”

She snorted at him again.

“Well, I hope you found some amusement in whatever it was that you were doing last night. Every chance there is to prevent our stay from being ‘dull’ for you ought to be taken.” He grinned in the face of the glare that she sent him.

“Seeing you squirm in your skin last night set a positive precedent for the way our stay with the nature lovers will go.” She said. “If things continue as they are I think I’ll find this coming week to be tolerable, if only marginally so.”

“Well, I’m glad to be of assistance in that regard at least.” There was the slightest trace of being cross in his voice. “Do you have interest in coming along to the Moon Well?”

“Looking for excuses to get away from my company already, Wrynn?”

“No at all.” He stood up and grabbed his cane. “I simply wouldn’t want to saddle you with attendance to an activity you’ve no desire to participate in.”

“Traveling out to the Moon Well will be better than lingering in this city, so yes. You could say I do have interest in attending.” The former Ranger General lifted her bow and restrung it with a practiced ease before she rose herself. “If you’re ready, Wrynn, than we can head down to collect your guards and our mounts before meeting with the Night Elf assigned to be our guide.”

“Only my guards?” Anduin took a piece of pine nut bread from the basket which had been brought in at some point earlier and ate it quickly, licking honey from his fingers. “What will yours be doing?”

“Making an unactionable nuisance of themselves for Tyrande by remaining unsupervised in her city. I’ve no need of their assistance and, unlike yours, they don’t feel utterly robbed of all purpose when not underfoot like needy hounds.”

Anduin sighed and shook his head but knew better than to attempt to convince her to dispense with the plan to nettle their hosts. It wouldn’t amount to anything more than a waste of his breath.

Ames was on shift outside with Velora and greeted him on sight with a slightly worn “good morning, your Majesty.”

“Good morning, Ames. Valeera and the others are in the room downstairs?”

“Yes. They should all be awake by now.” He said. “Huntress Shadebough and Phaera are waiting near the city’s gate to take you out to Dolanaar’s Moon Well.”

“Thank you.” He said. “How long have you been on watch?”
“Not terribly long, your Highness. I had fourth shift.”

“The eagerness that you all have to work is something I hold in high regard.” Anduin said. “That said, I can’t allow any of you to overwork yourselves. While we’re in Alliance territory there’s little reason for me to drag all three of you along with me everywhere. Take the time that we’re away to rest.”

Again he sensed that odd mix of relief and displeasure which he’d long since come to associate with a situation where he’d stopped a guard from pushing themselves too far for his sake. How loyal the vast majority of them were made outliers like Samuelson and Malagan all the more surprising. “Yes, your Majesty.”

The privilege he had in being surrounded by such devoted personnel was in no way lost on Anduin. It made him all the more determined to do right by them.

After communicating the young King’s orders to his colleagues, again surrounded by that air of put out relief, Ames disappeared into the room to return to his bed while Gideon and Cira fell in at Anduin’s side.

“Even given everything you put them through, they’re still too fond of you for your own good.” Valeera said as they continued the rest of the way down the same. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you in riding leathers little brother.”

“We’re going far enough that I thought them prudent; I’d have worn them to Sen’jin as well if the heat had been a bit less severe.” He said, adjusting the bracers on his wrists and then the gloves which fit over them. “How do I look?”

“I don’t think I’m the person you should be asking that, Anduin.”

Grinning he turned to Sylvana but she cut him off before he could speak. “You look like a fool regardless of what you’re wearing, so I’d advise you not to waste either your breath or my time asking that.”

The walk to where their mounts had been put up was short. Greyon was as inexpressive as ever. Anur clicked his beak at the sight of them. Dreamer nickered an excited greeting and tugged gently on Anduin’s ponytail before accepting his bridle and allowing himself to be led from the stall.

“Always glad to get out, aren’t you?” Dreamer made a rather unflattering sound and gently nudged his nose into Anduin’s cheek. “Yes, yes, I know we have a lot in common. Now stop making those noises, you naughty thing.”

Dreamer repeated the noise once more, a good deal louder than before as if just for good measure, and Anduin rolled his eyes as he pulled himself up into the saddle. Anur nipped at the Palomino when he tried to nudge at the Hawkstrider, earning an indignant whiney in response. Sighing, the young King prodded his mount forwards.

Huntress Shadebough was, as Ames had said, waited for them on the white stone steps outside the city. Phaera, her massive grey pelted Mist Sabre, flicked an ear at them in greeting.

“Hello, King Wrynn. Warchief Windrunner.” Again that tense distaste was audible in her tone. Owl fletched arrows filled the quiver on her back, gleaming a tawny gold in the morning light.

“Travel to the Moon Well will take the better part of the day and another hour’s travel from there will see us in Dolanaar where we’ll stay the night before returning to Darnassus. If you’re both prepared, we’ll set out now?”
“We’re prepared to leave whenever you are.” Anduin said. The Huntress nodded and nudged Phaera, the massive cat turning round about and starting towards their destination at a slinking trot.

The day was one of leisure riding, much of it done far from any trace of a trail or pathway. The sun filtered down through the reaching bows of the trees growing thick around them, drenching the forest floor in a dappled quilt of warm light and soft shadows. An Ancient lumbered by about an hour into their journey, sparing them a brief glance before judging them not to be a threat to their surroundings and moving on. Hills rose and fell beneath them. Owls hooted and fluttered about in the trees far above. A pair of Laughing Sisters fell in with them for a short while, happy to spend that time informing Anduin in great detail about a nearby warren of rabbits and staying well clear of Sylvanas before parting ways with them at a thin stream with sloping banks and cold water.

On occasion throughout their journey the Priest was overcome with the uncomfortable sensation of eyes on his back but each time he looked around his observation yielded nothing.

“Your Majesty?” Gideon asked after the fourth time, the silver dapple he was mounted astride snorting into the breeze. “Is something the matter?”

“I’m not used to being out in a forest as wild as this one.” He’d been out in Elwynn on hunts and pleasure rides countless times throughout his life but Elwynn forest was nothing like this. “That must be all it is. I’m imagining things.”

The older man didn’t seem entirely convinced but let the matter drop. Anduin didn’t miss the way red eyes scanned the trees around them appraisingly. If she noticed anything she made no mention of it and the Priest wasn’t certain if that made him more nervous or less so.

By the time they reached the Moon Well there were three hours left until night fall and Anduin had felt the sensation thrice more but had still seen nothing. It was more than just a bit maddening and he swiftly sought to distract himself with the sight of his surroundings. He’d read stories and seen drawings of Moon Wells in the old adventurer’s journals he’d developed a near cultish habit of raiding from the Keep’s library in his youth but parchment and charcoal didn’t do the real thing any sort of justice.

Dismounting from Dreamer’s back with a heavy thump, wincing as the impact sent pain shooting up his crippled leg, the young King limped closer to get a better look. Surrounded by a ring of white stone and hemmed in by decorative wooden gateways the Dolanaar Moon Well was filled with silvery water which gave off a pale diaphanous glow, filling the air with a gentle ringing tone and coiling tightly with his mana. Teasing at the Light within him and filling him with a peaceful sensation which reminded him of the effects of the waters in the Vale of Eternal Blossoms.

“Pick your jaw up off the ground, Wrynn.” Sylvanas brushed passed him, passing through one of the arch ways and dropping into a feral crouch at the water’s edge.

Made suddenly aware that his mouth had been open a bit wider than could be considered dignified he amended his expression before following, coming to stand at the Moon Well’s rim a few feet away from her. “It’s beautiful.” He said, gazing down at the rippling argent surface. “I’ve devoted my life to the Light and would never wish to serve another power but when I come to places like this I see firsthand the truth that the Light and the Shadow aren’t all there is.”

“You feel something here?” he looked over at her in mild confusion. “You’re a Spell Caster, Wrynn. I’m not. I’ve heard stories about these wells. Can you feel something or not?”

Gripping his left glove in his right hand he dipped his fingers into the water; frigid and electric, raising the hairs along his arms. “It’s difficult to explain exactly how it feels. Like there’s loose
mana in the air, perhaps?” he said. “But, yes. I do feel something here.”

Satisfied with his response Sylvanas seemed to abruptly lose interest in him.

After a moment of silence “The point of what?”

The Banshee Queen sent him a look of annoyance. “What are you prattling on about now?”

“I meant to ask the other day but didn’t get the chance.” He said. “What did you mean by ‘perhaps being off putting is the point’? The point of what?”

“Of keeping the unwanted company of overly sanctimonious savior types who believe it’s their sworn duty to heal every perceived ill of the world at bay.” She said. “I’m not ‘lonely’, Wrynn. And I’m certainly not weak the way that you are.”

“Weak the way that I am?” pained by the crouched position he’d adopted, Anduin shifted his legs underneath him and perched instead on a rock. “Do tell me, Dark Lady, what it is which connotates weakness in your eyes?”

“Sentimentality. Charity. Mercy. Love. All the sort of things you proudly champion.” Sylvanas spat. “The flaws of the living to which the undead are immune.”

“Immune?” Anduin repeated, a bandit’s smile unfurling across his lips. “That’s funny. Usually, at least in my experience, people don’t run from things to which they’re actually ‘immune’.”

“I am not running from anything!” She snapped. “Certainly not from you.”

He nodded, grin widening further into an expression which was truly infuriating. “Advancing in the opposite direction, then.”

“It would seem,” Sylvanas snarled, baring her teeth at him, “that you’ve aspirations of being drowned!”

Though his smile never died completely Anduin knew when he was coming dangerously close to crossing a line and left her be for the rest of their time there.

The sun hung on the verge of setting by the time they were ready to leave the Moon Well and dark shadows lay thick across the ground. Phaera seemed to have been agitated by something, hackles raised and gaze fixed on the nearby tree line, and Anduin felt an icy trickle of fear shoot down his spine as the creeping sensation of unseen eyes returned.

This time he wasn’t the only one who seemed bothered by it. Both Sylvanas and the Huntress were looking between the trees.

“There’s something out there.” More resigned than questioning. Valeera tensed. Both of his guards gripped their swords.

“Yes.” The Banshee Queen’s gaze shifted from the tree line to the Huntress who’d begun to creep towards it and back again. “And it’s not an animal. We’ve been being stalked all day.”

He opened his mouth to say something more but never got the chance. The Huntress yelped and collapsed and immediately afterwards all hell broke loose. Figures appeared from the darkness all around them: first five, then ten, then twenty. Men and women clad in leather and armed with knives, all gaunt and unhealthily thin with the same mad hate in their eyes and the telltale red bandanas covering their faces.
Anduin’s heart dropped, his fears confirmed when Gideon shouted “Defias!” just before his voice was lost beneath the Mist Sabre’s roar.

The Light sparked to life at his fingertips, flashing spindles of blinding brilliance across the battlefield which burned exposed skin and forced the Rogue who’d dove for him back far enough for Valeera to blindside him. Dreamer bellowed and reared up, kicking out with his hooves. Gideon and Cira were both engaged with three of the Defias each. Arrows hissed through the air with a deadly precision, felling those they found their way to.

Snarling at his own stupidity for not having brought Shalamayne with him Anduin surrounded himself with glowing protection and took off running across the battlefield towards where he’d seen the Huntress fall. Flinging Holy Fires, Smites and Penances at anyone who dared to attempt to impede him and ignoring the pain in his leg, his training as a Healer having fully kicked in.

Huntress Shadebow was unconscious and there was a fair amount of blood. Though serious, her wounds weren’t immediately mortal and he quickly set to work putting at least a temporary stop to the bleeding. Renewing his shield periodically between hymns and prayers until confident further treatment could wait until the battle had ended.

Pulling the quiver of arrows off of her shoulders and slinging it across his own he picked up the bow and drew down on one of the Rogues, felling one and then another and then a third. Realizing there were arrows on the field which weren’t her own and then that they were coming from him Sylvanas sent him a look of bald surprise. He smirked and fired again, missing a fatal blow this time but succeeding in making the Rogue withdraw in pain.

“I didn’t know that you could shoot a bow, Anduin.”

“So it’s Anduin now, is it?” he called back across the melee, only half aware of the fact his shield had fallen. Firing off the last few arrows in the quiver he tossed the bow away and returning to pelting their attackers with spells. “What’s changed?”

“The realization that you possess at least one respectable skill.” Catching a blow against one arm of her bow she kicked her attacker away and drove the other arm into another’s throat with the sickening sound of cracking flesh. “Though you still need to learn not to waste your ammunition!”

“Healing isn’t a respectable skill?”

“Your ‘healing’, where my people are concerned, would do more harm than good so no. I can’t say that it is.”

He snorted, cast shields over both his guards and then took in a breath to reenter a healing hymn but was cut off by the bruising grip of a rough hand on his chin. The Rogue which had a hold of him wasn’t gentle, yanking his head back as far as it would go and pressing a dagger to his throat. The blade was cold and bit into the soft skin, drawing a streak of blood against the silver metal.

He heard both Valeera and his guards shouting and squeezed his eyes shut, certain he’d feel the dagger lay open his throat at any moment just seconds before the blood loss took him. If regicide had been the man’s goal he never got the chance to go through with it, grip going slack a moment before his body fell with a heavy thud. Wide eyed, heart thudding in his ears, Anduin stumbled back towards where he’d left the
Huntress on the ground. Losing himself in the familiar motions of healing until the sharp pain of someone tugging on his hair snapped him out of the mild trance.

“There’s blood all down your front, Little Lion.” Though she still looked patently unimpressed at him her face wasn’t quite as unforgiving as he’d have expected. “Heal your own wounds first. You’re of use to no one if you bleed to death because you neglected a flesh wound.”

It was only then that the burning sensation registered. Confused, he pawed at his throat; hissing in pain when his fingers dug inadvertently into the seam of the shallow wound. His gloves came away red. His thought process stuttered a moment before snapping back into focus, Light skittering across the thin line of open skin. Softly investigating and then sealing the wound shut, leaving behind a hint of red irritation and no scar. Even while appearing thoroughly dazed the look which Anduin sent her was challenging. Sylvanas released him and stepped away.

Valeera swiftly knelt beside him and threw her arms around his shoulders, heedless of the fact that his riding leathers were wet with blood. “That bastard could have killed you! Are you alright?”

“A bit shaken up.” Anduin admitted with a moment’s further silence, wrapping his arms around her and giving Valeera a comforting squeeze. “But I’m alright. I need to finish stabilizing Huntress Shadebough now that they’re gone.”

It was only reluctantly that Valeera released him again, allowing the Priest to turn back to the injured Night Elf. Doing his best to ignore the Mist Sabre’s heavy gaze, Anduin couldn’t help but think that it was a good thing they were still so close to the Moon Well or his mana would have dipped into critical levels by now.

“What fantastic timing this group of thugs had.” The Banshee Queen had returned her bow to its place across her back and was watching them with a cold gaze. “First Proudmoore and now this. One almost has to wonder…”

“Jaina wouldn’t have set the Defias Brotherhood on me. Not knowing that they’d be all but certain to kill me no matter how much they were paid. Not with how much they hate Stormwind. Not that they don’t have reason to.” So it seemed that he could sympathize even with the criminals who had attempted to attack him. “They built it and we didn’t pay them. And Westfall fell into disrepair because of it. With all of the money going to war efforts there was nothing we could do to help those people but now that that’s all over hopefully things will change.”

“Regardless of who sent them or if they came themselves, your Majesty, we must consider your safety. It’s likely more of them will come.” Gideon said. “Darnassus isn’t safe.”

“I’ll have word sent to Bloodhoof that we’ll be moving on sooner than expected.” Sylvanas said. “Can the Night Elf be moved yet, Anduin, or will we be forced to camp out here for the night?”

“I think I’ve done all that I reasonably can while we’re still exposed. I’ll be able to do more once we’re safely in Dolanaar.” He said.

“They don’t have healers of their own?”

“She was injured because of me. It’s only right that I do what I can to help her recover.” He said. “Gideon, can you help me lift her?”

“Of course, King Wrynn.”

With the assistance of his guard Anduin managed to lift the Huntress up onto Phaera’s back. “You’re able to lead us to Dolanaar, aren’t you?” the Mist Sabre huffed at him; an unfamiliar
sound which Anduin could not interpret and could only hope meant ‘yes’. “No one else needs healing?”

“Discounting the small handful of those bastards who managed to limp off with their tails between their legs?” Valeera hissed. “Just some cuts and bruises. We’ll survive.”

“We’re fine, your Majesty.” Cira told him. “The only ones really injured were the Huntress and you.”

“My wound looked worse than it was. It was more a shock than anything.” Placing two fingers in his mouth Anduin called Dreamer over with a sharp whistle. “It’s only going to get darker the longer that we stay out here. We should be heading in towards Dolanaar.”

Their ride to the town was made in tense silence, all present on high alert for any further ambushes. Their failure to arrive at the planned time seemed to have caused a stir of concern as, by the time they got there, they were met by another Huntress whom Anduin followed into the inn, repeatedly dismissing concerns over the fact that blood had dried dark across his shirt. He was equally adamant about tending to her himself, though he eventually conceded to the assistance of a Druid, and promptly disappeared into the second floor.

After another two hours Tyrande and Malfurion, along with her Dark Rangers and Anduin’s third guard, arrived. Leaving the Night Elf leaders to be dealt with by the Rogue and the two guards which had been with them Sylvanas made her way up to the second floor to drag the Priest down so that he could handle the pair.

Finding flowers growing along the floor, walls and ceiling of the room—a telltale effect of Druidic magic—would never cease to be a strange experience not that it seemed to bother Anduin terribly much that a vine of Peacebloom in full flower had coiled up his leg. The Priest’s presence in the room made candles unneeded, a gilded glow spilling from beneath his skin and his usually blue eyes had glazed over with a flickering film of white fire, lips moving with a final cadences of a barely audible hymn.

“Anduin.”

Pulled from his healing trance the Human started, blinking as the Holy Fire faded from his eyes, and turned towards her. The golden glow which hung about him in a lacy cloud was slower to disappear. “Tyrande and Malfurion are here?”

“As well as your third guard.” She said. “I’m not about to deal with Alliance leaders for you.”

Turning back to the Druid and exchanging nods Anduin freed himself from the vine and stepped over to a small table. Pouring a glass of water from the pewter pitcher that he found there. “I’ll be down in a moment.” He drained the cup quickly set it back down on the table and crossed the room to join her in the doorway. The Light had faded completely now, leaving him looking little different from any other Human. Young, naïve and nothing special.

An interesting dichotomy to moments before at the Huntress’ bedside; to hours before fighting with the Defias. There was no wolf spirit inside of Anduin Wrynn, but the control he wielded over the Light was nothing to sneeze at.

“What your Dark Rangers arrived as well or will we be returning briefly to Darnassus tomorrow to collect them?” he asked as they started down the stairs.

“All are present, though it’s too late now to move. We’ll be remaining for the night in Dolanaar.
You’ll have to ask one of the Night Elves for information beyond that.” Rue had gotten stuck in his hair, the small white petals stark against their burnished back drop. She glared at them in annoyance until he reached up to investigate and pulled the flower free.

“Grace and clear vision. It must like the Light.” He held it out to her but the gesture was ignored.

“It figures that you’d know something as pointless as the symbolism behind flowers.”

Anduin smiled, allowing the delicate flower to drop behind them and folding his hands at the small of his back. “Consider it flavor text.”

“I’ll be certain to have ‘fluent in the language of flowers’ etched into your cenotaph.”

He snickered as they reached the bottom floor, smile growing wider. “That sounds nice.”

“Anduin!” Tyrande and Malfurion both looked concerned, eyes lingering on the state of his clothing.

“It isn’t as bad as it looks.” He said. “Huntress Shadebough was the worst of out of all of us but she’s fine now. Should be back on her feet by tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you, King Wrynn.” Malfurion said.

“Think nothing of it, it was the least I can do.” Anduin said. “I did promise just yesterday not to bring trouble here.”

“You could hardly have expected the Defias Brotherhood to show up here.” Tyrande said. “I’d like to know how they even got into Teldrassil; whomever is responsible and any of them which might remain in the area will be hunted down. But in the meantime it is no longer safe for you to remain here.

“We figured that it wouldn’t be.” Anduin said. “I’ve been made to understand that arrangements will be made to send word to Thunder Bluff that we’ll be moving on sooner than planned, though we’d be traveling over the ground to give the Tauren time to prepare.”

“Velora will have been sent out with a message to Baine by day break.” Sylvanas said. “The Defias Brotherhood will have a near impossible time getting to you in any Horde held territory but it may be advisable to send word ahead to the Alliance holdings we’re to visit in the future.”

“You’ve a fair point there.” He said. “Though I’m not certain that I have the guards to spare.”

“We’ll handle sending the news ahead.” Malfurion said. “It’s best you keep as much protection around you as possible, Anduin. Especially now.”

“Not running off unguarded into a melee again would also be best.” Sylvanas said, sending him a pointed look. “No matter how good my aim is there will inevitably come a time where the half-starved mongrel trying to slit your throat is faster. I won’t have my Horde falsely condemned for your own stupidity leading you to death.”

“Running into danger is a Healer’s duty.” He said.

“And surviving is a ruler’s.”

Tyrande looked as if she’d been forced to swallow a lemon. “I’m afraid I have to agree with the Banshee Queen on that, King Wrynn.”
“You’re right.” He said, fighting back another smirk and well aware that he’d likely never hear of the two agreeing again. “In the future, I’ll try to remember that.” Balancing a Warrior and a King had been his father’s burden, and his own was one which was near the total opposite. With luck he’d be able to adjust to that balance in time enough to prevent his office from suffering for it.
“Leave it to you to miss the one time we actually ran into trouble.” Cira snickered, swiftly tying up her long brown hair so that it wouldn’t hang down beneath her helm when she’d eventually don it. “Leave it to King Wrynn to find his first spot of real trouble in friendly territory.”

“I wouldn’t have stayed behind if I hadn’t been ordered to.” He pulled his own helm on over his head. “And the Defias Brotherhood? Are you sure?”

“Do you know of any other group of thugs who run around Azeroth with red bandanas on their faces?” Gideon finished securing his sword to his belt and began the process of a final check over of the state of his armor, lined face grim. “It’s undeniable who they were. The real questions of importance are how they knew the King would be here and who sent them. Not to mention why. And my only regret of the encounter is that, in the chaos of it all, we weren’t able to pin down even a single one of them.”

“The ‘why’ should be fairly obvious, Gideon.” Cira said crossly, pulling on her own helm. “VanCleef’s dog almost killed Anduin! If Windrunner hadn’t shot him we’d have to be relaying the news to Stormwind that instead of preparing for a wedding they ought to be preparing for another royal funeral!”

“Would he have killed him or would he have held him at threat to force us to back off? I’m not certain you noticed, Cira, but he had plenty of time to kill the King before she shot him if doing so had been his intention.”

“You think that they were sent to kidnap him instead?” Ames asked.

“I think that if the King’s death had been their goal a single assassin in the night would have been a better choice.” He said. “It’s the same as the last time they did this, though that ambush was at sea. Neither of you are old enough to have been in the guard at the time.”

“You mean when King Varian went missing?” Gideon nodded. “But that wasn’t the Brotherhood alone, was it? I thought that damned Dragon was feeding them insider information.”

“She was, at least so far as any of us can tell.” He said. “Black Dragons are nothing if not cunning and Onyxia hid her trail well.”

“You think that they had inside information this time?” Ames asked.

“I think it’s possible.” He said. “I agree with the King’s belief that Lady Proudmoore wouldn’t have chosen the Defias Brotherhood if she was going to hire a mercenary group to kidnap him in some sort of misguided attempt to change his mind. But I think we all know that there are plenty of people in both the Alliance and the Horde who aren’t particularly happy with the way that things have ended up. Any one of them could be behind this from either side. Though there’s still the matter of how they got ahold of the information of where we’d be.”

“Provided that it wasn’t simply a lucky guess.” Cira said. “Shaw will be on this like a wolf on a wounded rabbit once he gets wind of Tyrande’s message. He’s always been loyal, but ever since what happened with Detheroc…”

“Whoever did this will get holy hell out of him. And I’d pay to see it.” Ames said, folding his arms.
“I think we all would.”

“With how quick it would be over there wouldn’t be much to see.” Cira said. “He’s not the master of both Stormwind Intelligence and the Assassin’s guild for nothing, after all.”

“And he’s always been fond of Anduin.”

“A rare body in Stormwind’s forces that isn’t. Even troublesome as he’s always had a habit of proving.” Gideon said. “It’s my hope that, with time, things will settle down.”

“They certainly seem to be ‘settling down’ between them.” Cira said. “She’s been referring to him by his first name. And it almost seemed like they were exchanging playful banter instead of sharp retorts when they came down from the upper floor last night.”

“Don’t expect too much. She threatened to drown him in the Moon Well about five hours prior to that.”

“What changed?” Ames asked.

“She found out he could shoot.” Valeera nudged open the door of the room with her hip, a basket under one arm and a half eaten Eye of Elune in hand. “Or, as she put it, learning he ‘possesses at least one respectable skill’. We have about ten minutes before we need to be ready to catch a portal to Darkshore. Anduin’s checking in on Shadebough once more before we leave and, barring any further delays, we should make it to Astranaar by tonight. I brought breakfast.”

“Thanks, Sanguinar.” The woven basket was filled with more of the same fruit: a small, sweet breed of apple with a mottled skin of red and gold. “How was last duty?”

“Quiet.” She said, finishing off her apple core and all. “Anduin was asleep and whatever Sylvanas may or may not have been up to didn’t amount to any noise. Lyana spent the night pretending I didn’t exist. All in all it was a boring shift, thank the Light.”

“They were more talkative than usual first shift.” Cira said.

“About what?”

“I don’t make a habit of eavesdropping on the King, Ames!”

Gideon sighed and shook his head. “I’m aware that I’m the old man of the group but the two of you are acting like children.”

“I’m sure that Anduin would rather have them talking about what topic of conversation he has in the bedroom than about other things concerning same said room.”

“Oh, and we’re the children?”

“Valeera isn’t a member of the Stormwind Guard and thereby isn’t under my authority, unlike the pair of you.” Gideon said. “While you’re wearing Stormwind’s tabard you act appropriately even while out of the eyes of both the public and the King.”

“Yes, dad.” Ames grumbled, then yelped in surprise when the older man pushed his helm down over his eyes.

“I’m not quite that old.”

“A proper spring Murloc.” Valeera laughed, rising from her chair. “We should be heading out.”
Much to Gideon’s quiet annoyance the two younger guards—not much younger than Anduin himself at nineteen and twenty respectively—continued to mess with each other a while more until they stepped out into the public eye.

“The rapidity at which they clean up their act, Wrynn, is astonishing.” Nathanos drawled on catching sight of them. “Unfortunately for you it’s often the way they act when you’re not around which determines whether an assassin is caught or slips by.”

“A bit of horseplay breeds comradery. I don’t have a problem with my guards cutting loose enough to have a bit of fun from time to time.”

“Because you prefer to treat those around you as friends instead of guards and it only serves the underscore how ineffective you truly are as a leader.”

“The nature of our relationship, Nathanos, is duly noted.” Anduin had changed out his bloodied leathers for riding pants and a long sleeved button up under a rain scaled traveling cloak. “I’ll definitely refrain from attempting to make friends with you in the future. Ever. Promise.”

“It would seem that your sarcasm still needs work in certain areas.” Sylvanas pushed away from the pillar she’d been leaning against. “The Mage has arrived and is setting up the portal as we speak. Are you prepared to leave now or would you prefer to flutter once more around the Night Elf’s bed?”

“Huntress Shadebough is awake and mobile, now, so there’s no need for me to continue to worry about the state of her injury.” He said. “I’m ready to leave and I’m sure that my guards are as well. I’d assume that you don’t have any reason to want to linger in Dolanaar.”

“If we’re going to make it far enough into Ashenvale to make it to Astranaar on horseback tonight we can’t afford to hang about. Not that there’s anything in this village which would make doing so worthwhile.” The Banshee Queen exited the inn, followed by Anduin and her two remaining Dark Rangers. Valeera helped Ames to lift the trunk and carry it out of the inn and down the steps.

The day was cool and clear, though there was no way of knowing what the weather would be like in Darkshore or Ashenvale; particularly in the largely untouched forest the chances of sustained and heavy rain were very high. Pocaroo, Cira’s Piebald, and Quincy, Ames’ Bay, were hitched to the small cart carrying the trips supplies. Gideon’s silver dapple, Altair, was tolerating—and by the look of it only barely—Dreamer’s demands for attention while Geryon and the other skeletal horses simply stood there.

The Mage had just finished etching the necessary Runes into the ground and had the portal open. After going through the needed platitudes on Anduin’s end, Sylvanas making a point of ignoring the Night Elf entirely, they passed through the portal and stepped out onto a raised wooden deck above a shallow stretch of greyish water. The smell of salt and sand, so familiar to the King, was thick in the air. There were more clouds in the sky here than there had been over Teldrassil and, distant in the direction they were bound for, the weather seemed to promise rain.

Anduin nudged the Palomino forwards, the hooves of their horses clacking against the wood down the short ramp and onto the stony ground.

“Did you sleep well?” Anduin looked over at his guards as he asked this. “Valeera brought you all the basket of apples?”

“Yes, your majesty.” Gideon said. “A quiet night is a restful night; a relief after the eventfulness of yesterday. We’ve a map on hand, should it be needed, but as things stand we should make it out of
Dark Shore by midday and to Astranaar by just after night fall. We should reach the border with the Barrens by early afternoon tomorrow."

“We can expect to meet with a Tauren party there; Velora will have made it to Thunderbluff by tonight and I’m sure that Bloodhoof will be eager to reassure himself of your safety.” Sylvanas said as they exited the town of Lor’danel and clattered across the bridge. “A more interesting topic of conversation is who taught you how to use a bow; from the roughness with which you handled the weapon it’s a safe assumption they were Human?”

Anduin tried to smile but the weight of sadness pulled down on it like a bowing branch. “My father taught me.” He said, fiddling with the reigns. “He wasn’t around very often in my younger years because of depression and…other things. But when we did spend time together…he’d try. There was a cabin that we would go to. It was where he taught me how to shoot.” Though he was looking ahead of them she could tell the sight of the cobbled road wasn’t registering. His blue eyes were unfocused and pale as they stared into the past. “I took better to those lessons than I did to his lessons on the use of a sword. But Bolvar couldn’t shoot worth a damn so, after my father went missing…I had to teach myself.”

“Your aim is passable enough to be a Hunter by your Race’s standards.” She said. “But you’d never make it as a Ranger even if Silvermoon was still open to training your kind.”

“I wouldn’t be disinclined to resume lessons.” Anduin leaned back in his saddle, the sadness melting from his face as if it had never been. “Perhaps I could learn from you?”

“Hasn’t anyone ever told you that having more than one class is cheating?”

“Mathias,” Anduin said with a smirk, “just before he taught me the proper method for avoiding notice and picking locks.”

“So that’s how you slip your handlers so easily; I’ll bet he regrets ever having taught you that.”

“I’ll bet he probably does.” Anduin laughed. “Though it’s harder now that my leg makes it difficult to sneak around as affectively as I used to.”

“Which really wasn’t all that affectively, I’m sure.”

“Hey!”

“I retired from training Rangers years ago, not that I’d waste the months and years that it would take to make you truly proficient with a bow even if I hadn’t.” Sylvanas said. “Though I may teach you a lighter touch, if only to prevent my weapon of choice from continuing to be abused by your fumbling fingers.”

“You talk about me as if I can’t put one foot in front of the other without falling down.”

“Without that cane I’ve no reason to think that isn’t the case.” Sylvanas smirked. Anduin rolled his eyes but didn’t seem too terribly affronted by the comment.

Dark Shore was a beautiful place though a somber atmosphere hung over the area. The jagged coastline cut its way along the hem of the blue-grey sea. Waterfalls cackled from time to time in the near distance, large bears hunting for salmon in the frothy rivers which ran along the sharp black rocks away from them. Moonsabres crept quietly through the thick undergrowth which lined the road they followed. A large buck raised its head from where it grazed to watch them pass, its twelve sharp points glinting in the sunlight which filtered down through the trees.
The marks left behind by the Cataclysm were still evident in the land. A large chasm cut its way across the road about half way out from Lor’denel and though it was thin enough to safely jump on horseback the cart had to be painstakingly maneuvered across.

Auberdine had been left in its state of flooded ruin, a testament to those who had lost their lives there.

The remnants of the Twilight Hammer’s excavation at Master’s Glaive were still visible—ramps of wood and metal moorings still clinging to exposed rock and soil—but the remaining husk of the creature the Cultists had been attempting to resurrect had been thoroughly destroyed. The path transitioned from being wide, well-kept and paved in stone to a little more than an animal trail, thin and curving as it wound a meandering track away to the North West and over the border into the thicker forests of Ashenvale.

Little disturbed even by the Night Elves who held the territory prior to the Horde invasion under Garrosh Hellscream in the pursuit of lumber, the trees here grew towering and as wide as the steam powered wheels which pushed the iron sided ice breakers of the Stormwind navy through the water. Rain hissed and pattered against the ground around them, warm and sweet with coming summer as it flecked his face. Releasing Dreamer’s reigns for a handful of moments Anduin pulled the hood of his cloak over his head to keep himself as dry as possible as the traveling party picked up their pace. Thunder rumbled overhead, pursued by the occasional lance of blue-white lightning. The cry of a wild hippogriff rose above the rushing of the storm but the undergrowth and surrounding trees were thick enough that they encroached well onto the road and were impossible to see through.

Astranaar was a small Night Elven town built beside were a large lake met with the shallow stream which fueled it, one of only a small number of settlements present in the forest. The persisting storm disturbed the surface into a shuddering silver pool, dampening the wooden bridge which passed beneath their horse’s hooves and the trundling wheels of the cart with a low rumble.

Leg protesting against the damp conditions, wet and leaning heavily against his cane Anduin turned towards the Night Elf woman who’d exited the inn to greet them. Dreamer immediately shook himself off, flinging water in all directions much to the distaste of everyone involved regardless of the fact that they were all already soaked.

“Old wounds giving you trouble, Little Lion?” still snide, but less so than he’d come to expect from her.

“A bit.” He said as they headed up the front steps of the inn. “But with the weather the way it is it hardly comes as a surprise.”

“We’ve prepared the room with the best view of the lake for you, King Anduin, but if it’s too hard on your leg to climb to the third floor we can move you to something on the first.” The innkeeper said.

Anduin shook his head, smiling. “That won’t be necessary. I’ll be able to make it.”

“Of course.” She said, nodding at him. “Follow me.”

Anduin leaned even more of his weight against his cane, wincing with every step as his brittle bones rutted together at the points where they’d once been snapped like dry branches. It was difficult but he forced himself to hobble forward and managed to make it to the second floor before a short whimper slipped out.
“You’ll be able to make it, will you?”

He raised his head, expression screwed into a rictus of pain. “I may have overestimated myself a bit. Or underestimated the weather.” Anduin admitted. “I can make it to the top floor. I’ll just… need a bit of help.” He turned to find his nearest guard but before he could so much as open his mouth Sylvanas’ grip closed around his upper arm hard enough to raise bruises.

“I’m not hauling dead weight up this ramp! Help me!”

Catching his balance and recovering from his surprise Anduin resumed his efforts at hobbling up the last ramp, leaning equally against his cane and Sylvanas. The Banshee Queen didn’t appear very pleased with the situation and released him so abruptly that he nearly fell on his face once they reached the top floor but the fact that she’d even helped him at all came as a surprise.

“Thank you.” He said, rubbing his arm. She didn’t bother to respond.

They were led to the largest room on the floor, open along one wall where the roof extended out far enough that the rain was kept fully at bay. The view of the lake was incredible and, though sparsely furnished, the room was nice.

“I’ll have dinner brought up to you in a few moments, along with a pot of Briarthorn tea to warm you up.” The inn keeper said.

“Thank you.” Anduin said as she turned to lead the rest of their party away to their own lodging for the night, already in conversation about who would be taking the first shift.

Once the door had swung shut he thudded over to the open wall and slid slowly to the floor. Dangling his bad leg over the side. Leaning his head back against the wooden paneling and allowing himself to drift in a state of half sleep until a knock came on the door marking the innkeeper’s return with the tray of food. His efforts to get back to his feet were met with no success.

“Stay down, Wrynn.” Though the comment sounded more amused than anything. The Night Elf brought the tray over and set it within easy reach for him before exiting the room again. Anduin adjusted his position enough to pull the tray towards him and picked up the pot of tea, pouring himself a cup. Allowing the warmth to seep through the wood and chase the cold from his fingers.

Briefly, a faded out image of a Pandaren tavern with mist filled windows and glowing red eyes flashed through his mind.

“You were attracted to him?”

Anduin started, blinked, and then looked into another pair of glowing eyes. A different shade of red than Wrathion’s had been. “What?”

“You were attracted to him.” The Priest frowned. “You were attracted to him, I would assume. Attracted to a fellow Prince. You’ve a taste for men. And yet,” she canted her head, crimson eyes appraising, “Gallywix’s whores seemed to get you quite…interested. So I find myself admittedly confused.”

This. This was a conversation he’d only ever envisioned being forced into having in his nightmares-though usually it was his father he was trying to explain the matter to-but ultimately Anduin supposed that she deserved an answer as they were going to be wed. Not that it’d be easily given seeing as he hadn’t a clue what he was himself. “I am into men.” He said. “But I’m also into women. I find both of them attractive for different reasons. It was never what someone was that mattered to me, but who.” Anduin clutched the cup in his hand a bit harder, the amber liquid inside
rippling. “If there’s a way to describe it in a single word in Common I don’t know what it is. You probably think I’m a stupid child who doesn’t even know his own preferences.”

“Do’rahne.” He looked over at her in confusion. “The word for it, in Thalassian. And I wouldn’t be surprised if there wasn’t a word for it in Common. Your race, after all, is one of Azeroth’s least tolerant.”

“I won’t argue with that much.” The Briarhorn tea was bold and dark, laced with notes of chocolate and roasted nuts. Though he hadn’t eaten much all day Anduin couldn’t bring himself to do much more than pick at the ribs and fruit on the plate between them. Sylvanas hadn’t even spared the pot of tea a second glance. “I’d never blame the Light because it isn’t its fault, it’s a matter of culture. The Clergy and its structure; its…codes of conduct.” He shook his head and watched the rainfall. “Even in Stormwind, fluidity isn’t particularly appreciated.”

“The kinkiest Human kingdom on Azeroth amounts to almost nothing when Humanity as a whole is so constipated about sex.”

And again his face flushed. “Are the Forsaken really ones to talk?”

“Not all of my Forsaken were Human when they were alive.” She said. “Unlike the Scourge we do not have a universal culture. Contrary to what I’m sure you’ve heard, even those raised into undeath during times of war to bolster the Forsaken’s ranks weren’t forced to serve. I am not Arthas. I never will be.”

“We all have things in which we take pride.” He said.

“There’s little to find.”

“Perhaps you’re looking at things the wrong way.”

“The wrong way?” Sylvanas pinned him with a scorching glare, ears laying back and showing her teeth. “What joy is there in this curse?”

“None. If the curse is what you focus on.” Wincing again, Anduin shifted position to relieve the pressure on his leg. “Being cursed. Being crippled. I don’t intend to attempt to equalize our positions, you’re far worse off than I am, but everything happens for a reason. And Light persists even in the darkest hour, should one look for it.”

She scoffed and turned away from him. “The typical dribble of a Priest. The least you could do is be a bit more original.”

“Will honest work instead?” he asked, setting his cup down and folding his hands in his lap. “I don’t seem to have been doing terribly well with ‘original’ thus far. Tonight, with the ‘Priest dribble’ and then back in Orgrimmar.”

“Oh, yes, your little compliment. ‘Beautiful’.” Her tone was acidic. “I’ve heard it before, Wrynn, yes. ‘Beautiful’, but-.”

“No ‘but’.” He said. “Not from me.”

Her glare continued for a drawn out moment before she scoffed and returned her gaze to the heaving surface of the lake. “Close, but still not quite.”

Anduin laughed.
The rain persisted through the night, a lulling ambience of pattering droplets and rolling thunder, and by the morning it had passed leaving behind the scent of dark earth and ozone and a thick layer of cold dew. The temperature remained pleasant well into the afternoon, though it noticeably raised a few degrees as they approached the forest’s borders with the Barrens.

Thick undergrowth and towering trees transitioned into a rolling sea of tall golden grass, a rutted dirt path curving away into the distance. Waiting for them, mounted atop towering Kodo outfitted in colorful armor, were the Tauren Chieftain and a handful of Braves accompanied by Velora.

At the sight of his friend Anduin broke into a sunny smile. “Baine!”

“Anduin.” Both dismounted. The Tauren’s height in comparison to the King’s was comical. Both his arms barely managed to wrap around one of Baine’s. “I’m glad to see you in a venue where we can talk.”

“I’m glad to see you as well.” He said. “Glad that things didn’t have to come to war because I don’t know if I could have brought myself to facing a friend on the battlefield.”

“We’d have each brought ourselves to it for the good of our people. Regardless of the outcome, regret would have come later.” Baine said. “Solely an anthropological interest?”

“It was, at the time that I asked.” Anduin said innocently, stepping back. “I wasn’t lying, only-.”

“Obfuscating.” Sylvanas cut in. “Though you should be aware, Bloodhoof, that it’s not the same thing. He used that line on me at Light’s Hope.”

Valeera snickered. “Uh oh, little brother.” She said. “She’s got your number now. And you have lost your trump card.”

“If it means an end to the fighting then I’m happy to exchange it.” He said. “Though I wouldn’t go counting me out just yet, seeing as I can still get things over on Shaw on occasion.”

“You’ll find I’m quite difficult to take by alarm a second time, Little Lion.” Geryon flicked his knotted tail. “We’ve still a ways to go and you’ve now just over a week to complete your tail wagging.”

Anduin flashed his friend a slightly smaller smile. “She does have a point.”

“We’ll reach Thunder Bluff in just over three hours.” Baine told him, then dropped his voice and pinned the Priest with a searching gaze. “Truthfully, please. Are you alright?”

Anduin nodded, dropping his eyes to the ground. “She saved my life.” He said. “Regardless of whether or not that was an attempted kidnapping or an attempted assassination one slip of that knife and I wouldn’t have my head right now.”

The Tauren heaved a heavy sigh and shook his horned head. “If anyone, it would be you.”

The young King smiled and turned back to his horse.
The Great Gate of Mulgore rose high into the harlequin of blue and white which made up the sky above the Southern Barrens; a towering fortification built entirely from wood scarred by siege weapon fire from Northwatch and ‘True Horde’ forces, topped in a pair of watch towers which sported the perched forms of eagles carved in tribal style. Thick ropes hung with a variety of beads and charms hung between the burning totem poles to which the gate itself was attached. The doors, constructed of lashed together tree trunks sharpened to brutal points at one end stood open, and another eagle figure cast strange shadows over the dusty ground. Through it, the verdant plains of Mulgore opened up before them. Distantly and in all directions the Stonetalon Mountains could be seen rising up on the horizon. The wind carried the sharp refreshing scent of pine sap.

“Keep your eyes open.” One of the Braves called down from atop their kodo. “Though they’re not usually seen in this area Quillboar are ferocious and aren’t opposed to attacking even large parties.”

Keeping his eyes open didn’t seem to be much of a problem for Anduin. At the moment, with his head on a never ceasing swivel, his eyes were open so wide that they appeared liable to pop out of his skull at any moment. Even from that distance Thunderbluff was faintly visible through the low lying clouds and they passed by a handful of wells, camps and totems before they finally reached the mesa’s massive foot.

“It’s huge!” Anduin chirped, all but laying down on Dreamer’s back in order to properly look up at Thunderbluff from the position beside the rough worn cliff face. “I haven’t seen mountains this tall since Kun Lai.”

“Yes,” Baine chuckled, “Dezco tells me you were troublesome at Mist’s Edge.”

Straightening up the Priest focused his friend in a serious look. “I’m trouble everywhere.”

“At least he’s honest about it.” Valeera said, squinting against the sunlight as she gazed up at the mesa as well. “How are we going to get up there?”

“Not by climbing.” The Tauren Chieftain said, pulling his kodo around. “The lifts are over here.”

The lifts up from the ground were located at the far end of a complex of bridges and raised walkways: a great clattering contraption which linked a pair of hide covered platforms to overhanging decks attached to the city’s lower rise by a series of chains and pullies. Not the safest thing in the world by the look of it but Anduin was left expectedly undaunted. He went up with Valeera, Sylvanas, Baine and the company of Braves leaving the rest of their party and the supply cart to take the second lift to the Lower Rise.

Thunderbluff was a place of life and color: a vibrant combination of long houses and hide tents all centered around more totem pulls, etched at the top into the effigy of a Tauren. The population here was the friendliest they’d so far seen, no doubt aided by the general groundedness of the Tauren as a people and the widespread knowledge of the friendship between the King and the Chieftain, and there was none of the verbal attacks or quiet hostility which they’d encountered while in Orgrimmar and Darnassus. Anduin smiled at everyone they happened across and there were only a few occasions where the gesture wasn’t returned.

“All the times that you’ve described Thunderbluff in your letters I never thought I’d get the chance
Anduin’s eyes gathered the sunlight, reflecting the hue of the partly clouded sky. “It’s beautiful. I expect to see you in my city someday soon.”

“I do intend to come to your wedding.” Baine said. “And at some point after that I’m sure I’ll find the time again.”

“I hope so.” He said. “Can you tell me a bit about it? I understand that Mulgore was the ancestral home of your people but that the Centaur forced your ancestors into centuries of being nomadic.”

The Tauren nodded his horned head. “Yes. It wasn’t until after the Third War, with Thralls help, that we managed to reclaim these lands.” He said. “There are a few among us who miss our formerly intinerant lifestyle but we’re all intensely proud to have our permanent home. Myself especially as it’s my father’s legacy. All members of the Horde are welcome here, and now members of the Alliance as well.”

“Some might argue, Bloodhood, that there are shades of being ‘welcome’ here.” Sylvanas said. “It’s no secret that your people are only barely tolerant of mine. And the Forsaken are not terribly grateful for your ‘pity’.”

“Differences in culture, Warchief.” Baine said calmly. “We understand that what has befallen your people is not your fault but my people hold particular beliefs about life and its sanctity which yours have shown themselves not to hold in particular regard.”

The Banshee Queen scoffed.

Anduin sighed. “Where will we be staying for the week?”

“One of the long houses on the upper rise.” Baine said. “It’s divided into two so that both you and your guards will be able to stay in the same building in comfort and privacy.”

The journey there only took a handful more minutes and after crossing a rickety bridge up to the Upper Rise, they soon arrived at their lodgings for the week: a tall, stretched building with high ceilings made entirely of wood. Inside, it had been divided in half by a neat wall.

“We won’t need to worry terribly much about shifts here.” Valeera said, then looked over at Anduin. “I don’t think the fact you’ll be sleeping in the back room needs to be said?”

He shook his head, grinning. “No.” Anduin said. “It doesn’t.”

“I hope that your ride in from Ashenvale this morning wasn’t too tiring.” Baine said, “as we’ve festivities planned for the night.”

“Let me guess,” he said with a half bemused and half annoyed smile, “a feast and a speech.”

“Already tired of them, Little Lion? Imagine for a moment how I feel.”

He reddened a bit and looked appropriately apologetic. “Right. Sorry.”

The Tauren flicked his ears. “Do you think I’d subject a personal friend to a generic formality, Anduin?” he asked. “Here at Thunderbluff we have certain traditions surrounding weddings. I thought you might have an ‘anthropological interest’.”

The Priest grinned. “Anything is welcome over another uncomfortable round of being stared at as if I’m suspected of suffering acute brainrot.” He said. “And I’d be more than honored to be included in one of your people’s traditions.”
“A wiser creature would ask what tradition precisely is being discussed before blindly agreeing.” Sylvanas said. “Some cultures have a ‘tradition’ of eating Humans.”

“Considering the fact that Baine’s my friend I trust him not to.”

“I hope you won’t take this the wrong way, Anduin, but I wouldn’t eat you even if we weren’t.” Baine said.

“Glad to hear that.” Anduin’s grin grew even wider. “But she does have a bit of a point, not to mention the fact that I’m curious. What will we be doing?”

“In our beliefs there’s a dish which couples to be wed should eat together for good luck and good health. It’ll be cooked tonight at the bonfire but we’ll need to catch the crayfish first.”

“We caught the fish for the bonfire at Sen’jin Village too; that was the most fun I’ve had in a long time! I’m looking forward to it.” A pause, then Anduin’s expression fell into mild confusion. “Just a moment, what’s a crayfish?”

“Tiny lake lobsters, your Majesty.”

“Oh! Thank you, Ames.” He said, looking back at his friend. “What lake are we going to be getting them from?”

They’d passed a small handful of them throughout Mulgore on their way in from the Southern Barrens, ranging in size from about the proportion of a small fishing pond to something which would require a boat to make it across in good time and all crystal clear.

“They’ll be found most easily in large numbers in Stone Bull Lake, which is located just outside of Bloodhoof Village.” Baine said. “We’ll be able to reach it in a handful of minutes on the back of Wyverns. At nightfall we’ll head in to the village to ‘drink and make merry’ as your people might say.” The Tauren’s brown eyes flicked briefly to the Warchief and back again. “Or try to.”

“She’s a better sport than she likes to pretend.” Anduin quietly informed his friend, then yelped when she pinched him.

“I can still hear you, Wrynn!”

Rubbing his already bruising arm the young King flashed one last smile at the Tauren and said “I got a little bit of experience riding on Wyvern back when we visited Gallywix’s Pleasure Palace. I’m ready to head out at any time.”

“The sun isn’t going to wait for you.” True to form, though he doubted she’d visited the city often, Sylvanas pushed her way passed them with her Dark Rangers at her heels and set out through the streets.

Exchanging one last look with Baine and his guards, Anduin followed her out.

The Wyvern to whom the Priest’s safety was entrusted was name Kwahu and didn’t seem particularly bothered or thrilled with his presence, giving him the feeling that the Wyvern had seen enough passengers in its life to make them all the same regardless of what race they were a part of. It grumbled at him in a vaguely pleased manner when he reached up to run his fingers through its mane and took off along with the others, following a long established route to their destination.

Bloodhoof Village was fairly small, consisting of a handful of buildings erected from wooden poles and tanned soft hides. Unlike Stormwind, Orgrimmar or even Darnassus the ground hadn’t
been balded by common passage and Mulgore’s green grass stretched uninterrupted through and passed it. A wooden bridge stretched languorously across the banks of the wide stream which curved around the village’s eastern side and emptied into Stone Bull Lake. The gentle sound of a trickling current and the sweet smell of pure water reached them before they could clearly see the lake and Anduin sped his pace, grinning yet again. With how often he had some variant of that expression smeared across his features it was a wonder his face hadn’t frozen that way. He’d left his cane behind and, without its support, moved forward with more of a stagger than a walk. It looked painful but he seemed to have long grown used to it.

“Do the Crayfish that we’re looking for live all throughout the lake or is there somewhere in particular where it’s best to find them?” Anduin chirped, keeping up with his friend with some effort.

“They prefer areas of shallow water with lots of rocks where they can hide; the best place to look will likely be in the shadow of the bridge.” Baine said, then looked the Priest over in some concern. “Will you be able to lift the rocks to get to them?”

“Well I won’t be able to lift any boulders that weigh more than I do but that was how things were even before I was injured.” He said, bending down with some stiffness in order to begin pulling off his boots and rolling up the legs of his pants to the knee. Faintly against the pallor of the skin which Durotar’s sun hadn’t baked into a soft tan the endings of the scaring left behind by the shards of the Divine Bell could be seen, coiling around the top of his calf like the hanging tips of silver vines. “I’ll be alright.”

“You could always order your guards to do the heavy lifting for you.” Sylvanas picked her way lightly down the muddy slope of the bank towards the water’s edge. “They’ll need something to keep them occupied, I’m sure.”

The water of Stone Bull Lake was cold but not uncomfortably so, and Anduin waded in up almost to his knees. Finding purchase on the silty bottom with a fair amount of ease and proceeding to begin to move the rocks he came across: flipping them over entirely or simply lifting them up far enough to feel around beneath them. An action he quickly came to regret when something clamped down on his finger.

Letting out a yelp of pained surprise Anduin recoiled, sending the responsible crustacean flying. He looked over when he herd Sylvanas snort. “You’re supposed to put them in the baskets not throw them across the lake.”

“I know that,” he said, shaking droplets off his hand and looking down at his finger; the jagged inner lining of the crayfish’s claw had left a small cut in his skin and a mix of blood and water smeared itself along his second knuckle. “It pinched me. Not the worst thing I’ve ever felt by far but it took me by surprise.”

The predatory set to her posture as she slunk towards him through the shallows had returned. The gentleness of cold fingers as they wrapped around his hand warning of danger in some form. “It’s barely a scratch. I think you’ll live.”

“It was never in question that I wouldn’t.” Anduin said, well aware that she was simply trying to get a rise out of him. “I could heal it easily but I’m not certain doing so would be worth the man-ah!”

Red eyes blinked up at him with a surprising innocence given the lewdness of the activity she’d engaged in without warning, black lips and cold tongue coiled around his bleeding finger. The sight of it, combined with the sharp pain of the wound sent a frizon of heat down into his belly and
the uncomfortable tightness at the front of his pants he’d felt-to his complete and utter mortification-when he’d been cornered by ‘hired company’ at Gallywix’s Pleasure Palace began to return. Disconnectedly he could feel his face burning.

He nearly jumped a mile when Baine cleared his throat from a few yards away. “There’s another one under this rock here, Anduin. I’ll show you how to go about catching them so that they can’t pinch.”

“Oh, uh, thank you Baine.” Still pink in the face, he hurriedly stepped around her and scuttled away through the water. “Excuse me.”

He knew from the amused sound which came in his wake that victory in this round had gone to her but was far too embarrassed at the current moment to truly care.

Anduin was pinched twice more to varying degrees of severity before he managed to get the proper hang of catching them and all three baskets were filled soon after. Carrying his boots and gloves in one hand and one basket of the squirming, insect like animals in his arms, mud and grass sticking to his feet in a way which would have set the House of Nobles howling-and the thought of that was enough to put a feral smirk on his face-the Young Lion joined the rest of their party in heading back towards Bloodhoof Village. The bonfire had already been erected and lit and burned brightly as the sun began to set over the lake behind them.

“What are you smirking about you witless fool?”

For some reason Nathanos seemed to be in a particularly bad mood after the handful of hours spent at the lake side. Anduin canted his head, expression taking on a curious tint, but didn’t mention the matter. “Oh, just wishing the nobles back in Stormwind could see me now.” He said. “Though, preferably, they’d be viewing my mud splattered state from inside of a locked, sound proof glass box.” Though he’d be sorely tempted to never let them out again. The Dark Ranger Lord huffed and had nothing more to say to him.

As they reached the bonfire a Tauren woman approached Anduin with a gentle smile, greeted him and took the basket. Baine’s heavy three-fingered hand landed on the Priest’s shoulder and the King turned to face him. “Come over to the fire side, Anduin.” He said. “The festivities should begin at any moment.”
Now even more so than when they had while alive the crayfish they’d fished out of Stone Bull Lake looked like large—and admittedly very appetizing—chitinous insects. Steaming and fragrant, drenched in a rich amber broth alongside numerous wild grown vegetables few of which Anduin recognized and with their once blue shells lightened to a milky lilac by the heat of the fire, they’d been ladled out of the large clay pot used to cook the dish into a smaller wooden bowl which the Tauren Chieftain hadn’t hesitated to hand to him and warmed his ungloved hands. A number of smaller bowls had been passed around to the rest of the gathering—the Bloodhoof Tauren and Valeera and his guards; some had been offered to and refused by the Dark Rangers as well—and the entire gathering was now staring at them.

Quickly putting together the snippets of conversation which he and Baine had had throughout the day regarding the nature of the dish and the traditions behind it into a comprehensible hint about precisely what was expected of them Anduin picked up one of the two crayfish in the bowl, holding the other out to her. Sylvanas shot him a rather annoyed glance and he offered an apologetic smile.

“You don’t have to eat it, I know that this sort of thing can’t be much beyond a passing annoyance to you with how little you get out of food, but I think they’re waiting on us to crack them before they start eating.”

She took it without saying anything, snapping it in half with a vindictive ease which was somewhat concerning. Anduin, too, had little trouble largely owing to a lifetime of experience cracking lobster. Apparently he’d been right in his assumption because as soon as they’d done so everyone around them began tucking into their meal.

“This seems familiar to you, Anduin.” Baine said. “With the fact that just this morning you didn’t know what a crayfish was I’d expected you to have a bit more trouble managing that than you did.”

“I’ve never had crayfish before but lobsters are little different beyond, perhaps, being bigger and notably more of a pain to get open.” Anduin told him. “This looks and smells wonderful and I’m sure that it will taste…hm?” turning his head in response to a tap on his shoulder the young Priest let out a muffled yelp of surprise when the tail of the crayfish Sylvanas had cracked was shoved into his mouth.

“Do something useful with your mouth before you run it and eat that!” She tossed the head and claws into the dirt.

Snorting in mild amusement he sucked the meat out of both tails and, after looking around to see what was being done with the shells and following the example of tossing them into the fire, turned his attention to the broth in the bowl. The Banshee Queen seemed more interested—though that wasn’t saying terribly much—in the contents of her mug than the food or conversation around them. Mulgore Firewater. Anduin hadn’t had a terribly great amount of experience with Horde liquors but hadn’t needed more than a single draught of the Blood Mead which had accompanied the feast at Orgrimmar to know that they were a great deal stronger than what the Alliance typically favored for ‘social drinking’. Much more in line with the sort of thing his father would drink with the express purpose of getting drunk. The young King was by no means a light weight and knew his limits, at least while dealing with familiar alcohols, but he couldn’t exactly call himself ‘experienced’ with being well and truly drunk and even with Baine, Valeera and his guards all there to ensure didn’t make too much of a fool of himself or fall into the bonfire Anduin would
rather avoid making such a scene something necessary to avoid.

He observed the mug full of liquor with something near to suspicion, far more wary of it than he had been of the countless unfamiliar spices and ingredients which had gone into the meal he’d had little hesitation in partaking in. Perfectly clear like the finest distilled water, and carrying a warm sharp scent. Cautiously, he tilted his mug and took a sip. The flavor was similar to nutmeg and cinnamon and it blazed its way pleasantly down his throat and through his chest. Tempted beyond proper caution Anduin took a second, larger drink and half-regretted it. His vision canted slightly to the left and blurring a bit around what had once been defined edges.

One mug would be about all that he could take if not a little more but he didn’t want to get quite so far along quite so early in the night and so set his mug aside. Tucking back into the bowl in his hands, turning his attention away again only when music started up nearby. An unfamiliar, if not unpleasant, ensemble of instruments the like of which Anduin had never seen before hand-carved from wood, strung with sinew and decorated with colorful designs etched in with delicate tools by skilled craftsmen. The vocals were in Taura-he, only a few words of which the Priest was able to pick out and didn’t string together in any way which was sensible to his now minorly impaired mind.

Baine appeared more than a little bit amused and gently nudged his smaller friend’s shoulder. “Had I realized you weren’t much of a drinker I’d have supplied a lighter beverage.”

“Lighter? No need.” He wasn’t slurring yet, at least, though Anduin was almost painfully aware of the most important lesson his father had ever taught him concerning alcohol: the longer it was in you the more of an impact it tended to have. “I think one is about my limit, but I’ll be alright.”

The Tauren chuckled again and sat back, setting his own mug aside. “If you’re certain.” He said. “Though I’m not sure how graceful you’ll be.”

“You’re talking about the dance?” beneath the flickering glow of the fire, now the only source of light beyond the moon and stars, and slightly unfocused with the Firewater he’d consumed Anduin’s eyes appeared a smoky color closer to grey. The Priest watched the Tauren spinning around the crackling flames and smiled. “You know me too well.”

“Well enough to know that neither your leg or that drink will have much effect in stopping you from joining in.” Baine said. “Dezco had a litany of stories about you when he returned from that Tavern at Mist’s Edge.”

Recalling the Dawnchaser Chieftain, Anduin smiled. “I don’t think he was any more amused than my footmen were.”

“He did say you could get up to a bit of trouble.” Baine said, grinning as the Priest struggled to his feet and turned to Sylvanas.

“Trouble you for a dance?”

Her red eyes shifted from him to the rabble going on beside the fire and back again. “That is not dancing. And that you would call it that leads me to wonder precisely what your tutors got up to with you.” She said. “Though, as my other choice is sitting here and watching you stumble about like a Gnoll with a peg leg I suppose that I’ll indulge you.”

Anduin had spent enough time with the Black Prince years before in Pandaria to tell when someone was being wholly genuine with their distain and when it was more a matter of preserving their image. Unphased and smiling he offered her his hand which, after a drawn-out moment and with
much reluctance, she took. Cold metal, jagged along the hinged joints. Anduin had left his own gloves beside his cane, his leg aching dully and slightly stiff but not intolerable.

Falling into line with the swift steps was markedly more difficult for him than it was for the Banshee Queen, despite the fact that she was barely trying. He’d trip and stumble more often than he managed to do things correctly, and she never missed a chance to snipe at him for it, but a combination of the Firewater and the ridiculousness of it all made it impossible for him to do anything but laugh about it.

The matter seemed to be infectious, at least to some degree, because by the time the night was over Sylvanas appeared to be having a mild struggle keeping her trademark sneer properly in place.

“Amazing how quickly ‘one is my limit, I don’t want to risk what I might do while drunk’ changes tune to ‘you know what, half a mug more won’t hurt’ when the alcohol in question is to your taste.” Valeera snickered, watching him half teeter along on his cane. “Though I suppose I should have expected this, given whom you’re related to.”

“Valeera, you and I both know that if father had been in my position he’d have out drank everyone there just to show that he could hold his liquor-Light, I’m slurring!”

Valeera grinned. Ames was clearly struggling not to laugh, pinned beneath Gideon’s warning glare. Nathanos and the Dark Rangers ranged from indifferent to annoyed while Sylvanas seemed supremely amused. A light flush of high color adorned the curve of his cheeks.

“Don’t deny that you’ve inherited at least a mild competitive streak. I know better, little brother.” She said. “Besides, the real test of mettle isn’t how much you can drink. It’s how much you can drink without regretting it in the morning.”

“I have no sympathy for hangovers, Anduin.” Sylvanas said, a tint to her gaze which he couldn’t identify as she looked him up and down.

“You don’t have sympathy for anything.” Valeera snapped, defensive.

“I won’t need sympathy even if I do end up with a hangover.” Anduin’s cane almost slipped out from under him and he tripped forwards before regaining his balance. “I’d hardly be worth my shalt as a healer if I couldn’t handle a hangover on my own.”

“A good thing; I’d hope you’d have known from the outset that ‘tender wiles’ weren’t among my set of skills.” Sylvanas led the way into the long house they’d been put up in and through the front room where their entourage was staying.

“Sorry about that; she can be a little over protective at times.” Thoughts of saying something along those lines came to mind but Anduin could already guess what she’d say to him in return-if anything at all-so he kept silent. Turning away from the door and wobbling over to his trunk. Propping his cane up against the wall and freeing himself from the outer layers of his clothing: boots and gloves and the thin jacket he’d donned as the temperature had begun dropping with the nightfall. Pulling open the trunk and bending over it, slightly off balance with most of his weight on his good leg and squinting through the dark in an effort to locate suitable clothing for sleep as he pawed through it.

His only warning was the slight shift of motion in his peripheral vision before a surprisingly powerful grip tipped him sideways onto the bed. Anduin’s first instinct was to attempt to get back
up, alcohol fatigue and surprise slowing his mental process enough that it was difficult for him to process what had occurred with the immediacy he’d have preferred, but his efforts were thwarted by her weight across his waist and the fact that she’d pinned his hands above his head. Her red eyes held the satisfied triumph of a successful hunter, though he was well aware that he’d made for pathetically easy prey, and her black lips twisted up into a ruthless grin.

“It’s far too simple to take the King of Beasts unaware, it seems.” She shifted her grip on his wrists to one hand and began to pluck at the buttons on his shirt with the other. “If a couple of drinks is all it takes to make you so compliant I may have to see you on the cusp of drunk more often, Anduin.”

“I’m usually compliant to most things provided that they’re reasonable.” The last button came undone and the two sides fell open, revealing most of his chest and stomach to her discomfiting gaze. His heart was thudding so loudly it was difficult to think clearly. “I’m not certain this is reasonable. I’m not even certain what it is you’re doing.”

“I think you’ll find it’s very simple. You may be possessed of the foolish need to ‘know me better’ but most people in the world only care for what goes where and whether or not all the parts are working. If I wish to indulge in what you should have thought better of dangling in front of me than I shall. If you’re unwilling-.”

“I’m not!” Immediately Anduin turned bright red, realizing the precise implications of his quickly spluttered response. “It’s simply that it’s hardly proper. Now, I mean. We’re not-.”

“Married yet?” Ferocious amusement twisted her features. Her hand was cold as it traced lightly down his chest, following the ridges and dips of muscle and scar. When she’d removed her gloves he had no idea. Of greater concern was the less than dignified position he was rapidly finding himself in and precisely what the mounting restriction of his clothes might say about his exact taste. “Naturally you’d be entirely ignorant of the fact that there’s more than one way to go about this and that most of them wouldn’t register as ‘improper’ in the context in which you’re using the word.” Not improper in that context but improper none the less. Dirty. Debauched. Though, to be entirely fair, was there a way to go about the act that wasn’t in some way? Still holding her place smugly astride him Sylvanas leaned forward until they were in a recumbent double of the position their first meeting had ended in. With only her quite revealing armor to separate their upper bodies there was nothing to keep their skin from brushing and every time it did Anduin had to fight to keep his breath from hitching too loudly. The blush down his neck rapidly darkened as he felt her lips against the shell of his ear. “I think you need another lesson, Little Lion.”

His efforts at response only amounted to an undignified and almost frightened sounding croak as his voice failed him. The fact was plainly more amusing than off putting in the eyes of his captor. One of her hands slid down his body again, this time not stopping at his waistline and the added pressure against the already restricting fabric left him biting back a whine.

“‘Scholarly’ always was used to describe you, King Wrynn, but I have to wonder if you’re this excited for all of your teachers or if it’s simply something about me.”

Another whimper. Anduin attempted to hide his face in the crook of his arm. Hissing, Sylvanas grabbed his chin and forced him to turn his head back.

“Don’t think you’re going to get away with hiding. Or grabbing for that matter.” She released his chin quickly and grabbed one corner of the sheets they were sprawled on top of, looping it around one of the bed’s supports. “Before this little lesson goes any further you need to be shown the proper posture.”
Prior to having his wrists bound above his head the young King had been under the mistaken impression that only sailors could tie knots that fast. He tried his bonds only to discover that he wasn’t going anywhere.

“Quite the piece of art you make, Wrynn; tied up and red all down your chest. I think I understand, now, why you’ve been kidnapped so often in your life. This is a sight anyone could be forgiven for being after.” Sylvanas traced a finger along his jawline and over his lips, pressing down just hard enough to squeeze the blood from the flesh. “Hide from me again and you’ll be learning a second lesson about the use of pain in the pursuit of pleasure.”

That was a threat and it should have sobered him but it only seemed to make his distraction worse and his clothing, impossibly, seeming to shrink another size. Pupils blown wide, he squirmed in his bonds.

“I understand; I won’t hide. Just, please! Whatever you’re going to do, do it!”

“Such a pretty beggar, too.” Her hand resumed applying pressure as her body slipped down along his, cold and smooth like a snake’s. Slipping beneath his waistband. Cold fingers closing around him in a firm grip. Thumb circling the head as she pumped his shaft. His hips bucked up into her touch only to be pinned down with her other hand. The headboard creaked as his arms jerked in an effort to free his wrists. He bit his lip bloody trying to quiet a whine. “I’ll have to hear you beg properly later.”

Sylvanas released him, removing her hand and jerking down his last piece of clothing, leaving him bare to the cold night. His length sprang forwards against his stomach, flushed ruddy and beading at the tip.

“Conspicuously interested,” her grip on him returned, nimble fingers stroking up and down. “I think we may be better suited for each other than I’d first thought, at least in this regard.”

“I don’t…what?”

The Banshee Queen didn’t answer him, her grip slipping down to his thighs. Nudging them open and slipping into the space between them. Cold, pale tongue flicking out and drawing a soft sound which turned into a sweet, mid-tone moan as she took him into her mouth. All the way down to the base. Working her throat in a way that spoke to great, if distant, experience and left him nearly boneless and tugging mindlessly against his bonds. He wouldn’t have lasted long if not for her grip on his base.

“If you don’t want to be stuck like this all night you’d best resume your earlier pleading.” Red eyes glared down at him through the darkness. “I’ve very little mercy and you’re currently dependent on it.”

The Priest beneath her let out a shaky breath, eyes struggling to focus properly and his face awash with lust. “Please!”

“Not good enough. It’s polite, Wrynn, to address whom you’re speaking to and what you’re asking for.” A whine pressed against his teeth, face redder than ever before. “Resisting, little King, will only prolong this.”

“Please, W-Warchief! Let me…ah! By the Light!”

The Banshee Queen drank in his half-pained desperation with an enthusiastic contentment which Anduin, in his hazed and only slightly sobered mind, couldn’t help but think was perhaps a little bit
sadistic. “Good enough, I suppose, for your first time.” She said, continually applying light touches
to his painfully hard length and watching him writhe helplessly beneath her. “Though I’d advise
you keep in mind that, in the future, you’ll have to do better to receive any sort of reward.”

Sylvanas released her grip, stroking him harshly and taking his tip back into her mouth. His peak
ripped through him like a wildfire, far too quickly for Anduin to bite back his cry and his voice far
too loud to stand any chance of not being heard in the other room. Tears of relief pricking at the
corners of his eyes Anduin shuddered against the pallet and fought to catch his breath as she sat
back, her scarlet gaze seeming somehow brighter as she daintily swiped at the corner of her mouth.

“Yes, it’s definitely been far too long.”

“Pleased to be of service?” his eyes were half dazed and he didn’t look quite able to comprehend
what had happened. “Please, Sylvanas, will you untie me now?”

“Untie you?” she picked teasingly at the knot before releasing his right wrist. “I see little reason
not to.”

He blinked at her expectantly but when no effort to free his left wrist was made as well Anduin
tugged experimentally on it only to discover no give in the material. “Both of them?”

“Both? A bit demanding of you when you’ll only need one.” Her grin returning full force, shark
like and ferocious, Anduin heard the clink of armor which made his eyes go very round. “Did you
think we were finished? Arousing as it is to have the ‘Lion of the Alliance’ splayed and submissive
beneath me I require a bit more stimulation from the night than that. Seeing how concerned you
are with ‘propriety’ your fingers will have to do for now.”

His…? She wanted him to…? Uncertain he’d interpreted her meaning correctly Anduin didn’t
move as she prowled closer, trying not to stare at what her missing armor had revealed and failing
spectacularly. He’d heard of such things, from the servants on occasion when they thought they
were alone or some of the champions at the tavern, but he’d never actually seen one before and it
was…the alcohol wasn’t helping.

“What are you waiting for? There are only so many hours in a night, you pin head!”

Cringing slightly at her tone, blush back to full force, he swallowed hard and reached forward with
a shaking hand. Fingers sliding through coarse hair into the wet folds beneath. Slick and cold;
clumsily and less than confident, he found his way to her opening and pushed inside up to the first
knuckle. She hissed and leaned down over him, long hair brushing against his neck and chest as
she drew his head back and attacked his mouth. Licking at the drying blood on his lips as he
pushed further, hesitantly beginning to slide in a second finger only to have Sylvanas grind back
against him, forcing him fully into her body.

“Stop being so ‘gallantly’ concerned with hurting me.” She hissed, slipping down to his chest and
sinking her teeth into his collarbone. Lapping away the blood that welled there. He stifled a groan
as she rocked back against him, nails raising red welts over his chest. “A bit of pain makes things
all the better.”

Tied down and pinned beneath the Warchief of the Horde, a woman renowned across much of
Azeroth for her ruthlessness, heavily distracted by the scrapes and biting kisses she dropped on him
wherever she saw fit, all Anduin could do was continue blindly pushing into her with hooked
fingers. It wasn’t a position he found himself terribly averse to.

Sylvanas shuddered, muting a satisfied purr by biting down on his shoulder again and leaving deep
teeth marks behind that beaded scarlet against his pale skin. Ignoring his light hiss of pain as she laved at the wound. He reached up to untie his other hand and, after another moment, succeeding in doing so.

“Here, I can heal it.”

She pulled back enough to glare at him, blood on her lips. “No.”

Anduin blinked in bleary confusion. “What?”

“I’m sure that you ‘can’ heal this, but you’re not to. You may heal the others but this one stays. Am I understood, Wrynn?”

“I-?” she dug her nails into the open flesh and he yelped. “Alright, I’ll leave it. But may I at least stop the bleeding?”

She ran her fingertips along her jawline again, smearing blood across his skin, and smirked. Her teeth were stained a light scarlet. “Good boy.”

Where she went after that he didn’t know, seeming to vanish into the surrounding shadows of the room and leaving the exhausted and still partly drunk King to process what had happened alone.
Plains Hunters

Through a combination of Anduin’s long stretching tendency to remain true to his word and the fact that he wouldn’t have put not having left as completely as it had appeared the night prior past Sylvanas the bite mark on his shoulder had been left almost entirely untouched though his other injuries-largely welts raise by sharp nails and a few bruises where his wrists had been tied-had been properly seen to prior to him passing out the night before. Now, hours later, Anduin was sitting up on the side of the pallet cautiously prodding at the wound with probing fingers. Deep cherry where her teeth had broken his skin, leaving behind a perfect imprint of sharp incisors, it had scabbed over mildly and was still tender around the edges. The second bitemark that she’d left on him which was certain to scar no matter what he did to attempt to prevent it even if he hadn’t been all but ordered not to heal it. More severe and larger than the first, at least it was a bit more easily concealed.

Sighing, Anduin collected bandages from the small Healer’s satchel he never failed to have on him and quickly but securely wrapped the wound to prevent the fabric of his shirt from irritating the open flesh before collecting the clothing which had been tossed carelessly about the night prior and heading for where the trunk stood against the wall. He only made it a few steps before the door of the room swung open to allow the smirking Blood Elf inside.

“Morning, noisy.” She chirped, entirely oblivious to the fact that much to Anduin’s mortification she’d walked in on him without a stitch aside from the bandages.

“Valeera!” He quickly made use of his discarded clothing to cover himself. “By the Light, do you knock?”

“I’m a Rogue, Anduin, what do you think?” Fel green eyes fell on his shoulder and playfulness transformed into concern. “Are you alright? What did she do to you?”

“Fine, and nothing. It’s just…” he reached up and rubbed at the back of his neck nervously. His fingers catching slightly in some of the tangles which had formed in his long, burnished hair. “She likes to bite.”

“Clearly; I remember how you looked when you first came back from Light’s Hope Chapel.” Valeera said. “Why did you wrap it up when a Renew would have been enough to heal it. Is it that bad?”

She looked as if she expected him to inform her Sylvanas had attempted to chew off his arm. “She asked me not to. I think…well, ‘territorial’ would apparently be a good word to use in this case.” His state of advanced undress suddenly seeming to re-affirm itself at the forefront of his attention again Anduin flushed once again and yelped “would you please get out so I can put some pants on?”

“You only had to ask, little brother.” She snickered, turning around and sauntering out. “Riding leathers, again, would be the wisest choice.”

The door swung shut behind her. Anduin sighed and opened his trunk, dropping his old clothing in before digging out that day’s replacements. Something told him that the mild headache the Firewater he’d had the night before had left behind would only get worse as the day went on.

Pulling his riding leathers into place and retrieving his cane, he untangled his hair as quickly and as thoroughly as he could before tying it back and clopping out of the room.
Facing his guards after the commotion he knew he’d made the night before was difficult and Anduin could feel his face beginning to steadily grow hot. Valeera snickered again, seeing his discomfort, though there remained a tint of protective displeasure to her expression which he didn’t doubt would persist well into his marriage. Cira was having a bit of trouble meeting his gaze directly herself and, though it was difficult to tell beneath her helm, appeared to be blushing as well. Gideon was as professional as ever. Ames, grinning ear to ear, clapped Anduin on the back as he passed with near enough force to knock him over though for the life of him the Priest couldn’t determine why.

“Good morning, your Majesty.” Gideon said by way of greeting. Anduin dipped his head in return and mumbled a similar response. “The entirety of the day’s itinerary is taken up by a single activity; we’re to accompany you and the Banshee Queen out with Bloodhoof and some of his Braves on a trophy hunt in the Southern Barrens.”

Trophy hunting; an activity which was familiar to him at least in some regard. He’d gone along with his father, Bolvar and other nobles and members of the guard on hunts through Elwynn Forest for prize rack buck, or wolves or even bear. But the wild inhabitants of the lands around Stormwind city had nothing on the enormous Fauna native to the Barrens some of which, like the Kodo and Stormers, were positively massive and far from easy prey. “What will we be hunting?”

“A black lion named Kichalo.” He told him. “From what I understand of what your friend told us it lairs with its pride between Camp Taurajo and Razorfen Kraul. It will take most of the day to reach the area, but I’m sure there’ll be other things to hunt in the meanwhile.”

Plenty of them, he didn’t doubt. The heaving herds of zhevra and roving packs of raptors and hyena they’d spotted on occasion coming in were proof enough of that likelihood.

“Are you prepared to leave, King Anduin?”

The young Priest nodded, pulling his gloves into place. “Sylvanas and the others have already set out, I presume?”

“They were gone when we woke this morning, your Majesty.” Cira said, gaze pinned on his forehead. “Presumably they’ll meet us at the Lower Rise, near the lifts. I doubt the Banshee Queen would pass up an opportunity for a hunt.”

Anduin doubted that as well, especially given the fact that he’d proven unsatisfactory prey the night before. “No reason to leave Dreamer and the others locked in the stables any longer than need be, then.” He said, thumping across the front room towards the long house’s door and pulling it open.

The bright white glare of morning sunlight stabbed him in the eyes without delay or mercy. Anduin blinked hard, shook his head a few times as the headache attempted to mount, then pushed it aside and started forwards. Strolling around to the nearby stables with Valeera and his guards just behind.

Dreamer poked his head out of the top of his stall door, barely able to do so due to the fact that the lodging was meant for the massive Kodo mounts favored by the Tauren people, and let out a high whistle in greeting. Anduin smiled at the comical sight and reached for the latch of the stall, flipping it over and pulling it open with the gentle creak of wooden hinges. The Palomino trotted out with a swish of his pale tail, only dissuaded from his usual ritual of lipping at his owner’s head in an attempt to eat his hair when the Priest offered him a handful of milled oats from the bucket left hanging on the door.
"We’re going hunting today.” The horse’s ears perked up sharply. Anduin smiled and patted the side of his mount’s neck. “I know you love going out on sustained rides. You’ve been having a lot of fun on this trip, haven’t you?”

Dreamer snorted in response and tossed his mane, waiting expectantly while Anduin attached his saddle and slipped his bridle between his teeth. Leading the Palomino out of the stables to join the other three horses and Anur, he pulled himself up onto his back, settling into the saddle.

Reigns loose and comfortable in the grip of one hand, Anduin prodded Dreamer forward with a gentle tap of his heels and started off towards the arranged meeting spot in front of the lifts on the Lower Rise. Baine and the others were already there, the Tauren Chieftain mounted atop his Kodo, Talut, as were the Dark Rangers. Sylvanas, however, was leaning casually against Geryon’s side with a look of absolute smugness on her face and a bow and quiver of arrows additional to her own beside her.

“The Young Lion has awoken at last and rolled from his den.” Picking up the bow and quiver she tossed them to him; Anduin managed to catch them quickly enough that the impact didn’t knock him off his horse though he did almost dump all of the arrows tucked inside of it onto the dusty ground. “Hung over?”

“Not terribly.” Luckily, he hadn’t drunk quite enough of the Firewater the night before to leave him lain up in pain or feeling ill.

“Good. You’ll be able to pay attention to my lessons then.” Catching the dusting of pink which had once more broken out across his cheeks, she added innocently “you did say you wanted to learn a lighter touch with the bow.”

“A-Ah.” Anduin cleared his throat quickly as he draped the strap of the quiver over his shoulder. Wincing slightly as its weight pressed against the bite. “Yes. I remember us having that conversation now. Something about saving your weapon from my ‘fumbling fingers’.” Despite his coloring the look he sent her made it clear he was asking a question of sorts with that statement.

“They’re a bit more clever than I thought, but still fumbling.” She informed him, and then asked “did you hurt your shoulder? You seem to be in a little bit of pain. Care to share?”

“I’ll be alright; a little bit tender but nothing to be any way concerned with.” He replied demurely, looping Dreamer’s reigns once more around his hand. “as for your other questions, you know what happened to my shoulder and I personally see no reason to broadcast what we’ve gotten up to in our personal time for anyone to hear.”

“Oh, yes. Yet another manifestation of your stiff backed ‘propriety’.” Her Cheshire grin stretched wider. “Interesting knots for someone so ostensibly vanilla. Though with the amount you’ve been kidnapped I suppose I’m not surprised; they do say fetishes develop at a young age.”

Anduin almost choked on his tongue and hurriedly turned to his friend. “I hear we’re hunting one animal in particular. Could you tell me more about this ‘Kichalo’?” He asked. “Preferably while we’re riding out towards the Southern Barrens?”

“Of course, the lift will be coming back up in another few seconds.” The wooden walkway shook beneath the plodding footsteps of the massive reptile the Tauren Chieftain was mounted atop. Lowering his voice as they approached the lift, the rush of air being pushed before the platform ruffling Anduin’s golden bangs, Baine said “an interesting dynamic you’ve formed with her. I believe she’s come to respect you, in some way, as much as she respects anyone.”
Which, it seemed, wasn’t all that much at all.

“I’m match enough for he, at least so far as quips and barbs go. Though I’ve more of a filter and she’s taken to using that to her advantage.” He said. “She likes to see me squirm, I think. I’ll admit to finding mild enjoyment in giving as good as I get myself. All in good fun, of course, at least for me. Really, though, about the lion?”

“Kichalo is a particularly vicious and intelligent lion and unique in coloring. He’s a bit of a menace and will provide good sport: a proper trophy, and story, for the Lion of Stormwind to take home to his own pride.” The lift had arrived back at the top of its line. Anduin and Baine were among those in their group who took the first one down. A small handful of Braves and a Kodo drawn cart were already waiting for them. “Tauren may not look it at first glance but we’re as able Hunters as any Elf or Human. And there’s plenty to hunt out on the Barrens. Even if Kichalo eludes us no one will come away empty handed. Though we’ll need to be careful, especially around Razoren Kraul.”

“Because of the Quilboar?” Anduin asked.

Baine nodded. “Razoren Kraul is one of the few places on this continent which those savages claim as sacred and many of them live there. The old among their kind often seek death in battle and will throw themselves at any large group of single enemies they stand no chance of defeating. If we don’t see at least a few of them today I’ll be surprised.” He said. “I hope you know how to use your father’s sword, because the sight of it will draw them to you.”

“I’m no talent with a blade, but with the Light at my hand I’ll manage.” He said. “And I’m not alone. There are enough eyes I trust to watch my back if need be.”

“While you’re still of use I’m not about to allow you to be cut down by some slavering boar creature.” Sylvanas drawled. “Though I hope you’ve learned from Teldrassil.”

“I have.” Anduin said, hearing the wheels of the cart squeak into motion behind them as they headed back towards the great gate. Basking in the cool scent of evergreens and clear water and dewed grass. “The point you raised is more than valid. I must take my Healer’s duties in measure with my duties as a ruler to my people. What would they do it I was to die now, so young and without an heir by either blood or name? Stormwind would be left in total chaos.”

“Given all your hang ups I highly doubt you’ll ever have a blood heir, Anduin. Would you be able to bring yourself to sleep with another woman; a living woman who’d be capable of providing you a child. Potentially multiple times, should you not be ‘blessed’ with a son your first go around. Never mind the trouble questionable legitimacy could lead to.” Sylvanas said. “I think the guilt would keep you from getting it up. Not to mention the fact that your House of Nobles would want their next King to be fully Human, and you’ve a-.”

“The ‘taste for Elves’ joke went trite some time ago. I don’t have a specific taste for Elves but no man in his right mind wouldn’t find an Elf, male or female, pretty!”

“That sounds like something someone with a closeted taste for Elves would say.”

Anduin huffed and rolled his blue eyes skyward but, recognizing the argument as a hill not worth dying on, let the matter drop. He changed the subject and received a pout in reward. “There’s always adoption. Naming an heir which I’d raised as my own. There are far too many orphans in Stormwind, and Kings have done so in the past.”

“I hope you’re prepared to raise it yourself. I’ve no interest in someone else’s brat.”
“Someone else’s specifically?” curious eyes shifted back to her. “Was there ever a time where you wanted your own?”

Sylvanas scoffed at him and prodded her mount a bit faster. “I’ve never had time for children.”

‘Never had time’ wasn’t the same thing as ‘never wanted’ and didn’t in any way answer his question. Anduin could tell pressing the matter wouldn’t be the wise choice and supposed that, whatever the answer, it wouldn’t matter either way. Having children of his own, a large family to love and grow old with, had been one of the things he’d known he was giving up by pursuing this avenue of peace. What difference did it make if there’d ever been a time where the former Ranger General of Silvermoon had wanted children when there was no longer any chance of her doing so?

They reached Mulgore’s Gate after a pleasant few hour’s ride through the rolling green plains, not spotting much beyond a pack of lumbering Tallstriders and a couple of cougars which the Tauren around them didn’t seem to view as worth hunting or, at the very least, worth delaying getting into the Southern Barrens and the more impressive prey which awaited them there. Anduin still found the great cats to be beautiful and graceful, for all that he could barely catch a glimpse of their tawny coats through the rippling grass.

Once, though he couldn’t be certain as he’d never seen one even in books, only knowing descriptions of the bird woman read long ago, the young King thought he might have caught sight of a Harpy in the distance.

The air was slightly hotter beyond the Great Gate, dusty in much the same way that Durotar’s had been though not heavily enough to bleach the skyline white with heat or coat the backs of their throats with a gritty earthen flavor. Though the day around them passed slowly it didn’t drag in any way, and the Priest quite enjoyed the easy riding and occasional jaunt after an animal which crossed their path, sometimes to shoot and sometimes to take part in a brief chase. The scents of the towering dry grass around them mingled with the faint tang of blood from the Zhevra and wind serpents that the Braves had already taken. The golden sea seemed to stretch endlessly before them. Neither he or Sylvanas had yet fired a single arrow at a target of their own.

“We’ll be entering Kichalo’s common hunting ground soon.” Baine called, brown eyes alert. “You can see the thorns of the Kraul just over the horizon there. Keep an eye out; if we’re to see any Quilboar now would be the most likely time they’d make an appearance.”

Though he had little idea of what exactly he was supposed to be looking for Anduin pulled his gaze from the far flung horizon in order to keep watch over their immediate surroundings instead. Beside him, though clearly with more of a concrete idea of precisely what she was looking for, Sylvanas was doing much the same. Reflexively, seeking comfort from the familiar unyielding shape of the hilt, Anduin’s hand fell to where Shalamayne hung heavy at his belt.

Aware as he was that attempting to use it in any sort of battle was more likely to prove a hinderance than a help it was comforting to have it close at hand. The only piece of his father that had survived what had happened at Wrynnfall.

He jumped in alarm when Sylvanas leapt from her saddle without warning, the tattered tail of her wine-red cloak fluttering behind her as she landed lightly on the ground in a poised crouch.

“What?”

“Relax, Wrynn. There’s no danger.” She didn’t turn away from whatever she was looking at; her crouched posture left the object of her interest obscured from his view. “I think I’ve found a hint for our hunt.”
Slowly, held up by the stiffness of his lamed leg, Anduin dismounted from Dreamer’s back and hobbled closer and to the side of her. Finally getting a glimpse of what it was that the Banshee Queen was looking at.

“Prints.”

“Lion prints.” She agreed, then indicated something about the nearest one which Anduin couldn’t discern. “And they’re fairly fresh. The cat that made them can’t be more than a few miles away.”

Anduin reached out and lightly placed his hand over the print. Blue eyes widening at the sight of his palm and fingers disappearing with room to spare. “That’s a big lion.”

“Kichalo.” The Priest hadn’t noticed his Tauren friend coming up behind him and would have tipped face first into the mud if Baine hadn’t caught him gently by the shoulder. “Sorry, Anduin. I thought you heard me.”

“By the Light, Baine. You’re bloody silent for something so large!” With mild trouble, the young Priest straightened up and brushed dust from his clothing. “How can you be sure?”

“No other lion on the Barrens is that big.” The Tauren said. “If we set out after him now, we may be able to-.”

Baine cut himself off and turned his head at the same time that Sylvanas knocked an arrow on the string of her bow, stance becoming tense. Hair rising along his neck and arms, Anduin took a step back from the towering grass in front of them. Reaching, at first, for the bow across his back before thinking better of it and drawing Shalamayne. Though not unbearable to carry as an ornament wielding it was an entirely different matter altogether and he knew from the way the tip dipped forward alarmingly that he was doing something wrong. The look Sylvanas sent him and her hiss of “what are you doing Wrynn?” confirmed as much.

He didn’t have much time to dwell on the matter, however, before the tall grass around them seemed to blow apart. With the thunder of hooves and a cacophony of snorts and squeals a small group of creatures the like of which Anduin had never seen before stampeded from the weeds. Short but stocky and with hairy arms each as thick as one of his thighs they were pig like in appearance with hooved feet and tusked snouts in place of faces, crowned with tiny angry eyes. Quills sprouted from their backs, crude black armor strapped haphazardly onto vital places, and what little of their bodies wasn’t covered in either was swathed in thick knotted hide.

The nearest one jumped at him with a shriek, swinging a crude battle axe at the middle of his chest: the highest part of his body that it could reach. Anduin reacted without thought and brought up his blade. Steel meeting stone with a gout of sparks and a vicious clang. Anduin felt the bones in his wrist grind together in entirely the wrong way and gave ground, a fresh jolt of pain shooting up his lamed leg. Swiftly applying a Renew to relieved the pain the Priest scraped everything he could remember of his long ago martial training together and lunged forward, stepping inside the reach of the bulky slower weapon and using his weight and momentum to drive the tapered blade through the chink of the poorly crafted breastplate his opponent wore. Planting his good foot against the Quilboar and ripping Shalamayne back as it shrieked again and collapsed with a heavy thud.

“Your majesty!”

“I’m fine, Gideon. Thank you.” Anduin brushed a stray lock of hair back from his face before pulling a handkerchief from within the folds of his clothes and running it over the blade to clear away the blood.
“Impressive, by the standards of an admitted novice.” Sylvanas said, three arrow bristled Quilboar lying at her feet. “It seems you really are passable with that sword, though I doubt you’d ever be capable of making the transition into Paladin.”

“I’m not terribly disheartened by that. I’ve always been drawn more towards the Priesthood than the Order of the Silverhand regardless; I’m aware that I belong at the head of the church not the head of the army.” He returned Shalamayne to his belt. “Even still, I’d have become as close to a Paladin as I could if that was what was needed to protect my people. Would have led the Alliance to war, and to our doom, if that was the choice which was made. I’m just grateful it didn’t come to that.”

“I’m flattered that you consider me the only threat to Stormwind left on Azeroth.” Sylvanas draped her bow back across her shoulders and started towards the horses. “Now, I believe we’ve a lion to be hunting.”

Smiling, the high of adrenaline fading from his blood, Anduin pulled himself back up onto his mount’s back and followed the other’s away.

The next few hours passed with no further Quilboar related excitement. They’d find tracks on occasion which Baine and Sylvanas both had far more success interpreting than he did but ultimately and largely by chance Anduin was the first one to actually spot the lion they were looking for. Unfortunately, Kichalo seemed to have spotted them quite some time ago. He barely had time to fire at the beast, hitting it in the neck but mostly catching the great cat’s ruff, before the lion pounced with a roar. A combination of a swift shield and Dreamer’s quick hooves took him out of the path of danger, one of the lion’s massive paws whooshing by dangerously close to his head.

He fired again, this time getting a better hit between its shoulders but at a bad angle; the arrow didn’t sink in as deep as it should have. Sylvanas struck it three times with arrows of her own before Kichalo turned tail and limped back into the grass, leaving behind a beaded trail of blood.

“We can’t leave it suffer.” He said, lowering his bow. Heart still hammering from the near miss of giant paws.

“We won’t, Wrynn.” Sylvanas said as she nudged Geryon forward. “The sooner we catch up to the lion the sooner its pain stops.”

He nodded and urged his own horse through the grass.

The trail of blood weaved back and forth almost drunkenly, the struck lion having difficult walking straight while laden with injuries. The path eventually led to a shallow crevice in a pile of boulders into which Kichalo had wedged his wounded body, amber eyes glassy and wild as he rumbled another ferocious growl. Trapped, with no way out, and he knew it.

Prepared for another attempt to pounce Anduin pulled down another arrow and knocked it on his bow string. Poised to shoot at a moment’s notice.

“They’re going to lure it out, aren’t they? By making it feel even more cornered?”

Sylvanas nodded, watching the Braves dismount and prowl closer with weapons drawn. “A different sort of hunting than you’re used to?”

“To say the least.” Briefly, the Priest considered trading in the drawn arrow for a Flash Heal in case of severe injury. He didn’t get the chance to move very far beyond considering before Kichalo
erupted out of the crevice with claws and teeth on full display. Anduin was one among many in
their party who fired at the lion and the cat fell with a heavy thud. It didn’t move again.

He dismounted and cautiously, aware of the tension of his guards, approached the lion. Nudging it
with the toe of his boot to insure that it wasn’t simply playing dead before, with great difficulty,
kneeling down beside it. Gripping one of the arrows protruding from between its ribs which he
recognized as his own with one hand and, with some difficulty, pulling it out; returning it and
others to his quiver before rocking back on his heels, fingers streaked with red. He tried not to think
too much about the blood of the other more metaphorical lions which might have wound up on his
hands had he failed to end up where he was now.

“Deep thoughts?” with more grace and the speed of experience Sylvanas crouched beside him and
removed her own arrows, returning them to her quiver. “Or maybe you’re just squeamish.”

“A Healer can hardly afford to be bothered by a bit of blood.” He said, wiping his hand on the
same handkerchief he’d used earlier to clean Shalamayne and straightening up, refusing to
acknowledge the first part of her question. “How are we going to get it into the cart?”
Kichalo had spent most of their remaining week in Mulgore being taxidermied and this was the first time that Anduin had seen the lion since. Up close and without need for concern that its claws and teeth would do damage it looked even bigger than it had out on the Southern Barrens’ Savannah. Set into a pose which was both ferocious and space saving, by necessity, their hunting trophy had been loaded into the cart of supplies beside his trunk.

“It’s a good thing we went to Darnassus first,” Anduin said, watching the play of sunlight off the lion’s fake eyes, “because a lot of Night Elf Druid’s tend to have a problem with this sort of thing. Ever heard of D.E H.T.A?”

“Druids for the Ethical and Humane Treatment of Animals?” Valeera snorted. “Light, did Broll complain to you about them? I’ve heard they’re fanatics who cause quite a bit of trouble for the Cenarion Circle. I doubt that a single lion would have caused problems.”

“Better not to throw more gasoline on the fire, though.” He said. “With how tense things were after only a single day it may ultimately be a good thing that we were forced to leave prematurely before an international incident could have occurred.”

“If you’re meaning to say that, thinking back on what happened outside Dolanaar, it was a good thing you were nearly assassinated by a group of thugs because without your life threatening experience the Tree Huggers might have become offended then I think you need to see one of your own comrades specialized in mind healing.” Sylvanas said.

“I didn’t say the circumstances were good, simply that the outcome may have been.” Anduin said. “I doubt I need to be more specific regarding why.”

Sylvanas didn’t comment. Valeera grinned and nudged him. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you that uncomfortable.”

“You weren’t in the Keep when I broke the news to the other leaders.” He said. “Just ask Mathias: he told me afterwards that I looked like I was trying to fuse with the Lion Seat.”

“I can imagine; it must have been terribly stressful.”

“I think he’d rather have had that than a war, from what I’ve seen and heard. He doesn’t have the stomach for allowing his people to die.”

“And meanwhile you see yours as pawns to be sacrificed!” She retorted. “I hope you don’t expect to be allowed to do the same with Stormwind!”

Anduin sighed and turned long suffering eyes on his friend. “They do this every time they say more than two words to each other.” He said, shaking his head. “Thank you, Baine, for allowing us to visit. Your city is beautiful, as are your lands. And your people having been so accommodating was a privilege for which I’m most grateful, even if some of us may not be. Or, at least, may not be willing to admit they are. Hopefully I’ll be able to visit again at some point in the future, though I hope you’ll come to Stormwind before then at least once.”

“I’m sure that your wedding, at least, will come to pass before you find that fabled time, Anduin.” Baine said, smiling at the smaller man. “There will be plenty of time for you to return to
Thunderbluff in the future now that lasting peace has finally been found. Don’t fret for rushing.”

“If you’re not careful, Bloodhoof, you’ll start to sound like a Pandaren.” Sylvanas said. “The portal to the Draeni’s crashed ship is open. I’m sure you’re withered mentor is waiting on you to make an appearance.”

She did have at least something of a point: Velen likely was waiting to greet them and it wasn’t good practice, for various reasons, to leave a Portal open for sustained periods of time if such could be avoided. “Goodbye.” He said, nodding once more in his friend’s direction before prodding Dreamer into motion. The Palomino followed behind Geryon’s skeletal form without complaint, flicking an ear at the grind and squeak of the cart wheel trundling into motion behind them but otherwise didn’t react. The portal pulsed before them, a swirl of pink and grey, before Mulgore melted away.

Though he hadn’t seen it in around seven years Anduin was still able to pick out many of the places where the great ship had been damaged, and since repaired, during its brief occupation by the attacking forces of the Burning Legion. All around him, among the near unending shades of dove and silver and glowing rose, the young Priest was surrounded by the familiar. It hadn’t changed much, outwardly, since his rather brief stay there under Velen’s tutelage during the Cataclysm.

The Draeni Prophet met them with a gentle smile, his hooves and the heel of his staff clicking against the tiled floor and long tail swishing in his wake. “King Anduin.”

He smiled as well and stepped forward to greet his former mentor. “Prophet Velen.”

Pale white eyes turned to Sylvanas, then, and regarded her with something which to him was unplaceable and, to the Dark Lady, didn’t appear worthy of attempting to decipher. “Warchief Windrunner. Though my people have not had much trouble of note with the Forsaken in the past we have had much struggle, and now great rapport, with the Sin’dorei in the wake of the Sunwell’s restoration. It is our hope that this peace will amount to a better future for all of Azeroth.” He said. “Welcome to the Exodar.”

Red eyes examined their surroundings with a vague, pointed sort of interest. Flicking from the scarred walls to clusters of towering crystals to veins of channeled energy. “So this is a portion of Tempest Keep?” she said. “Interesting.”

“It is a unique city, much like Dalaran, though for different reasons.” Anduin said, shifting a bit more of his weight off of his bad leg and onto his good one. “Every day that I was here there was something new to do. Something new to see. By the time that I had to return to Stormwind due to my father’s concerns over my safety in light of the Cataclysm I doubt I got a glimpse of half of it.”

“With how much of your time was spent aiding the last of the Isle’s clean up and the reception of the refugees coming in to port here I wouldn’t doubt that’s true, Anduin.” The Prophet said. “You’re not a man prone to thinking of yourself and never have been. One of many qualities which are a true benefit to your people.”

“Oh yes, a true benefit to his people that he’ll get himself prematurely killed.” Sylvanas drawled. “What’s the matter, Prophet. You seem rather on edge.”

“On edge? I wouldn’t quite go so far, Sylvanas. The Exodar’s Peacekeepers are more than enough to keep the Defias Brotherhood at bay should they return to make another attempt on Anduin and I trust even the most zealous of my people to be able to control themselves.”
“There are some among the Draeni who don’t agree with my choice?” Anduin asked. “Or perhaps I should say that those among the Draeni who don’t agree with my choice are more than just mildly vocal?”

“It isn’t their choice they take issue with, Anduin, or even you at all.” Velen said. “The Light Forged, most specifically, have misgivings enough connected to the Windrunner name on account of Alleria’s choice to pursue power from the Void. Adding on to that the fact of what she is and the past connection of the force which led her to becoming it to the Legion it will doubtlessly be difficult for them to accept her presence easily. Among them, at least, your reception may not be kind.”

“Thank you for the warning.” Anduin said. “But, with due respect, if they’ve a problem with Sylvanas of any sort then by default they’ve a problem with me. Such is Human tradition.”

“Not to mention your own inherent loyalty.” Sylvanas said, placing a dramatic hand to her chest. “My gallant knight in shining armor.” She rolled her eyes.

Anduin looked down at himself and flashed a small smile. “Armor?” Ames tapped him on the shoulder and handed over his helm. “Ah, thank you Ames.” Sliding it on, he grinned. “You were saying?”

The helm clanged loudly when Sylvanas flicked her nails against it and he winced. “You are utterly ridiculous.”

“Better ‘ridiculous’ than stiff isn’t it? Relax a little.” The blonde pulled the helm off again and returned it to his guard, ignoring the mild glare she threw him in response.

“Avoid the Light Forged zealots as much as possible to prevent the Lion King from feeling the misplaced need to bite their heads off under the belief I could possibly still be in any way hurt or offended by being treated as a monster after all this time. Any other wise advice?”

“Don’t allow the misgivings of a few to make either of you feel unwelcome during your stay here.” Velen said, beginning to led them deeper into the Exodar’s twisting halls. “With the long running war between the Factions finally at end and a time of peace on the near horizon could I interest you, Anduin, in returning to complete your studies here?”

“I’d be honored to have renewed access to everything you have to teach me, though I don’t think I’ll be taking you up on that offer immediately.” Anduin said. “Maybe in a couple of years, once I’ve truly settled in to being married.”

“Don’t dely on my account; I’ll survive your absence Wrynn.” Sylvanas said. “Though I may have to drop in without warning on occasion just to make certain you’re not shacked up somewhere with a Draeni making use of Goblin Jumper Cables.”

“In what capacity?”

“Your face is bright red, Anduin; you know exactly what capacity.”

“High voltage electric shocks, not to mention using something Goblin made? Light, it’d be liable to explode!”

“The possibility of it exploding is your only misgiving?” she grinned ferociously. “Perhaps I’ll have to procure one.”

His head whipped around, blue eyes wide enough to show the whites all around them. “Please
They were led to a well-furnished inn just off of the Vault of Lights and were greeted by a Draeni man by name of Caregiver Breel. Velen left them with a brief word of farewell and, after being assured that their mounts would be taken care of, they were led up a short flight of stairs and left with their things in a grand room furnished in the typical Draeni style.

“You find sport in making me uncomfortable. Enjoy seeing me flounder.” He collapsed onto the bed and flung his arms out to either side, still booted feet sticking off the edge. “I’ve known it for a while now so let’s just admit it, shall we?”

“Perhaps I’m simply trying to determine how many new shades of red you’re capable of inventing.” She said. “There wouldn’t be of worth sport in it if you weren’t so reactive.”

“I’m hardly bothered by it.” Anduin turned his head to follow her movement across the room but didn’t sit up. “Simply curious about your motivations.”

“Curiosity.” She freed herself from her cloak, long hair spilling over her shoulders and down her back. “They say such things can be dangerous, Little Lion.”

“Perhaps when not taken in measure. I have heard the old adage, after all.”

“Curiosity killed the cat?”

“Yes, that one.” Anduin said. “But without that curiosity no one would ever learn anything about anything around them. And then where would Azeroth be?”

“Since we’re on the topic I’ll admit to being ‘curious’ myself.” She alighted on the bed beside him, stretching her body along his and resting against his chest. Thin fingers toying with the collar of his shirt. “Tell me, Anduin Wrynn. ‘Dear’ husband mine to be. Honestly. What do you think of me?”

“I’ve said part of what I think of you before, but if you really think they bare repeating then I’ll indulge you.” Watching her face for any sign that he was over stepping he ran a gentle hand up along one of her ears. The touch of gloved fingers light and careful as they slipped up and away into her hair. “I believe that you’ve been told that you’re a monster so often by now that you’ve taken that as truth. That you’ve been defined, so often, by what you are and what happened to you that who you are and what you might do, good or bad, doesn’t matter. That you’ve been treated unfairly and that it hurts. That you want…that you’re tired of being alone and desperately want someone to turn to but you won’t allow yourself to let anyone in. You tell yourself that you don’t need others, justify denying yourself by claiming giving in will make you weak but you’re really frightened that if you let someone in they’ll turn on you and hurt you more. I think there’s more to you than you let others realized. I’ve seen hints of as much. And when you finally see that I’m safe I’ll be here. Because I’m not going anywhere.”

“Safe?” Sylvanas rested her head on his shoulder as the hand which had been in her hair slid down to the small of her back, his arms draping itself lightly across. “I think you sorely overestimate your capabilities by insinuating you could ever have been dangerous to me.”

His soft chuckle echoed in his chest as the young King kicked off his boots.
"What, precisely, is your relationship to the Draeni’s Prophet?"

After events which had become fairly typical of the first few hours of the arrival in their tour in a new capital—a feast and a speech which had provided the Light Forged a chance to cluster together and leer at them with their glowing yellow eyes—the night had passed fairly uneventfully and the morning had seen them mounting up and heading out of the city to take an unguided tour of the area relying only on Anduin’s past time spent in the area and a slightly faded map. The Priest had been in the process of attempting to figure out the best route for them to take to the most interesting set of destinations and looked over, making a clumsy attempt at folding the map enough to peer over it at her. “My relationship to Velen?” he repeated. “He’s one of my most trusted mentors; certainly the most trusted one that I have left to turn to. And with all of the years he’s lived, all he’s seen and been through and survived, kept his people alive through, why wouldn’t he be? His sight is far, and not just because of his visions. I respect him.”

“So he’s an advisor to you?” Sylvanas said. “Like the mutt was? At least the Prophet is a better choice than Greymane.”

“Genn, I’ll admit, was often more of a choice of convenience than anything else. Especially in more recent months.” Anduin said, folding the top portion of the map over and turning the remainder sideways. Squinting against the glare of the sun. “He has years of experience as a ruler, that’s true, and was close with my father. And it’s also true that I grew to see him as family. But I’ve always had a measure of worry whenever I had to consider taking any of his advice; he’s always dealt in extremes and Stormwind can’t afford either to wall ourselves off from the rest of the Alliance or to commit genocide on a whim in the name of revenge. But he was always at hand and would forcibly insert himself into matters if he wasn’t invited in, so it was easier to simply include him from the outset.”

“Are you really that frightened of conflict?”

“Frightened of conflict? No. But I don’t particularly care for it and prefer not to burn my bridges when I can avoid it.” Anduin said. “Allowing a fight to break out in the keep and have Genn walk away fuming only to refuse to speak with anyone for the next week? A breakdown in communication is something no one wanted.”

“And yet it’s what you got, and here we are regardless.” Sylvanas said. “Was prolonging the inevitable worth it? Most would rather avoid drawing out the pain, though all things considered you at least seem to possess the makings of a masochist.”

Perhaps he was one and just didn’t realize it. “It isn’t that I wanted to ‘draw out the pain’, but rather that I wanted to make use of every opportunity to pull the situation back onto an even keel. Even with the new accord between the Factions the Alliance can’t afford to hemorrhage allies. Nor, I’m sure, can the Horde. There will always be another threat, the Legion and the Hammer and the Scourge should have taught us all that lesson, and what’s more parting from former friends on bad terms risks creating more potential enemies.”

“And yet you’ve simply allowed the mutt to walk away, unwatched.” Sylvanas said. “If one things certain, Anduin, it’s the fact that you, unlike your father, are far from a resounding tactician when it comes to matters of war. Accompanied with the fact you’re far too trusting for anyone’s good you’ve all the makings of a disaster in a bottle.”
“Genn may well be more than mildly unhinged but he’s come to see me as a son as much as I’ve come to see him as a grandfather. He wouldn’t hurt me; nor would he target my people knowing what that would do. Not to mention that he isn’t stupid enough to attack either the Alliance or the Horde with only Gilneas behind him. Not knowing that, as is the nature of our Accord, the unmenaced Faction would come to the other’s aid.”

“You underestimate the desperation of a cornered beast. And desperation is exactly what the Old Wolf must be feeling. If it weren’t for the potential damage it could cause, I’d simply be sitting back and savoring the thought of how he must be squirming now; raging against his own inability to change what’s come to pass.” Sylvanas said. “The fact that he sees you as a son, Anduin, is exactly why I’m so concerned. I’ve already taken one son from him-though I’ll admit that Liam Greymane was collateral damage and not a conscious effort to mentally destroy the Worgen; no matter what others believe I don’t take pleasure in undue suffering-and he’ll do anything to prevent himself from losing another. You being anywhere near me, let alone my husband with all that would entail, would be precisely the thing he’d want the least. And if your claim that he’s convinced himself of something so offensive as the notion that I’ve enslaved you with dark magic is true then he’ll be galvanized by the belief he’s saving you. He may not be concerned with ‘hurting you’ if it means getting you away from me and into Gilneas’ ‘loving’ arms. Ignoring the fact you’d likely be slaughtered in whatever hole they’ve dug themselves to hide in within the hour.

Giving up the map for the time being Anduin folded it messily and stuffed it back into his saddle bag. “And who would kill me? Even if he did orchestrate some sort of kidnapping plot and somehow manage to carry it out successfully he’d have ordered his people, certainly, not to hurt me if keeping me safe was his intent.”

“Don’t be so smug in that assumption, Little Lion. Genn Greymane may be the Gilnean King but not all of the Worgen answer to the whims of a Human office and he is not their Alpha no matter what he may wish to believe. I don’t need to guess at the fact that Ivar Bloodfang wants you dead for this: they’ve been a blight on my people since the Greymane wall collapsed and even after Crowley and his forces had fled they kept fighting. Should he have you within reaching distance I doubt he’d be able to resist the temptation to rip out your throat. Not that he’d want to resist.” She said. “Though that’s all assuming that the Bloodfang even remained with Gilneas at all.”

Anduin nodded thoughtfully after a long moment. “Maybe it was them. Maybe it was Ivar who sent the Defias after me. It makes more sense than your theory that Jaina was behind it, knowing as she does what the Defias were founded on.”

“Assuming a pack of mutts could afford to hire mercenaries.”

“The chance to make trophy of my head, the way my father sent adventurers to do of hers, might have been payment enough for Vancleef.” His expression settled into something both hopeful and sad. “I think the people of Westfall have suffered more than enough for my father’s failure to pay the Stonemason’s Guild what they were due after the city’s restoration. Now that there’s money to spare I think it’s time I turned my attention to restoring the area to its former glory. That, more than anything, will do for more to finally bring an end to the Defias Brotherhood through vastly undercutting their ability to recruit. It will lessen our problems, at least, and I think earning back the love and trust of my people is a much more worthwhile pursuit than endless war.”

The Banshee Queen’s only response was a harsh scoffing sound. Anduin, undeterred by her reaction and apparently better pleased with their current topic of discussion than he was with their former, continued onwards.
“Allocating the necessary funding is the first step, but that alone won’t be nearly enough. Providing relief, both in regards to resources and medical needs, and man power. Being on the ground myself to help my people; to work with them and restore their trust: fulfill my duties both as a Priest of the Holy Light and as their King. To do something as a ruler that’s truly good. It won’t be a simple matter but nothing truly of worth comes easily.”

“Then you must put a great deal more worth on our relationship than you should.” The Banshee Queen kept her gaze ahead of them as she said this.

“I disagree. I see plenty of worth in our relationship.”

“Peace. Safety. The ability to ‘help your people’. ” She drawled. “All that comes passively.”

“Forget last night’s discussion already?” his smile was small but bright and his blue eyes shone in the pale shafts of sunlight filtering down through the canopy above them. “You’ve said it yourself: I’m a savior type who has to fix every problem he can possibly stand to get his hands on. I think that changing your outlook, even slightly, is plenty worth it.”

“I’m honored to be considered of such worth.” Sarcastic, as expected. Anduin chuckled, but when Sylvanas returned their conversation to the former topic that good humor died a swift death. “Shaw, at least, must surely have enough sense to be keeping track of Greymane. I’d advise you ask him.”

“As a part of the agreement SI:7 pulled eyes from Horde held territories but if Genn attempts anything on the Eastern Kingdoms, and he’d have to if he truly intended to target me outside the timeframe of our tour-Mathias will know about it and it won’t gain legs.”

“And if it starts elsewhere?”

“He’ll cut them off.”

“With prejudice, I don’t doubt. He’s near as loyal to you as Nathanos is to me and he was just as loyal to your father.” She said. “Inspiring loyalty in Rogues isn’t easily done. Usually, employing their ilk in your military is only marginally worth the risk. I have to wonder what’s so different with him.”

“A number of things in combination. For one thing the military dragged him out of the cut throat alleys-though I don’t believe for a moment he’s given up his position as the leader of the Assassin’s Guild in any capacity-and for another I think he and my father developed a bond serving together on numerous battle fields.” Anduin’s expression slipped once more into something somber. A handful of yards ahead of them a Draeni youngling, closely pursued by their pet Ravager, darted across the path. “He watched me grow up. Had a hand in raising me, especially after my father went missing eleven years ago. Tolerated my numerous less than safe exploits. Like I’ve said, I grow on people.”

“‘Like mold’ indeed.” Sylvanas said. “Whomever first compared you to that was correct, if uninspired, in making that analogy. Grave moss would also be accurate.”

“I’m afraid I’m obliged to inform you that you’re accrediting Garrosh.”

“Ah, that explains why it was so patently unoriginal.” He smiled again but said nothing on the matter. “Where, exactly, are we going?”

“Bloodmyst Isle, just to the north.” Anduin told her. “When the Draeni first crash landed on this Isles the Mac’aree Mushroom Menagerie was established from the native flora by a collector
named Jessera and it’s since grown into a considerable wonder. It, along with the clan of Furbolgs making their home here, were two things I wanted to see when last I was in the area but didn’t get the chance to. I’m most interested in the Ysera’s Tears being grown there: supposedly they’re very beautiful and a rare sight.”

“If you wanted to see an impressive breed of mushrooms you should have made a stop at the Plague Wood after our meeting at Light’s Hope.”

“I saw some of them in the distance: they are quite large.” He said, Dreamer’s shod hooves clicking against the mossy stone bridge as they started across it. “But I figured that I’d pushed my luck enough for the night by meeting with you in secret, even if I did have a sizeable advantage.”

“So you do possess some marginal iota of risk aversion.” Sylvanas said. “I never would have guessed.”

“No reward without risk.” He said. “A closer look at a mushroom the size of an inn isn’t worth being impaled on a meat hook by an abomination.”

“We agree on that much, at least.”

The water rippling below the arch of the bridge, much like many of the trees and most of the grass on Bloodmyst Isle, were a vibrant and unnatural looking red which reminded her discomfitingly of the Plaguelands in the height of their corruption and likely gave the isle its name. Visible lurking in the shadowed shallow stream, a sharp toothed frenzy circled a clump of swaying sea fronds; its fins flared as it caught sight of them and it rushed the bank but achieved little more than harmless splashing and neither of them paid it much mind.

“How far do we have to go to reach this ‘menagerie’?”

“Not terribly far; it’s only about half a mile from Blood Watch, which we should reach in another ten minutes, maybe less, if we follow this road here.” Anduin said. “At least, that’s what I think the map said.”

“‘Think’?” she repeated, half indignant. “Are you unable to read a map?”

“I’m perfectly able to read a map but my grasp on written Dreani at current is considerably less than my spoken is and the distance factor used in the making of it is a bit strange. I can’t quite work it out.”

“If you lead us into getting trapped in some mutated forest filled with bears and lashers, Wrynn, I will hang you by your ankles from a tree and leave you to the birds!”

“I’m perfectly able to realize that attempting to take a short cut through ‘some mutated forest filled with bears and lashers’ wouldn’t be as effective as following the road we’re currently on.” Anduin said, the grin from before returning as he caught sight of a slightly faded sign not far ahead of them. “Look there; I was right in my interpretation. Blood Watch is half a mile ahead of us now; we should reach the town in ten minutes, and then the menagerie in another few after that.”

“What’s the purpose of this place? I trust it doesn’t serve the same use such a facility would have my Forsaken.” Sylvanas said. “Many breeds of toxic mushrooms can produce a number of the reagents necessary in the creation of the Plague.”

“Oh. I’d….almost forgotten about the Plague.” Anduin shifted uncomfortably in his saddle and fiddled with the reigns in his hands. “With an end to the fighting, and an end to the need to continually infect the living to keep your people from dying out, your Apothecaries aren’t still
“It’s being phased out in favor of Azerite, but until we fully understand the proper means of using the ore production of the Plague won’t cease completely.”

“I was, at least at the time of the summit, pleased with the progress which we made in banning further harvesting of the Lifeblood of Azeroth. I’d hoped that the Alliance’s inability to convince your Horde to give up even a small portion of the ore you’d stockpiled already would be ameliorated by the comfort of an end to the fighting; that the death of the arm’s race would lead to you abandoning your investigations into Azerite’s uses for lack of the need for such weapons.”

“You truly are pitifully naïve.” But it wasn’t harshly that she said it. “It never does harm to have a means of keeping former enemies in line should old tensions flare again; when you’re dead and your successor, or his successor, or the successor after him be they of your blood or only Wrynn by name decides that your choice was a mistake what then? And, as you’ve said, there will always be another enemy; when a new Lich King or Iron Horde or Death Aspect inevitably crawls from the crack in the earth where they’re currently hiding it will only behoove us to have such weapons.”

“And here I thought you didn’t see me as a monster.”

“I don’t, but I’m also not as much of a fool as you believe. At least in this regard. As much as I wish that I could say otherwise I have difficulty imagining you not resuming the war should a chance arise once I’m not longer around to make not fighting at least somewhat amusing.” He said. “Now I’ll ask again, can you tell me honestly?”

“I can certainly tell you, Young Lion.” Sylvanas said, black lips curling up into an unkind smirk. “But I can’t guarantee that I’ll be honest.”

The Priest sighed and shook his head but dropped the matter; he had no way of knowing what was true and what wasn’t for certain regarding the subject and he himself would be dead, recently or for some time, once anything on the matter even came to pass. The best that he could do was do all that he could to grow as close to her as possible while he was still alive in the hopes that the memory of what his people had meant to him might protect them in the future, and revisit the matter of at least a partial surrender of the Horde’s stock of Azerite in the future.

Blood Watch, even after all of the years which had gone by, was really more of a provisional encampment than a real town comprised mostly of tents and structures built out of cannibalized pieces of the wreckage from the Exodar. It was small and would only take a minute or two to pass through and yet, true to form, Anduin managed to find some form of trouble.

Standing huddled near a hovering construct of metal and sanguine crystals were a small group of Lightforged who shot them occasional glances and sneered at each other. Sylvanas hadn’t the slightest idea what they were saying beyond the fact that it had something to do with them, though she thought that she could guess with a fair amount of ease, but Anduin had not been lying when he’d said he spoke Draeni; pulling Dreamer to an abrupt stop the King snapped a harsh rebuke in return which was equally unintelligible but left the pair looking mildly alarmed and quite chastised.

“Anduin’s blue eyes remained straight ahead of them, his expression tight. “Not aware that I could
understand almost everything they were saying they were discussing how I, ‘supposedly’ strong in the Light, could stand to be anywhere near you for an extended period and repeatedly referred to you as a ‘thing’.

“Galant as it is of you to be so offended on my behalf there’s no point to it: I’ve been called worse quite often and have frankly ceased to care.” She could tell that he didn’t believe a word of that much but Anduin didn’t mention the matter. “I’m curious myself. I know that powerful Light wielders feel great discomfort in the presence of the undead. At the very least your skin must constantly be crawling.”

The corner of his lips twitched upwards. “I’m a Discipline Priest.”

“What difference does that make?”

“The path of Discipline requires exactly that: discipline. Being able to exercise mind over matter regarding a baseless discomfort, well I wouldn’t exactly call it trivial but at this point in my life it’s far from the most difficult thing I’ve ever done.” He said. “You must find all this to be a terrible bother. Me. My…ineptitude in most everything we get up to. I’ve never had much in the way of romantic contact with anyone and I’m sure you’ve seen better.”

“My sisters and I were often lauded as the most beautiful maidens in all of Quel’thalas—Lady Sun, Lady Moon and Little Moon we were called—and I’ll admit to having been terribly…vain back then. Pleased with myself and with the attentions I could garner. The power that it gave me. I could have had any man in the Land of Eternal Spring or beyond and I toyed with many. Looking back on it I can hardly believe I was ever such a fool. In the end, what is beauty worth? I’m shackled to a rose’s thorns as much as I am to this world, and all because of him.” Something bitter passed across her face. “I suppose I find your fumbling to some degree…the term ‘endearing’ would give the false impression I’ve any want of you near me and we can’t be having that!”

“Oh, no. Of course not.” He said with a smile, prodding his horse into a bit of a faster trot. “Look there, just head, I think I can see the menagerie from here.”
Sylvanas had heard from no small number of sources that the Boy King was adept at sneaking about but she hadn’t believed he’d be able to slip away without her notice even if she hadn’t been paying particular attention at the time, and yet that was precisely what had happened. By the time it dawned on her that the sound of breathing had vanished from the room the side of the bed where he’d been lying had all but gone cold and Anduin was nowhere to be found. Confused and aware both that he couldn’t have gone far and that one of her Dark Rangers, at least, would know exactly where he’d run off to Sylvanas left the room they’d been put up in at the Draeni inn and went to find Vorel.

She didn’t have to go far; the other undead High Elf was only a few paces down the hall, amusing herself by throwing the occasional glare at Cira who was doing her very best to ignore her evidently mounting discomfort to nearly no effect.

“He passed by an hour ago, my Lady, and stopped only long enough to order her not to leave her post and follow.” The Dark Ranger said. “The Blood Elf isn’t with him.”

“After what happened in Darnassus you allowed him to go running off alone?”

“It would have been conspicuous if I’d gone after him; the Little Lion was adamant of not wanting to be followed.” Vorel said. “Nathanos went after him once enough time had passed that it was unlikely he’d noticed; the King was never unguarded if the Peace Keepers of this city are taken into account.”

Sylvanas preferred not to entrust the safety of the Priest to the Draeni. “Are you aware of what he was so desperate to do that he’d wander off in the dead of night?”

“He looked upset, my Lady. Glassy eyed, like he was fighting off tears.” She said. “He went towards the ‘Vault of Lights’ and is likely still there.”

*Upset?* Throughout the entire day Anduin had never seemed anything less than content, if one discounted brief spells when their conversation strayed into tender topics and his snap at the pair of Light Forged. There had been no hint, or at least none that she’d picked up on, that the Priest might have been struggling enough with something that he’d feel the need to slink off somewhere with his tail between his legs. Though the Blood elf had made mention of the fact that he had both experience with and a habit of concealing how he truly felt from those around him if he thought that those feelings were a burden. Regardless of what he was up to, it was best she put a stop to it before the matter could go down hill.

So late at night-or, perhaps, so early in the morning was a more accurate descriptor-the halls of the Exodar were almost entirely empty and silent but for a low buzzing sound ambient to the ship. Soft rose-tinted light suffused the cavernous chambers and twisting corridors but did little to diffuse the thick pall of night. Nathanos had perched himself on the rim of the ramp way which led down into the Seat of the Naaru and turned his head at her approach.

“He’s secluded himself below, where the Naaru which supposedly once dwelled here stayed my Lady.” He said. “I’ve no interest in what the scissorbill is doing sitting alone down there in the dark and this is the only way down which doesn’t include a fatal fall. Nothing’s gotten passed me.”

“Thank you, Nathanos. I’ll be fine on my own from here.” Leaving her champion where he stood Sylvanas descended the ramp into the Seat of the Naaru alone.
If one of the Light beings truly had once been there no trace was left of it now. Her red eyes scanned the area once, found nothing, then again and saw him. Curling in on himself with his knees clutched to his chest, something clutched white knuckled in his fist beneath the gloves he wore, his posture reminded her of the weather worn statues of weeping angels so commonly found in Human graveyards. Fitting, Sylvanas supposed, as she could tell even without the telltale hitching of his shoulders, that weeping was precisely what the Priest was doing. The sight of him folded up in the shadows bawling into his knees, doing all that he could to keep himself quiet in spite of his self-imposed isolation, sent emotions flooding through her which Sylvanas was struck momentarily paralyzed to recognize as pity and…empathy. She could see more clearly now through the shadows, what he was holding onto so tightly. Not a mere piece of metal like she’d first thought but a compass which, even badly tarnished and full of dents and scratches, she recognized as the same one she’d seen falling to the ocean floor off Soldier’s Torment as Varian fought back towards the surface.

So his upset had something to do with his father, then? Not terribly surprising.

Displeased and alarmed by the unwanted, unexpected and by this point almost unrecognizable feelings which the sight of him had brought rushing on Sylvanas’ first instinct was to leave. To turn around and abandon him to his suffering and make no mention of his absence when he eventually came crawling back to their room. He hadn’t yet realized she was there, and even if he had it wouldn’t have made a difference. Offering comfort to anyone was hardly her place, nor was doing so in any way her desire, and she wouldn’t stand for anything—even her own emotions, and damn Wrynn for actually managing to get to her at all let alone to such a degree-preventing her from doing so and abruptly turned to leave.

Briefly, the memory of what had happened to Lirath flashed before her eyes. The image of his name carved in stone, and the crushing phantom of guilt, left her feet unwilling to answer her demands. Leaving, it seemed, wasn’t an option.

With the only choice left to her that between standing there like a fool and doing something to stop the Human’s sniveling Sylvanas hissed a quiet curse under her breath before turning back towards him. The Priest was still hunched over where she’d last seen him and still hadn’t seemed to notice her. Between the darkness and the angle, with his golden hair free to fall down his back and his face hidden from view, Anduin looked a great deal like the brother she’d lost so long ago. Whose death, in a number of ways, had been her fault.

Closing the last few feet of distance between them Sylvanas lowered herself beside where he sat and propped her back against the wall. Reaching out towards him, briefly thinking better of it, and then rested her hand on his back. Carding her fingers through his hair and catching on small hidden tangles. He raised his head, face wet and raw and eyes red rimmed.

“What are you doing out here? The sun will rise in three hours and the living need to sleep.”

“Sleep?” he shook his head. “I was tired enough last night that I was able to sleep but tonight? No. Too much on my mind. Too much that might have been. I…knew this would happen.”

Sylvanas had never once in her life attempted to offer comfort to another and wasn’t about to mimic the behaviors she’d seen in others who had done so; wasn’t about to offer a shoulder to cry on or make any effort at some soothing platitude. Instead the Banshee Queen looked dead at him and simply said “talk.”

Anduin stared at her a moment longer, something about his expression seeming almost cornered, then dipped his head and sighed. “I’ll never regret my choice to come here and learn from Velen, following the path the Light had laid out for me, but I’ll always regret the falling out that happened
because of it. My father wanted me to take my studies closer by so I could stay in Stormwind; he all but begged me to stay and when I still refused he lost his temper. Almost broke my arm. It was an accident, he felt horrible about it for years afterwards but… I was afraid of him for almost that long and I know that he resented my choice. I can’t help but think that if I’d stayed I might have had a few more precious years with him.”

“You took his presence for granted.” Another thing they had in common, it seemed. “And then one day he was gone. And there was no going back.”

“He was so strong. The Champion of an Ancient. The greatest Warrior on Azeroth.”

“And your father.” Sylvanas said. “Something about being related to a person by blood makes them seem immortal. And it’s not until their mortality is proven by their death that you realize they aren’t.”

“I was such a fool. I wish I’d known better. That I’d done more to be a better son. That I said more.” A fresh tear trickled down his face, leaving behind a silver track. “You’re speaking from experience. You did say that you lost someone but I hadn’t realized-.”

“My little brother.” She turned her gaze away from him.

“To the Scourge?”

She shook her head. “No, to the Orcs when they first came to our world.” Sylvanas said. “Vareesa and Alleria were off on their own when they made it through Quel’thalas’ defenses but Lirath was with me. Of all the times to get into an argument over something stupid…I don’t even remember what it was now.” With a bitter noise she shook her head. “I left him. And they killed him. It was my fault and I think it’s the thing I most regret. At least he found the peace I never will.”

“Light’s grace for small mercies.” Anduin said somewhat brokenly, blue eyes dropping back to the badly damaged compass. Where he’d kept it until now she wasn’t sure, but the trunk of clothing he’d been dragging around was the most likely bet. “When I said back at Light’s Hope chapel that we had a lot in common I hadn’t realized how true that was. A pity most of it stems from misfortune. But maybe we can turn that into something good. Who better to understand, right?”

Sylvanas looked back down at the compass as well. “Did you ever mourn him, or were you too concerned for others to give yourself the time to grieve?”

Had he? His continually interrupted vigil at the cathedral; his journey to the Broken Shore; what he’d seen at Wrynnfall. Did that count? “I didn’t get the chance to finish. To do it properly. With the Legion at our gates taking that sort of time seemed… selfish.” He said, staring off into the darkness. “I guess at this point I’m just waiting for it all to get better.”

“Get better?” Sylvanas scoffed, devoid of mirth. “It doesn’t ‘get better’, you idiot. You get used to it.” Abruptly, causing him to look up at her in alarm, she stood up. “Come on.”

“Come on?” he repeated. “What do you mean? Where are we going?”

“Somewhere that will let me take your mind off things. Dwelling on it will only make you miserable, and then you’ll be even more of a pain to be around than you usually are.”

‘More unpleasant to be around than usual’ was, he supposed, her way of saying ‘I like you better when you smile’. Attempting to reign in his breathing and almost choking for his trouble Anduin scrubbed at his face with the back of his hand and dragged himself onto his feet, following her back up the ramp. The young Priest didn’t know what to expect from her as a means of keeping his
mind off of his resurgent grief but given what had happened back in Thunder Bluff he had more than a marginal suspicion. Much to his surprise rather than return to their room at the inn Sylvanas headed for the passage out of the Exodar and into Ammen Vale.

Anduin stopped. “We’re going outside?” he asked. “Alone?”

“Together.” She shot back at him, turning. The ghost of a smirk tugging at the corners of her lip. “There’s nothing, then, that we shouldn’t be able to handle with or without your footmen to hide behind. Isn’t that what you said back in Dalaran? Even if you’ve reconsidered you needn’t have concern, Anduin. I’ll protect you.”

Her tone dripped with teasing sarcasm and, briefly, he smiled. Once more wiping at his face. “Yes.” Anduin said. “Together. As we’ll handle most everything now. As we should, given our soon to be position.”

“Ah, yes, the King and Queen of Stormwind.”

“The King and Queen of the Alliance and the Horde. The two most powerful mortals, baring perhaps a handful of Dragons, on Azeroth.” He said. “That’s more than any one person, even if they no longer need to sleep, could ever handle alone. Where are we going?”

“Do you think I’m going to tell you?” Sylvanas resumed walking. “Take a leap, Wrynn. Matters of faith shouldn’t be of any trouble for a Priest.”

Giving up on attempting to dry his tears, Anduin trotted after her again.

Ammen Vale so late at night was dark, cool and quiet. A light breeze, fragrant with the heady nectar of blooming wildflowers and clean water, hissed around them and tugged playfully at a few loose strands of his hair. The buildings around them were empty, now, with their owners and frequent visitors all tucked away to sleep within the city halls beneath their feet. Undaunted by the dark trees rearing up around them and able to see much better in the deep night than he was Sylvanas struck out without hesitation and it was nearly all he could do to trip and stumble after her. Their destination was, it turned out, a small clearing full of swaying lavender and scarlet blossoms which Anduin vaguely recalled having passed on their way out the day before. He was led to the center of it, at which point—with all the same grace which she seemed to do everything—the Banshee Queen lay down in the grass.

Crimson eyes, more vibrantly saturated with color than the surrounding flowers, blinking up at him. “Are you just going to stand there, Anduin?”

“Is this…another lesson?” he asked, half hesitant, as he slowly-stiffly-lowered himself onto his knees and then repositioned to be sitting down.

Sylvanas turned her head away again, a smirk once more playing on her face. “Do you need a lesson from me to be able to look up? Is lying on your back that difficult? With the way you quickly wind up spread eagled while asleep I find that difficult to believe.”

Was she trying to tell him that he’d been hogging the bed? Mildly chastised and slightly pink in the face the young King followed her example and lay down in the tall grass. “Oh, Light.” He said, surprised. “I haven’t seen this many stars in years. It’s beautiful.”

“I figured you’d be the type to find enjoyment in this.” She said. “You’re awfully easy to please if dangling pretty lights in your face is all it takes to swing your mood.”

“They’re not just ‘pretty lights’ they’re places. Hundreds of thousands of other worlds all
throughout the Great Dark. Who knows how many of them have life or what that life might be like.” He said. “At least they’re all safe, now, with the final end having been put to Sargeras’ Burning Crusade.”

“There will always be another threat to keep those worlds from ever being ‘safe’.” Sylvanas said. “But other worlds millions of miles beyond our reach aren’t your concern.”

“There’s nothing I could do for them even if they were.” He said softly, raising the hand which wasn’t still gripping his father’s damaged compass to reach towards a particularly bright star. “I’ve concerns closer to home to focus on.”

“At least you’re not completely hopeless.” Sylvanas said. “Were you taught the stars.”

“Enough to use a sextant, or navigate over ground if need be.” Anduin said. “After my father went missing Bolvar told me that the stars were the spirits of those who had come before us. Sometimes I wonder if that’s true. If he’s looking down at me, even now, and whether or not he’s proud of what he sees.” He dropped his hand again. “I doubt it. He loved me, I know that, but he had misgivings. Being born of royal blood doesn’t mean you’re born with the makings of a good leader. Even the children of my kingdom at play recognize that; they’d much rather be him than me.”

“Of course they would. Your father was a skilled warrior who charged headlong into glorious legendary battles. Glorious legendary battles are much better suited for the games of children but they’re not what truly makes a leader, ‘good’ or otherwise.” She said. “Even with Varian dead you’re still living in his shadow. You set yourself up for failure by trying to be your father.”

“What else am I supposed to do?” there was a tint of desperation to his expression when he looked over at her. “My people care for me and trust me but they don’t respect me. Not like they respected him. They’d rather still have him as King. Would rather I had been the one-.”

“If you’re really about to suggest Stormwind would rather it have been you reduced to Fel and Ashe at Wrynnfall I’m taking back what I said earlier about you not being completely hopeless. You’re stronger than your father was: you may both have been all each other had in the world but unlike what would have happened to him his death didn’t destroy you. Not completely.” She said. “Your SI:7 aren’t the only ones capable of sneaking into cities and from what I know of how he reacted after you went missing in Pandaria I’d be shocked if your death at Guldan’s hands failed to drop him on the spot. And then we’d be two Wrynns less, which perhaps would be a better position for the Horde but I suppose we’ll never know. For all he may have said ‘for the Alliance’ when he died it was for you, and you alone, that he jumped off that gunship. You, in the end, were his real weakness.” But you won’t be mine. Not ever. I won’t allow it. Somewhat resentfully, Sylvanas added “did you really think for even a moment that the Horde ever wanted me as Warchief? Vol’jin had lost his mind to the poison and it was a delusion, not a ‘Loa’, telling him to choose me as his successor. It’s the only explanation. Your position is more secure than you think.”

Anduin snorted softly and shook his head. “We’re both a mess, aren’t we?” The sound she made in response was noncommittal. A moment further passed before he said “thank you. It helped. I feel…better now. Like I can finally get some sleep.”

“You’re going in, then?”

“Not quite yet: it’s nice out.” He said. “I can stay awake for a few more minutes.”

But, as it turned out, he couldn’t. The stars spun above them. A trail of silver fire cut its way across the sky. His breathing changed to the slow even keel of a sleeper and Sylvanas was soon left sorely
tempted to leave him there as punishment for being stupid.

Even temptation it seemed, much like earlier, wasn’t enough to let her follow through with it. Something about the way he looked lying there, curled amidst the tall grass and wild grown flowers with that dented compass lightly clutched to his chest like a talisman made it impossible to simply walk away. His height made doing so somewhat awkward but his weight, surprisingly, wasn’t as much as she’d have expected and even without the additional strength of undeath it wouldn’t have been difficult to lift him into her arms.

Anduin stirred slightly at he was moved, his warmth of him reflexively pressing closer, and the glint of a golden clasp briefly became visible below the neck of his shirt. Less than pleased by the predicament he’d led her to-not that it was the first time unwanted results had ended up connected to him, even just that night, and she doubted that fact would be changing any time soon-Sylvanas started back towards the opening of the ship.

“Sleep well, Little Lion.” She hissed. “You’re getting it for this in the morning.”
Again, I am sorry about the other night. I didn’t mean to pass out on you like that, though looking back on matters I suppose I should have been able to, well, predict that outcome frankly.”

“Your periodic apologizing, at this point, is more annoying than my having had to drag you back to that inn. Cease this and we’ll consider the matter done with.”

“I do feel bad about it.”

“Wrynn!”

“Right, sorry.” After another moment further of him standing there looking somewhat discomfited by the fact that he hadn’t delivered what he deemed to be a proper apology Anduin resumed checking through his trunk in order to insure nothing he’d brought with him was left behind. He’d done this every time a week had passed and they were picking up to move elsewhere and she’d never paid much attention before now, but the sudden appearance of Varian’s destroyed compass led the Banshee Queen to being more than a bit curious as to what all he had in there aside from Shalamayne and clothing. Unfortunately, he’d removed very little of its contents and short of digging through it herself there seemed to be little means through which she could satisfy that curiosity. Perhaps she’d get around to doing that soon, while he was dead asleep and would be left none the wiser. Anduin certainly didn’t need to be any further galvanized by the knowledge that she’d become interested enough in him to go rooting through his belongings like some sort of scavenger. “You could have just left me out there, you know.”

“I’m not quite ready to have you murdered yet, Anduin.”

“You wouldn’t have had to leave me out there all night. Just long enough to get Cira.”

“Which would have been far more than ‘just long enough’ for the theoretical lurking assassin to cut off your head and make off with it.” She said. “Besides, going to retrieve your guard, explain to them what had happened and inform them of where to find you would have been an even bigger bother.”

Not to mention having to struggle with the betrayal of her own body’s refusal to leave him lying there; something unwanted and incomprehensibly bizarre which had somehow come out of seeing him so broken down. A combination of his refusal to relinquish the pursuit of ‘helping her’, the way which he’d somehow managed to coil himself around her like a massive snake with nearly no escape regardless of where she turned to look for it and that one fleeting traitorous thought of how much, while stripped of that half-artificial happiness which always seemed to cling about him like a cloud of cloying perfume, he’d looked like…

“Any other mementos being totted around in there which I should know about?” it came out surly, covering what part of her other feelings might have possibly come out even slightly in her tone. “I’d rather have prior warning of another breakdown.”

He stopped what he was doing, neither straightening up or looking over at her. “Yes, um…about that.” Anduin said. “I’m not in any way ungrateful for what you did that night. I really do appreciate it. But…I prefer to be alone during those times.”
‘He believes that showing any emotion otherwise is to burden others unduly’. Now she was even hearing his pet elf in her head! “How long has that Dragon been dead, Anduin? Eleven years? A few months less? And yet you still let her control you. Still let her keep you in chains. Still let her win.”

Wide blue eyes looked over at her, confusion and, behind that, old fear laced between the spindles of cerulean which dotted the indigo bands around his pupils. “I don’t…understand.”

“Don’t play dumb, Wrynn. Mental wounds aren’t like physical ones; even a healer can’t simply wave their hand and make them disappear. They’ll always stay open until you take the first step,” she said. “Continuing like you are will only lead to you ending up like me.”

Anduin blinked and canted his head. “Undead?”

“Bitter you idiot!” Quickly, in an effort to cover up a snort, Anduin covered his face with one hand. “What?”

Not looking even the least bit guilty Anduin lowered that hand, revealing a small smile, and said “you said it, not me.”

Sylvanas scoffed. “Child!”

“Always. Young at heart, and I intend to stay that way even when I’m bent and grey.” He chirped. “Provided that I live that long.”

“Are you going to answer my question or not?”

He sighed and shook his head. “No. No more breakdowns. At least, no more that I can predict.” Anduin said, closing the lid of his trunk-apparently satisfied that nothing of his things had been misplaced-and securing the latch. “Even if there were…I think that what you said helped. At least a little. You’re right. I’m not my father and I never will be, so I need to focus my energy on leaving his shadow and being my own King. Carrying the weight of my own crown, as he taught me, instead of trying to pick up and carry his. As hard as that will be.”

“Yes, I’d imagine rewiring your thought process to not entirely exclude you would be difficult.” Sylvanas drawled. “What is it about the Wandering Isles which has you so excited?”

“Anduin said, his smile and expression softening. “The Wandering Isles, so I’ve been told by Aysa, is quite similar. I’m looking forward to it, personally, though I’ll admit to being well aware that our first night there likely won’t be the most entertaining for you.”

“I was under the impression that your time running amok on Pandaria had led you to ‘going native’, at least briefly. Surely you must be aware that when Pandaren have a feast they rarely focus on much beyond the food in front of them.” Sylvanas said. “Which will make it simply done for us to slip away.”

“Us?” Anduin grinned. “So you do want me around; ‘us’ implies that you want me tagging along.”
“No, Wrynn.” Sylvanas said. “‘Us’ implies resignation to the fact that I’ll be unable to prevent you from doing so.”

“They do say one small step for mankind.”

“What are you blathering about now?” much to the Banshee Queen’s annoyance a wide grin was the only response on the matter she received. “Anduin!”

He hummed innocently, picking up his cane from where it rested against the wall and starting towards the door of their room. Doubtlessly to inform whichever one of his guards was currently on duty that he was finished with his check over and they could now pack away his trunk.

“What are you blathering about now?” much to the Banshee Queen’s annoyance a wide grin was the only response on the matter she received. “Anduin!”

“Answer me!”

“Oh, no, I don’t think I will.” His grin widened further. “I wouldn’t want to bother you with something ‘foolish’.”

“Funny,” she hissed, “it’s never stopped you before.”

“They also say that there’s a first time for everything.” Turning the knob and pulling open the door he stuck his head into the hallway and murmured something to whomever was standing out there. A moment later the door opened wider, allowing both Ames and Gideon into the room and letting Sylvanas catch a glimpse of Nathanos leaning against the outer doorframe. Expectedly, her Champion radiated disinterest. When Anduin spoke again it drew her attention back to him; the Priest had pulled a golden time piece from the folds of his clothing and was examining the mother of pearl inset face. “We’ve a few spare minutes before we have to catch the portal to Huojin Village and meet up with Ji and Aysa. If it’s alright with you, I’ll meet you there. I’d like to speak with Velen once more before we go.”

She didn’t exactly have a wealth of things to do while they were at the Exodar even if their remaining time there was short but the Banshee Queen wasn’t about to suggest that she go with him. A bit of time away from the Human, after all, should have been nothing short of a relief and she most certainly had no desire whatsoever to know what he intended to speak with the Draeni Prophet about: it doubtlessly had to do with the Light and the latest reason it was so incredible. Sylvanas sighed. “Don’t make us late, Wrynn.”

“I’ll keep one eye on my time piece at all times.” He promised, the foot of his cane narrowly missing a light collision with the doorframe as he exited the room.

Valeera was waiting for him on the inn’s lower floor and looked up as he approached. “We still have about half an hour, don’t we?”

“We’re not headed out to catch the portal quite yet.” Anduin assured her, nodding to Breel as they passed. “I want to speak with Velen once more before we go. I’d like to know if he’s seen anything of relevance of late.”

“You still have doubts.” She said, their footsteps pinged down the metal steps which led up to the inn.

Pale blue eyes caught her in a measured gaze. “I’d be more concerned when the day comes that I don’t have doubts.” He said. “I know that his ability to see the future is no longer absolute, but if it was I wouldn’t ask. I don’t want answers, really, just…”

“A bit of confirmation that you’re on the right path.” He nodded. “It’s understandable. What if it’s bad news?”
“Better to know and prepare than be blindsided,” Anduin said.

“You wouldn’t try to change it?”

“And risk making things even worse?” He shook his head. “Even if I was told I’ll die tomorrow instead of attempting to buy more time at unknowable cost I’d make the most of what I had.”

“You did tell Sylvanas that you weren’t afraid of death.” Valeera said. “Though I can’t help but find how calm you can be about the matter mildly unnerving.”

“I’ll go to the Light, see my family again, and the bad things that come with living will be over, though the good things will be over too. There’s nothing to really fear from that.” Anduin said. “I’ve heard that dying hurts, but that’s hardly something that makes it unique and I live with pain every day. I don’t want to die, of course, but…at this point it’s something which comes inevitably with life.”

“And you’re absolutely certain your indifferent reaction to the admittedly at this point only theoretical possibility of you dying has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that Sylvanas could simply snap her fingers and make you undead?”

“Are you forgetting about her repeated insistences that she doesn’t want me around for that long?” He asked, half grinning but also looking somewhat resigned. “I’m making progress, bit by bit, but I know I haven’t made it anywhere near far enough with her that she’d ever consider much if I suddenly dropped dead beyond maybe not leaving me to be eaten by crows. I’m not certain I’ll ever get that far.”

“You choose the oddest times to suddenly be daunted by your prospects, little brother.” Valeera said; beneath the lightness of her voice a thread of telltale concern was still wholly evident. Anduin sighed. “Before you even ask, yes. And I will be until I no longer have reason to consider her any sort of threat to you.”

“So up until the end of time?” he somehow managed to sound at once annoyed and amused.

“Just about, yes.” She told him. “I’m glad that you and I are on the same page.”

“No small wonder you and Sylvanas have so much trouble getting along.” Anduin said, adjusting his gloves as they crossed over into the Vault of Lights. “You’re quite similar in all of the most volatile ways.”

Her ears swiveled back “no need to be insulting.”

“I’m only making an observation.” He sighed.

“Speaking of observations,” Valeera folded her arms over her chest, “I still don’t understand what it is you’re so certain you’re ‘observing’ in her; she still seems just as much of a cold fish as she was when you pounced her with all of this.”

“A ‘cold fish’ can’t be warmed up until one’s gotten through the ice they’re frozen in Valeera.” Realizing what he’d said a moment too late, Anduin’s face scrunched up. “Light.”

“What’s wrong?” she snickered. “Sounded better in your head?”

“No, actually, it didn’t. That was just…bad all around.” He shook his head. “We should be able to find Velen somewhere around here; it was, at least back while I was staying at the Exodar, where he’d most often meditate on the nature of the Light while there wasn’t something else in desperate
need of his attention.”

The pale golden crystals which hung in great dripping chunks from much of the room’s walls and ceiling emitted a warm light which was almost blinding. The numerous holographic emitters which had formerly portrayed detailed models of many of the Burning Legion’s most dangerous races had, since their final defeat, been powered down and now stood as little more than darkened hunks of ornate metal. Though his recollection wasn’t the clearest Anduin was, after a few moments spent regaining his former bearings, able to lead them almost directly to where the leader of the Draeni was waiting.

“I’d expected to see you once more before you left for the Wandering Isles, Anduin.” He said. “How can I be of assistance to my King?”

“I’m not looking for specifics but…some of the things she’s said have left me with more than a mild concern for the far-flung future.” The Priest fidgeted with his cane, running the pad of his thumb back and forth across the carved pattern of the raven’s feathers. “Even finding out that what I’m doing is only delaying the inevitable won’t change anything but…am I making the right choice?”

“Yet again, you show yourself to possess an extraordinary ability to ask wise questions.” Ancient eyes regarded him with an empathetic sadness; a strange sort of relieved regret which left the young King both confused and concerned. “Resumed warfare with the Horde is not inevitable, Anduin. But what I’ve seen is neither clear nor comprised entirely of good news. You’ll be Stormwind’s longest ruling King, and yet…in leu of details, perhaps you’ll take a warning into consideration: beware the anchor’s sea.”

The anchor’s sea? Briefly, before he was able to push it aside, the desire to ask for the details he’d claimed not to want flooded up inside him. “Thank you, Prophet.” Checking his time piece again, Anduin tucked it away in the breast pocket of his overcoat. “I’d best be heading towards the portal; I did, after all, make a promise not to lead us to being late to Huojin village,"

Velen smiled, nodding at his former student as he turned to go. “Safe journeys, Anduin. Enjoy your time together on the Great Turtle.”

Sylvanas was already at the portal sight, along with his guards and her Dark Rangers, and turned with a raised eyebrow as they approached.

“I’m not late.” And that definitely didn’t sound defensive.

“Not ‘late’, no.” She drawled as the portal shimmered into existence in front of them. “Just dangerously on time, and by a thin margin at that.”

“Does the thickness of the margin matter?” he asked, grinning. Seemingly aware that he was aware her comment had been rhetorical Sylvanas didn’t rise to it, nudging Geryon forward with a sharp flick of his matted tail. Snickering Anduin prodded Dreamer into following.

The change in humidity was abrupt and rather jarring, though not entirely unpleasant, and the tropical air carried the strong scents of bamboo and sun warmed grass and sweet water. Rolling green hills, dotted by the occasional twisted tree, spiraled away from them hemmed in by tall mountains; behind them, off in the distance, Anduin caught the briefest glimpse of the tip of a massive flipper.

Ji and Aysa, each as usual dressed in the colors of their co-responding faction, stepped forward to meet them, bowing in greeting as they approached.
"High King, Warchief, welcome to the Wandering Isle."

"Thank you, Aysa. It’s even more beautiful than I expected.” Anduin smiled. “Good to see you again, Ji.”

"You as well, Anduin.” The Pandaren said. “We heard what happened in Darnassus. You weren’t harmed?”

"Not physically, no. Though it was a near miss, and only such because Sylvanas intervened.” He looked over at her. “She really is an incredible shot.”

"I didn’t reach the rank of Ranger-General by being bat-blind. That shot was nothing special.”

"Much can be said for modesty.” Anduin said as they started down the road, the Dragon Turtles towering over their horses. “Is this the road leading to Huojin Village?”

"Yes, High King.” Aysa said. “As both the Tushui and Huojin wished to host your stay here the week you’ll be on the Wandering Isles has been split between us. It’s been decided that the first few days will be spent feasting and playing with explosions with Ji’s clan and the last few days will be spent with us and give you a chance to actually see a few of the Isle’s sights in peace.”

“It would seem my reputation for loving to explore proceeds me.” Anduin said.

“Difficult for it not to, at this point.” Sylvanas shot back at him.

Valeera sighed. “I hate agreeing with her, but I have to on this one little brother.”

The Priest laughed and leaned back in his saddle. “If my getting into trouble and up to mischief makes you two agree than I’ll have to get up to more of it.” He said. “I’ll have you getting along if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Highness,” Cira said quickly, “please don’t.”

“’A couple grey hairs’, Wrynn?” The Banshee Queen said. “At this rate they’re going to be entirely grey by the time our tour ends.”

“Would I be doing my job as a charge if I wasn’t causing the occasional bit of concern?”

‘Bit of concern’ is your middle name!” She snapped. “And it’s a sordid understatement!”

“That in itself is an understatement.” Valeera said. “He’s a terror!”

Innocent blue eyes turned onto their guides. “They talk about me like I routinely go swimming with starving sharks.” He tried and failed to suppress a grin enough to pull a convincing mimicry of heartbroken disappointment. “Really, most of the time the only thing I’m in danger of are papercuts and a sudden snap in temper which would lead me to testing out exactly what affect my Penance would have on Stormwind’s House of Nobles: heal or hurt.” Catching the sharp glance of surprise Nathanos shot at him Anduin asked “what?” but received nothing more than a grunt in reply.

“You seem to be doing well, King Anduin.” Aysa said a few moments later, redirecting his attention. Her golden eyes held a measure of ill-concealed pity. “A loss like what you endured can be incredibly difficult to overcome. It’s good to see that you’re recovering.”

“Recovering.” Anduin repeated, a flash of pain playing across his face before he said “yes. I think
I’ve begun to, finally. I’ll never get better, I know that now, but...time deadens even the worst pain, to some degree. I’ve been given a changed perspective that’s lifted quite a bit of wait from my shoulders.”

“Yet further proof that the weight of idiocy is crushing.” Sylvanas said.

“As must be, I’m certain, the weight of being ever on the run from your own emotions.” He said. “We all have our own burdens.”

Huojin village was built in what Anduin had long since come to know of as the typical Pandaren style: one floor wooden structures adorned with gracefully stretching supports which curved towards the sky like the necks of swans. More of the gnarled, silver needled trees grew up at intervals from well-tended gravel gardens and colorful kites crafted in the shapes of cranes and tigers fluttered in the wind. A long table had been set up in the village square: plenty of space and seats for plenty of people, though at that time of day very little had been set out for the coming feast.

“The Tushui will be back later to take part in the feast, King Anduin, but for the time being I must bid you both farewell.” Aysa said. “Ji will take care of you from here.”

“Thank you, Aysa.” Anduin said, nodding in return. “I’m sure that I’ll see you again later tonight.”

As the Tushui leader rode away on her Dragon Turtle Anduin caught the other Pandaren staring and smiled. “Ji?”

The Huojin quickly looked away from her retreating figure. “Everything’s been set up for the feast and fireworks later tonight, but in the interim I thought a good way to fill the time would be to take you both around the island in my balloon.” He said. “It should at least give you a chance to pick out where you want to go later in the week while you’re with the Tushui.”

“That sounds incredible,” he said, a wide smile breaking out across his face. Questioning blue eyes turned on Sylvanas.

“Considering how long it took for us to find the Draeni Mushroom farm when you had a map and directions I’d rather not see the outcome of releasing you into the open wilderness with absolutely no idea where to go.” The Banshee Queen said. “At this point I’ve come to be rather resigned to the inevitability of being dragged along with you on any pinheaded endeavors you decide to get up to. At least in a hot air balloon we can’t be ambushed by half-starved assassins.”

“I’ll take you to your lodgings so that you can put away your mounts and belongings.” Ji said. “The balloon is tied down just outside the village.”

By now, this long into their tour and with four stops behind them, the routine of arrival at a new location had lost its polish, changed out instead for a familiarity which was almost mechanical. The home in which they’d been set up was small, but clean and cozy and possessed in its furnishings which reminded him uncomfortably—if only vaguely—of the Tavern in the Mists. The Priest pushed the thought away swiftly and rejoined his party outside.

Ji’s balloon was almost an identical mirror to the one moored on the banks of the lake surrounding Stormwind’s Earth Shrine: an amber orb latticed with red rope and glowing gently with the light of the flame which kept it aloft. Hanging below it was a small woven basket which Anduin didn’t need to take more than a brief glance at to know wouldn’t be able to hold more than three of them. At least, not safely.

“Are you sure about this, Anduin?” Valeera asked, apparently coming to the same conclusion he
had at about the same time. “It’ll just be the three of you up there.”

“Barring an unforeseeable balloon crash I think we’ll be alright.” He said. “It would be awfully
difficult for anything to get to us in the air, and between my spells and her arrows I think we’ve
more than enough range to handle anything that does. And this shouldn’t take terribly long; will
we be landing back here or elsewhere?” this last question was directed at Ji.

“Here, Anduin. And no, it shouldn’t take more than a few hours to travel around the entire island.”
The Pandaren said, uncinching the latch on the door of the basket and pulling it open. “The feast
will have started by the time we get back and will continue well into the night. I’m sure it will
come as at least something of a relief to know that, here, no speeches will be necessary.”

“A relief?” he nodded, grimacing slightly at the memory of the discomforting glares aimed at him
by both the Lightforged and a sizeable portion of the Kal’dorei. “Yes, I’d say that’s more than
fair.”

At some point while he hadn’t been paying particular attention, again acting on some silent signal
he was in no way privy to, Nathanos and the two Dark Rangers had vanished from where he’d last
seen them standing. His own guards and Valeera were, as always, more reluctant to leave him.

“We’ll use the time that you’re away touring the island to perform a thorough check of the village
to ensure your safety while staying here.” Gideon said, looking notably displeased with the
situation. “We’ll have finished and returned you to await your arrival before the balloon has made
a full circle.”

“By now I know that telling you that doing so would be unnecessary would make no difference,
and that asking you all to use the time to rest would be wasting my breath.” Anduin said. “I’ll be
careful, I promise.”

“If you’re quite finished making overtures to your guards, Anduin, I’d rather this be over with.”

With one last smile which was meant to be reassuring, and he sincerely hoped that it came off that
way, the Priest stepped over the threshold of the basket and closed it behind him. A moment later
Ji had untied the last of its moorings and they’d begun to drift away over the Wandering Isle.

Passing between uneven, mist clung pillars of white rock, overgrown with carpets of moss, the
balloon afforded an unmatched view of more emerald farmlands and cerulean pools. Silver rivers
wended their way across the land, interspersed with rapids and impressive waterfalls, and towns
and temples and an impressive monastery with golden roofs passed below them. Soon, though, the
lush land and deep forests gave way to rolling shell and blue waves and churning flippers. When
the massive turtle’s barnacle crowned head rose up from the sea to peer at them all thoughts of his
promise to be careful went out the window, nearly taking Anduin with them. Only Sylvanas’ quick
reaction time in grabbing him by the collar prevented the Priest from capsizing himself out of the
basket in his excitement.

Sunset had begun to color the sky with a faint tinge of scarlet when they finally touched back down
outside of Huojin Village to find Anduin’s guards, as promised, waiting for them. Sylvanas wasted
no time in vacating the basket at walking towards the village square at a swift pace but the young
King stayed behind to help the Pandaren tie the balloon back down.

“Thank you for the tour, Ji. I’ve never been up in a balloon before. And the isle, the turtle, it’s
incredible!”

The Pandaren chuckled. “I’m glad that you enjoyed it; perhaps a little too much if your near tumble
is anything to go by.” He said. “I’ve been meaning to ask but didn’t think it prudent with her in earshot, especially given what’s said about her. You’re doing quite well with the Warchief. You must be. She doesn’t look at you the same way she did in Orgrimmar.”

“Some progress has been made, definitely, and I’m glad for that.” Anduin agreed, smiling softly. “But I think I know what you want to ask me: this is about Aysa isn’t it?” though his fur made it difficult to be sure Anduin could tell that that was exactly what the Pandaren was doing. “I’ve seen all that I needed to to know that you like her. Have you admitted as much to her?”

His ears canted back in embarrassment. “Not yet, no. I…worry for what she thinks of me. And I’ve no idea where to start.” Ji said. “Any advice? You seem to be having quite a bit of success with terrifying women.”

Anduin laughed. “Trying is a good place to start. And don’t let her scare you off.” He said. “Keep at it long enough and you’ll at least get to know whether or not you have a chance.”

Nightfall had only grown closer while they were busy tying down the balloon and the scarlet tint had darkened into a faint violet pall. Many of the lamps which lined the village streets had already been lit, shedding a faint golden glow across the area. The table that he’d seen earlier was now crowded with Pandaren and laden even more heavily with food than the one in Orgrimmar had been, all with foods he recognized from his time in Pandaria, and many of which he hadn’t seen since: Charbroiled Tiger steak, Chun Tian spring rolls, Swirling Mist soup, shrimp dumplings, sautéed carrots and pitchers of Jadewitch Brew. The Tushui had arrived and the feast was already well underway, and though Sylvanas appeared to be only barely containing herself from taking the first chance to abscond that presented itself Anduin joined in with whole hearted glee.

A handful of hours passed with plenty of food and stories, interspersed with mostly playful shots at each other, before darkness had fully fallen and half of the rabble-including most of the cubs-had left the table in favor of making use of the weapon’s bunker worth of fireworks which had been gathered together for the celebration. Sylvanas took the chance to escape without hesitation. Anduin stopped only long enough to grab and light a pair of sparklers before following her out into the night.

He found her not far away; just far enough to be out of range of being stumbled on and bothered by one of the galivanting cubs armed with a number of less dangerous fireworks; if the sound of his slightly uneven footsteps didn’t alert her to his presence then the light from the sparklers he was carrying did, the red and blue smoke skittering briefly across the grass before going out.

He offered her one, holding it somewhat awkwardly in order to do so while still avoiding burning himself on the lit end, and smiled. Tilting his head towards the playing children with just enough suggestion to imply his own intent to join them and a request for accompaniment which he honestly expected would be instantly denied. Much to his surprise, though not without the necessary show of the matter being a clear inconvenience, Sylvanas turned to face him fully and took the flaming sparkler.

“Fine, Wrynn. But only to make certain you don’t set yourself alight by mistake.” She said. “Don’t get used to this.”

Anduin’s grin reflected the light of the stars as he turned again and headed away, neither particularly swift not in any way graceful, the sparkler in his hand leaving behind a trail of sapphire sparks. Sylvanas followed with all the speed and grace of a deer, outpacing him easily and darting between the stumbling cubs without a moment’s pause. And though it was clearly reluctant and something Anduin knew she’d refute until the day the very world finally came crashing in on itself for the briefest moment he thought he saw her smile.
Caught in the Rain

Fireworks had featured prominently in their time spent in Huojin Village, and not just because of their first night’s activities. More than half of the ‘Dragon Cannons’ which had been amassed for the celebration—which, in Sylvanas’ opinion, had gone on for much too long though it did have some benefit in that it ran most of the Priest’s energy out of him for the night—hadn’t been used and also, it turned out, hadn’t been properly put away which had opened them up for tampering by Hozen. Which was precisely what had ended up happening. And she didn’t even want to think about what the nymphs she’d seen making off with some of the smaller fireworks could possibly be getting up to. If anything, Sylvanas had now confirmed that if she ever came to a point where she had to trust another race within the Horde to watch over their cache of Azerite the Pandaren would not be that race.

The Tushui’s village, thankfully, was much less wild and had a noted lack of Hozen though a continuation of the feast they’d first arrived to—as expected—was being had. Sylvanas had spent most of their first day with the Alliance Pandaren amusing herself by getting familiar with even the most secluded nooks of the surrounding area. Anduin, perhaps largely because he simply hadn’t been able to keep her in sight long enough to follow her, had allowed the Banshee Queen an entire day to herself—she didn’t want to consider the implications of precisely why it had felt so bizarre not to have him doggedly underfoot, prattling on about something inane—and when she’d eventually returned to their lodgings it was to find that the young King had somehow managed to arrange for them to get away from the village sans even his royal entourage.

Really, she’d have preferred it be sans him too but at this point Sylvanas would take what she could.

The weather, of course, wasn’t being entirely reasonable to the seamless forward motion of the Priest’s plan to drag her along on some ridiculous ‘adventure’ to the dwelling places of the island’s four elemental spirits and the sky threatened rain, choked by thick clouds in a stark shade of violet. Anduin eyed them warily as he finished tightening the straps on Dreamer’s saddle.

“You’re really intending us to ride out in that?” Sylvanas demanded, glaring at the sky herself. “My cloak is rain scaled and even if it weren’t I can’t catch death from getting wet, Wrynn. What, even, is your point in dragging me around this entire island?”

“While you were gone yesterday I talked to Aysa about some of the sights we saw while flying round the island in Ji’s balloon.” He said. “The elemental spirits whom live at each of them are commonly sought out by the Pandaren for their blessing in things like trade and relationships. I want to see them.”

Sylvanas snorted. “What, the Light isn’t enough for you? Now you need to encroach on the Shaman too and mess around with elementals?” she said. “Lost confidence already?”

“No at all.” Anduin smiled over the top of his horse’s saddle. “But I think we can both agree that if I’m going to win our little game I need all the help I can get.”

“Calling the Titan Pantheon themselves wouldn’t help you win our ‘game’, because you winning would mean you somehow managing to make me fall in love with you. And that will never happen. So, by all means, Wrynn, seek the blessings of everything from the Dragon Queen to the Shath’yar on this, they won’t help you either.” With a sharp snap of her cloak Sylvanas swung
herself up onto Geryon’s back. “Though in this much I’ll humor you, if only to avoid being stuck in this village.”

“Not exciting enough for you when the buildings haven’t been rigged to blow up by Hozen?”

“Pyromaniacal monkeys aren’t my idea of ‘exciting’. And if it’s yours than you’re even more damaged than I thought.” More laughter. Anduin pulled himself up onto Dreamer as well and they started down the road. The gnarled trees which seemed to grow in great numbers on the Wandering Isle shaded much of the winding lane and the hooves of their mounts clattered against the weather worn cobblestones. Brilliantly colored butterflies flittered about in the flower speckled fields which stretched to either side and, on occasion, Virmen could be seen darting through the green grass. “You at least know where these spirits are, don’t you?” Sylvanas demanded, shooting another glare at the boiling sky. “Those clouds haven’t the patience for unfettered meandering.”

“I’m sure it’s only a bit of rain; nothing to be too worried about.” The former Ranger General would have to disagree: storms which turned that shade of purple were never just rain. “And yes, I do know where we’re going. With a bit of deviation at times, it’s an almost entirely circular route which should take about six hours.

“Provided that the sky doesn’t open up on top of us.”

“Yes.” He chuckled. “Provided that the sky doesn’t open up on top of us.”

“Are you going to share the details of this route or am I doomed to remain in the dark for the whole of this pointless escapade?”

“About two and a half hours ahead of us down this road and then off a small path to the east we’ll reach the Pools of Reflection and should be able to find the Water Spirit Shu. Not far along after that we should reach the Dai-lo Farmstead where Wugou, the Earth Spirit, is commonly found sleeping. The Fire Spirit, Huo, should be sleeping in the Shrine of Inner Light and Da-feng should be in the Chamber of Whispers, which we’ll have to cross a not-too-insignificant bridge to reach.” He said. “All in all, a fair bit of travel but it should be fun.”

“I question anything that you consider fun.”

“I consider reading fun. And dabbling in the arts of a scribe. And pet battling. And studying old adventurer’s journals which have been compiled in the Keep’s library in Stormwind. Do you question those activities?”

“You know exactly what activities to which I’m referring: precisely this sort of thing: your penchant for ‘exploration’ and barreling headfirst into the great dark abyss of innumerable compromising situations!” She snapped. “How you’ve even survived up until this point I can’t possibly imagine!”

“And what was supposed to convince me of that, Anduin?” Sylvanas shot back at him. “Your masterful display of getting caught outside of Dolanaar? Had you been alone allowing yourself to become so distracted would have gotten you killed: surely you’re not enough of a fool to believe that there’ll always be someone there to rescue you, or that they’ll always be fast enough to outpace an assassin’s blade.”

Anduin heaved a heavy sigh and slumped forward over his saddle. “You’re starting to sound like
Sylvanas ended their conversation with a disgusted noise and for the next few hours the only sounds between them aside from birdsong and the footfalls of their mounts was the whine of insects hidden amidst the trees and undergrowth and the occasional distant roll of thunder. The wind hissed through the branches overhead, carrying with it the scents of sun and earth and eventually of water. The Priest slowed his horse considerably, carefully looking over the area for landmarks—at least, that was what she thought he was doing—and then turned off the road onto a much smaller and nearly invisible trail without any explanation what so ever.

“Wrynn?”

Without stopping his horse Anduin looked over his shoulder at her. “Something the matter?”

“Where are you going?”

“The Pools of Reflection. I thought I said that earlier.”

“You also said that there wouldn’t be any baseless wandering around.” She snapped. “That storm is only getting closer.”

“I’m not ‘wandering’. He said. “I asked Aysa about the landmarks to look for. The Pools of Reflection should be just at the end of this trail here.”

“‘Should be?’” Sylvanas repeated in harsh disgust. “Marvelous!”

Ultimately, luckily for her patience and his safety, the Little Lion hadn’t gotten himself turned around. The Pool of Reflection was a large deep pool of cerulean water, spotted with unfurled lily pads and short pillars of moss grown stone. Perched atop the furthest one, watching them with large blue eyes set into a face which strongly resembled a stylized mask, was Shu.

The little spirit burbled happily upon noticing that it had their attention and beckoned wildly before diving into the water. It reappeared a moment later, waving again and canting its head.

“I think he wants to play.” Anduin said, a softness settling over his expression which did strange almost painful things to her to look at.

Grimacing, Sylvanas swiftly looked away. “You’re the one who wanted to see it in hopes of some supposed blessing.” She snapped. “You play with it.”

“I can’t convince you to join me?” Anduin asked, sliding down off Dreamer’s back and bending down to remove his boots. “You seemed to enjoy yourself more than I’m sure you’d like to admit the first night we were here.”

“Babysitting you while you ran around with what amounted to a flaming stick was not in any way enjoyable!” she focused her gaze on the boulder behind him as Anduin pulled his shirt over his head and draped it across his saddle. “Make this quick, Wrynn.”

Swimming, apparently, wasn’t what the water spirit had in mind for its game as it cast some variant of water walking on the Priest immediately upon realizing his intent to join in on its fun; Anduin’s reaction was about the same as Sylvanas would have expected from a newborn fawn with broken legs attempting to cross a frozen lake though he caught his balance quickly enough and didn’t fall.

The next near hour passed with the young King being ping ponged about on geysers and Sylvanas spending the entire time on tenterhooks to intervene if he missed and fell. Not out of any concern
for injury to the fool but out of a need to insure she wouldn’t suffer unjust blame when there was no one else around to confirm his injuries were a result of his own stupidity. Obviously.

Surprisingly, once the little spirit had finally gotten bored of their ‘game’ Anduin was left only slightly damp. As they proceeded onward towards Dai-lo Farmstead Sylvanas doubted that would continue to be the case, as the approaching storm had only continued its march on the Wandering Isle. On more than one occasion, lightning could be seen among the frothing clouds. Wugou refused to be woken up regardless of Anduin’s best efforts and so they eventually moved on. The fire spirit was much less difficult, problem was it took far longer than either of them would have preferred to reach it as Anduin managed to get them turned around almost four times while inside the Shrine of Inner Light. By the time they reached the Dawning Span the storm had had enough of waiting and the pair had to rush to the midpoint of the bridge to take cover from the pelting rain and hail.

“Just a bit of rain, Wrynn?” Sylvanas hissed, glaring at him through the rain-dark. The King was shivering, absolutely sopping wet but still somehow managing to persist in grinning like a moron. Lightning cracked through the sky around them. “We’re going to be stuck out here for hours!”

“You’re right,” he said, leaning out over the railing to look towards the Chasm’s heart as the rain pinged against the oxidized tiles overhead, “we probably will.”

She was starting to get the creeping feeling he’d planned this, and much to the Banshee Queen’s annoyance he didn’t seem in any way inconvenienced by the prospect of being trapped in a small almost entirely empty space for an indeterminate amount of time. He did, however, seem to be suddenly uncomfortable as a familiar tint of pink had begun to spread across his cheeks.

“What are you up to?” she demanded, watching him meander over to a small staircase leading to another floor. He started down the stairs without answering. “Wrynn!”

“Give me a moment. I just want to make sure…”

“Make sure of what?” but he was already down the stairs and either didn’t hear her or pretended not to. She couldn’t be bothered to follow him and turned away with a scoff, glaring out into the rain and thunder until the sound of his uneven footfalls returned. “Now are you going to tell me what you were attempting to ‘make sure of’ or do I have to wrench it out of you?”

“No need to ‘wrench it out of me’,;” his face had gone from slightly pink to almost fully red but his expression was kept determinately calm, an effort which was clearly taking a great deal out of him to manage. “I wanted to make sure that we were alone. That no one else was sheltering downstairs and might walk in on us.”

Sylvanas canted her head. “Walk in on us doing what?”

“Doing what indeed.” His smile was slightly more tense, a nervous twitch to his motions and the tight set of his shoulders making clear his ever mounting nerves. She raised an eyebrow. “Monkey see monkey do only leads to more monkeys. No one really learns simply by example, without doing for themselves, and…like you said, there are ways to go about this without being ‘improper’.” Slowly, looking for all his determination as if he were about to bolt and redder than a Lordaeric tomato, he closed in on where she stood against one of the stone pillars. Not stopping until he was standing far too close for polite conversation. “And reciprocation has always been the rule of our game.” The tips of his fingers ran down her side then traced along the curve of her belt. “No one’s with us and the storm will keep anyone who might otherwise have shown up at bay. Why don’t I show you what I’ve learned to pass the time?”
“As much as you claim to be a quick learner I doubt you could have learned terribly much from a single demonstration.” Still, his sodden clothing clung to his form in a way which was as flattering as being drenched could ever manage to be and there weren’t terribly great amount of alternate options. Her taloned gauntlets scratched lightly along the curve of his collarbone, “I suppose at this point you can only improve. And, from what I’ve seen of you, you seem to be much better with your tongue than you are with your fingers.”

“Oh yes, my ‘fumbling’ fingers.” Still blushing, though less vibrantly so, Anduin chuckled. His fingers worried lightly against the wing of her hip, just above her belt; the soft press of supple, high grade leather ever present. “Can I take this as permission?”

“My other choice is watching the rain fall, Anduin, so what do you think?”

The delicate touch of light fingers at her hip ceased as his hand shifted and with the soft clink of armor, slipped lower. Warm and gentle and blindly seeking, his first finger sank in up to the knuckle as his lips found hers. Vicious and fully with teeth, earning a noise of surprise and a purr of satisfaction as he pressed her roughly against the support beam behind her. He was still clumsy and little able to wrest control away from her for very long but had apparently learned at least something from the prior times they’d kissed as the tactic he employed of slipping away rather than attempting a head on clash for dominance was more than mildly frustrating and left her all but obligated to pursue him. Growling in annoyance Sylvanas threw a leg around his waist to pull him closer and ground against him, using the distraction of his groan to finally pin him down. Dragging her gauntlets down his back with enough force to leave red welts through his clothing as a second finger and then a third slipped in to join the first.

Inevitably, Anduin broke their kiss when he could stand the lack of air no longer and rested his forehead against hers. His breath fanning warm and wet against her cheek. His fingers pushed deeper and then withdrew and he locked eyes with her, slowly sinking to the damp stone of the bridge beneath their feet. Blue eyes smoldering up through long lashes and the near darkness of the storm.

The sight of the High King of the Alliance on his knees before her sent hot fissions of arousal shooting down her spine. Cold stone pressing into the small of her back as he reached up, her fingers guiding his to the hidden latches. The soft click and clatter as he removed the mail girdle standing in his way and set it aside almost inaudible over the wind and rain. There was something warm in his eyes, buried beneath the lust which hazed them and blew his pupils wide, which she chose not to acknowledge, to not even look into the face of, and pushed away. Focusing instead on the soft scrape of her gauntlets through his hair, darkened brazen with water, as he leaned in; the sensation of his breath and then his tongue finding over-sensitized flesh. Her grip on his hair tightened, dragging him closer as the slick muscle slid along her walls. Laving maddeningly at her swollen clit until a hiss and a harsh tug persuaded him to move on, following the path his fingers had taken and pushing up inside her. Flexible and wet and white hot with his living warmth, almost painful as it ground deeper and sent her over the edge. Sylvanas bit her lips to keep herself quiet, though from the smug expression worn beneath his newly flaming blush her efforts hadn’t quite gone far enough.

“My marks?” only the thinnest band of vibrant blue was visible around his pupils as he straightened up.

“Improved since your first attempt though that was only to be expected. As stated earlier, you’re better with your tongue than your hands and the only place to go was up.” Without warning and moving far too quickly to leave him time to react Sylvanas seized him by the front of his shirt and spun him around so that he was the one backed against the pillar. Grinning sharp in the face of his
dizzy surprise. “This storm seems to have energy to spare and you could only benefit from a brush-up. And from the look of you,” she pressed lightly against him and watched him struggle and fail to keep his breath from hitching, “you wouldn’t be against remedial lessons. Am I wrong?”

Going once again from rouge to scarlet Anduin chuckled, his lips twitching up into an unsteady smirk no doubt meant to come off as confident. “With how enjoyable and…unique your lessons have proved so far, I see no reason why I’d be opposed to exercising the privilege that is receiving tutelage from the Dark Lady herself.”

She scoffed again and rolled her eyes, hands already burrowing beneath the damp layers of his clothing. “No concern for your wind spirit, Anduin?”

“None at all, my Lady.” He said with a smile. “Dafeng has lived in that Temple for hundreds of years. I’m sure he’ll still be there once this storm, and the two of us, have finished.”
Sylvanas returned to the house where they were staying in Tushui Village to find her husband to be sticking halfway out of his trunk, and from the look of things whatever he was up to wasn’t the typical search through his belongings, though the Banshee Queen didn’t get the chance to do much more than pull up short because he straightened abruptly with a sound of triumph and held up the cloak that he’d been wearing in Dalaran to protect himself from Northrend’s biting cold. Set out on the bed was a further assembly of cold weather clothing.

“What are you doing, Anduin? Looking for a portal in the bottom of your trunk?”

“Having a portal in my trunk would certainly be useful, though it would make it difficult to keep anything else in it.” He said, tossing the fur lined cloak down onto the bed and beginning to systematically switch out his sleeping clothes for his day clothes. “My cloak got buried underneath everything else and it took me a while to find it. I’m ready now; we’re not going to be late.”

Seconds later he nearly lost his balance and only barely avoided toppling sideways onto the floor. “Your grace is an inspiration.”

“I’ll admit to not being terribly able to balance on my bad leg.” He smiled as he glanced down at his time piece before heading to the door to call on his guards. “Tonight should definitely be interesting; father never actually let me attend a Dwarven feast but I’ve heard about the sorts of things which go down and they all involve a lot of alcohol. I usually don’t actually drink, though admittedly I lost my grip a bit at Thunderbluff, but seeing as it’s practically obligated here and there isn’t a bonfire to fall into I think I’ll cut loose tonight.”

“This should be interesting.” ‘Interesting’. More like painful on a number of levels; Sylvanas, too, had heard about Dwarven reveling and throwing together horrible drinking songs, atrocious limericks, throwing hammers and one drunk Human in a sea of likewise drunk Dwarves and Gnomes didn’t sound like a recipe for anything terribly productive and Sylvanas had to wonder how much of Ironforge would still be standing once all of it was over,

“I can already feel the hangover.” Anduin grinned lopsidedly even as he winced, fastening the antler clasp of his cloak at the hollow of his throat. The blue and golden fur and fabric fell around him in cascades which flattered his form and made him seem deceptively graceful while standing still. “I’ve another one of those questions which might come off as rude though I’ve no intention for it to be.”

“The vast majority of your pointless questions aren’t going to offend me, Anduin.” She said. “Witless curiosity is something which, at this point, I’ve come to consider a part of the ‘package’ that you come in.”

The Priest grinned, pressing a gloved hand to his chest. “You talk about me like I’m a gift. I’m flattered.”

“Don’t be. You’re a gift in the same way that an exploding box of glitter is.” Sylvanas said, a spark of annoyance threading through her tone at the realization that she’d almost smiled. “You’re a mess and I’m the one who inevitably has to clean it up.”

“I do hate to be an inconvenience.” He said it in such a way that didn’t make that claim seem in any way true. “I’ll try and make sure that I only go off in places that are simply swept up. And avoid carpet.”
“Ask your ‘potentially offensive’ question, Anduin, before we both die of the suspense.”

He grinned again and then said “with the unavoidable sea of beer we’re walking into I can’t help but wondering if you’re able to get drunk?”

“Able, yes, though even with powerful alcohol it would take at least enough to poison one of the living to even begin to have an effect. Even were that not the case any hopes you might have had for dragging me into your inebriated revelry would be dashed from the start. I’ve no desire to be anything south of sober.”

“That may be for the best. Considering how rowdy I’ve been led to believe this sort of thing can become it’s better at least one of us remains sober.” He righted his cloak on his shoulders as he again checked his time piece. “Well, we’ve about ten minutes before the portal to the Great Forge opens. Shall we be going?”

“Given that our other choice would be standing here like simpletons I don’t see any reason not to be heading out to meet up with our guards.” Sylvanas’ cloak fluttered behind her as she turned and exited the building, Anduin’s cane clacking against the bamboo flooring as he followed her out.

Blinking against the white light of day, the young King squinted and waited for his eyes to adjust to the sun as Gideon and Cira carried his trunk over to the cart hitched behind their horses. Dreamer flicked an ear at him in greeting as he approached and scratched the Palomino’s nose before pulling himself up onto his back. Geryon, as usual, stood stalk still the only motion the horse made was the roll of his flaming eyes to meet the King’s gaze. Disquieted, Anduin quickly looked away. It was only then that he realized one among their number was missing.

“Where’s Nathanos?”

“I sent him back to Undercity to oversee last minute preparations for your impending visit. My city, as I’m sure you can imagine, is far from conducive to inhabitation by the living at the moment. As my champion, I can trust him to do things properly and swiftly.” Sylvanas informed him. “He’ll meet back up with us in Silvermoon.”

“Oh.” Anduin couldn’t say he’d miss the radiating aura of low key displeasure which always seemed to be directed at him from the other man but he couldn’t help but wonder exactly how Nathanos had gotten off the Wandering Isle.

A hearth stone…?

“Wisdom for the ages.” She drawled. “However did the Alliance manage before you sat on Stormwind’s throne? ‘Oh’: the key to the secrets of the universe.”

Anduin laughed, aware their collective cadre were all staring at them in varying shades of surprise but noticing as much only in passing. The sound echoed through the square around them like brazen bells. “It has been said that the deepest answers are found within the simplest things.”

“No wonder you seem to have so many.”

Her retort was almost instant and Anduin couldn’t help but snicker as the portal opened in front of them, the hooves of their mounts clattering against the ground as they advanced on the passage into the Dwarven city. Anduin, of course, had been to Ironforge before but that had been years ago now and that didn’t stop him from looking around with a childish delight. Blue eyes sparkling at the sight of the magma which fell in curtains of rippling red and orange to either side of them.

“Anduin!” Moira stood waiting for them a handful of paces away, flanked on either side by a pair
of Dark Iron. “I’ve been waitin fer ya ta get yer sorry arse around ta this leg o’ tha tour. We didn get tha chance ta talk in Stormwind or Dalaran. Ya seem ta be doin’ well fer yaself, and from the look a tha grin things seem ta be goin well.”

“Moira!” He greeted, grin widening as he slid down off his horse. The motion making his fur lined cloak ripple imperiously behind him. “I wish we could have gotten the chance to speak before, but unfortunately things didn’t turn out entirely the way I’d hoped. We definitely have some catching up to do.”

“An plenty o time ta do it tonight, though how much o it you’ll be fully coherent for I can’t be certain.” She said, grin taking on a sudden tint which left the King feeling vaguely concerned, “so…how are you two gettin along? Ya make a pretty couple. How far ave ya gotten?”

“Far?” Anduin repeated, canting his head. “What do you mean?”

“He has a tendency to play innocent, Thaurissan, but the blush never fails to give him away.” Sylvanas said, the slightest of smirks beginning to stubbornly unfurl itself across his face as she, too, slid from her saddle. Landing silently with much more grace. “And far enough that I’ve learned certain, shall we call them ‘compromising’ things about the tastes of your dear King. If you’re really so interested I suppose I could find the time to tell you all about it.”

“Ah!” Anduin yelped, horrified betrayal flashing across his expression alongside a tint of mild panic. Moira laughed at him and Sylvanas smirked.

“Relax, Anduin, it’s only a joke. I’ve absolutely no interest in what you’re getting up ta behind closed doors.”

“You’re awfully easy to provoke into reaction, Anduin.”

“Something about me you seem to enjoy,” Anduin said, “considering how often you exploit the fact.”

“I’m not arguing I don’t. Toying with you wouldn’t be nearly as fun if it weren’t the case. Not that we’ve come all the way to Ironforge to talk about you.” Sylvanas said. “If you could be inconvenienced to do such, Thaurissan, show my future husband and I to where we’ll be staying. I’d prefer to have at least a moment’s peace before tonight’s insanity.”

“Don’t expect much success with that. Most o tha festivitie ave already started.” Moira said, beginning to lead them across the span connecting the Great Forge to the Commons. “Though tha feast itself hasn’t gotten underway, tha drinkin and rabblerousing is well into a healthy swing. I’ll admit to havin takin part in a bit o it myself.”

“Always happy to provide a chance for celebration instead a concern.” Anduin said, smiling as they turned the corner. “Though I know it doesn’t always seem like it with all the trouble I get into.”

“Try ‘doesn’t seem like it at all’.” Sylvanas said. “In my experience with you you rarely think of the danger you’ll be in before you act and end up dragging whomever may be charged with guarding you down in the process. With how much you enjoy speaking of how one thing or another shows the cost of war, allow me to note how you’re repeatedly shown the ill effects of unchecked altruism. To live for others isn’t truly to live.”

“Maybe not, but perhaps its landed me an avenue through which I can ‘truly live’. Not to mention,” he said, “I have to wonder how much you’d really know about truly living, what with how cynical
“If this all circles back around to your pinheaded belief that I’m lonely-!”

“I’m only saying that perhaps neither of us can really be said to be ‘truly living’ and that maybe we can help each other.”

The Dark Lady scoffed, though didn’t manage to sound quite as put upon by the matter as she no doubt wanted to. “Are you incapable, suddenly, of acting on your own? Because it seems that, as soon as that accord was signed, you lost all ability to do anything without me somehow being involved.”

“I didn’t ‘lose’ any ability, I simply believe that one doesn’t achieve a united front simply by talking about it. It’s about reciprocation, like much else in our relationship has proven to be.”

“Keep your baggage, Human, and keep your do-gooder mitts off mine!”

Their mildly standoffish exchange seemed to be incredibly amusing to Moira. “I’m sure a lot a tha people in tha Alliance expected yer little gambit ta fail, Anduin, but I’m glad ta see that I know ya well enough ta have been right.”

“Right about what?” the King asked in mild confusion.

“About tha fact that even a raven can only ram itself inta tha same window so often before tha world starts ta look a little different.”

“It’s the head trauma, surely.” Sylvanas drawled, shooting Anduin a side long glare and Moira a much more direct one. “And your input, Dark Iron, is both unnecessary and unappreciated.”

“Oh, of course.” Moira said, the way that she was grinning making her look far too much like Anduin. “I hope tha soon ta be High Queen can forgive me my transgressions.”

Sylvanas made a noise of disgust. “Just what I needed, Wrynn, another you.” She snapped. “I can see why the pair of you get along so well.”

The Human and Dwarf exchanged grins as their party came to a stop outside of Stonefire Tavern: a sturdy building built directly into the mountain stone, exactly like the rest of the city. The interior was warmly furnished and illuminated by the amber glow of a flaming hearth, though was largely empty due to the majority of the city’s populace already having congregated outside in the commons around the numerous long tables which for the time being were serving as beer tasting platforms and stages from which to fling ill-rhymed insults at one another. Innkeeper Firebrew was stout and gruff even for a Dwarf, his wind worn face overgrown by a shock of crimson hair and an empty pewter stein clutched in one hand like a weapon as he led them up to their room.

The honeymoon suit, clearly by the size of it with a large bed and furnishings all done in stone and precious petals. A pair of windows had been set into the wall opposite then and provided a magnificent view of Ironforge’s streets. They were also standing open and allowing in a clear soundtrack of the rabble outside, something Sylvanas swiftly put a stop to by closing them with an almost vindictive sounding click.

Moira, still plainly amused, left them with the precise time the night’s festivities were actually meant to start and not long after, once Anduin’s guards had dropped off his trunk, the pair found themselves alone.

“This is the city which the Gnomes inhabit as well, yes?”
“Yes and no.” Anduin replied, uncinching his cloak and hanging it on a nearby peg. “Ever since Mekkatorque reclaimed Gnomeragon with the help of the rest of the Alliance and a generous handful of aspirant heroes they’ve been steadily moving back to their ancestral grounds. Though I do believe a healthy number of them still inhabit Ironforge’s Tinker Town district. He’ll probably be there tonight, though. Why?”

“Because small, high pitched and obsessed with explosions isn’t my favorite combination, Anduin!”

He flashed a somewhat guilty smile as he turned back to face her. “Me either, to be honest. And where some of what Gnomish technicians are able to come up with is truly extraordinary—take Mekkatorque’s battle suit for example—I’d…never use any of it myself.”

“Yet another rare show of sense.” She turned her back on him in favor of glaring out the windows with her arms crossed. “Just how much do you plan on drinking tonight?”

“Concerned?”

“That I’ll find myself having to drag you back again, yes. Once was quite enough.”

He winced. “I did apologize for-.”

“And I told you not to continue to apologize for it!” She snapped.

“I’ll know when to stop tonight.” Anduin said. “I don’t plan to black out, just to catch a good glimpse of the ‘pink elekk’.”

“So not ‘black out drunk’ but on the cusp of it.” Sylvanas drawled. “Marvelous. While you’re sleeping off the aftermath of reducing yourself a handful of desperately needed IQ points I’ll be doing something productive.”

“Like?”

“That’s not of your concern!” The heels of her boots clicked against the stone floor as Sylvanas left where she was standing and brushed passed him towards the door. “Let’s just get this over with, Anduin.”

“Of course, my Lady.” He said, grinning as he turned to follow. “Lead the way.”

Sylvanas didn’t require the encouragement to do so, and only allowed Anduin to fully catch up and pass her when they’d left the inn and gotten close enough to the madness that she felt the need to have some sort of bulwark between it and her. In order to actually reach the tables they first had to wade through a sea of drunken dwarves who were already well engrossed in various activities of drinking, singing, laughing and brawling to really notice any of them were there. Anduin looked like a child set loose in a sweet store. Sylvanas snarled and rippled the tails of her cloak from the hands of a Wildhammer whom had gotten far too handsy.

Muradin, Falstad and Moira were seated at the head of the central most table with a pair of empty seats beside them in a place of honor.

“Oi, there he is!” Muradin shouted over the noise on catching sight of Anduin, grinning beneath his thick beard. “Thought ya might ‘ave gotten lost in tha crowd. Take a seat. ‘Ave a pint, there’s plenty where this one came from: ya won’t see this many beers in one place again until Brewfest rolls around.”
“Thank you, Muradin. I’ll be happy to.” Anduin’s smile only widened as he claimed a chair, accepting the stein that he was given much more readily than the Banshee Queen did. He glanced down at the beer inside: a nearly black chocolate scented beer which was unfamiliar to him. “What brew is this?”

“Na quite certain, ta be entirely honest. Somethin new from tha Brew o tha Month club.” Falstad said around the rim of his stein. “It’s strong. Tha’s wha really matters.”

Anduin opened his mouth to respond but cut himself up in response to the sensation of something cold and metallic making contact with the top of his head. His attempts to look up were met with a warning hiss of “stay still or you’re going to be bathing in that brew as well!”

“Why are you putting your cup on my head?”

“Because it’s more amusing than leaving it on the table. It would be wasteful, after all, to simply not drink it so I’m using it as a round in our ‘game’ instead.”

“A challenge?” Anduin repeated, calmly taking a drink and leaning back in his seat. All while easily keeping the beer on his head safely balanced. “I spent three years of my childhood with a glass of something on my head almost all the time.”

“Were you drunk?”

“I was eight.” He said. “Does that count?”

She scoffed. “Of course not, you fool!”

Again sensing that her response was not nearly as harsh as it could have been the young King smiled in return and turned his attention back to the Council of Three Hammers. “Is Mekkatorque anywhere around?”

The prospect of a speech quickly became clear as a lost cause as the new ‘mystery brew’ was shockingly strong: Anduin lasted longer with it than he had with the Firewater, though that wasn’t a terribly great accomplishment, and about four hours into the night after getting through a mildly slurred limerick row with a Dark Iron and polishing off three generous plates of food the stein on his head went crashing to the floor, soaking one Dwarf and knocking out another. A fact which seemed to serve as a source of uproarious amusement to those around them.

It wasn’t until after she was certain the Priest was ‘seeing pink Elekk’ that the King of Gnomes appeared to extend an invitation to visit Gnomeragon. An invitation to which very drunk Anduin Wrynn happily agreed—though with how garbled his speech had become it was somewhat difficult to tell—something which sober Anduin Wrynn given their conversation earlier would doubtlessly regret.

Finally, six hours in having fulfilled any perception of obligations to be there and unable to stand the drinking songs which were so atrociously off key they sounded more like yowling cats than anything, Sylvanas succeeded in dragging her nearly three sheets to the wind soon to be husband away from the revelry and back to Stonefire Tavern.

Watching him stumble around the room in a half vain attempt to find his trunk and change in the dark only to ultimately topple onto the bed was mildly amusing. With the alcohol in his system helping matters along, Sylvanas didn’t have to wait terribly long after his breathing had evened out and slowed to be certain the Priest had fallen into a sleep he wouldn’t easily be roused from.

Quietly, mindful of the placement of furniture and belongings which she’d noticed earlier,
Sylvanas left her position beside the door and crept across the room towards the bed. The mattress dipped beneath her weight but didn’t creak and the sleeping human failed to so much as stir as she came to a stop looming over him.

In sleep, Anduin Wrynn was far more honest with his emotions than he ever was awake and not under some sort of duress; even slack, the set of his features left him looking worn down and sad. Older than he should have. Bent beneath burdens of guilt which weren’t his to bear and yet to which he ferociously clung. Owing to his less than graceful collapse the loose sleep shirt he had on was rumpled. Cautiously, doing all in her power to avoid sudden movements which might have jostle the bed and carried any chance of the all but insufferable Human waking up and seeing her doing this Sylvanas lowered herself beside him. Lightly touching first his shoulder and then his face and, when direct contact still didn’t disturb him, resting her head on his chest.

He was warm and, beneath the tang of beer, smelled of sea salt and incense and she wouldn’t be indulging in this ridiculous want to be close with him for longer than a handful of minutes but still, it was…nice. Closing her eyes against the faint light invading the room from the city streets outside she drifted into shadow to the steady beating of his heart.
The Morning After

Back at Thunderbluff Anduin had made a claim that no Healer worth their salt would be unable to handle the effects of a hangover alone, but at the time he’d apparently been talking about a hangover which was much less powerful than the one which he was currently suffering from because the only two words which the Banshee Queen could come up with to describe the Human in front of her were ill and half-conscious. He’d slept soundly for a small handful of hours and had, in the early hours of the morning, woken up and fallen immediate victim to his body’s rather violent efforts to expel the substance that he’d consumed in great quantities the night before and now lay curled on his side on the cold stone floor with a wooden bucket close at hand.

Overall, he made for a rather pitiful picture and was clearly in dire need of a number of powerful potions.

“The headache that my headache has has a headache.” The young Priest groaned, coiling around the bucket like a concussed garden snake and clutching his head in both his hands. “I feel like I’m going to die. I swear on the Light that I’ll never drink again.”

“That’s what they all say, Wrynn. It’s never true.” Propped against the stone headboard, Sylvanas observed him as he lay quaking on the floor. “You look like death. I’m sure you’re regretting drinking so much. Were the pink elekk worth it?”

A high-pitched whine was his only answer.

“Next time, I’m sure you’ll think things a bit further through before you decide to down a full gallon of Dwarven brew.” She said. “Everything has consequences and not all of them can be charmed with persistence and a bleeding heart.”

The sudden uptick in the pace of his breathing and lurch towards the bucket made it clear that the Priest was about to start vomiting again. Sylvanas grimaced and, when a sudden knock came on the bedroom door, hissed in annoyance when it caused him to yelp like a beaten dog but seized the provided chance to vacate the room.

A Gnome with vibrant pink hair piled atop her head stood outside the door, barely coming up past Sylvanas’ shins. The Dark Lady dragged her back a few paces by the collar and firmly closed the door. “Didn’t one of the armored Humans stood out in that hallway expressly tell you not to knock? That yelp you heard was your King!” Red eyes narrowed into a glare. “What do you want?”

“I was told, yes, but how else was I supposed to alert either of you to the fact that I was here?” straightening her clothing and brushing herself off, the Gnome glared back at her and continued “the High Tinkerer is wondering where you are, you were both supposed to be at Gnomeragon an hour ago.”

She’d been able to translate out of incredibly slurred Common that Anduin had agreed to visiting at some point, not that it had been a meeting for the very next day. Clearly, he wouldn’t be going anywhere until at least the coming morning. Sylvanas’ ears flicked back. “Wrynn was very drunk, and now the fool is very sick. You can tell your High Tinkerer that whatever Anduin agreed to will be happening tomorrow evening instead and that I in no way apologize for his inconvenience. Now, remove yourself from this hallway before you make even more unnecessary noise.”

Without giving the Gnome the chance to do anything Sylvanas closed the door of the room in her face.
Anduin had finished with the latest round of shoving his face into the bucket and raised his head weakly from where he lay on the floor, eyes glassy and face drenched in sweat. “Can you please turn off the sun? Or kill me?”

Yeah, this was a lot worse than she first thought. ‘Incoherent’ was a third fitting descriptor which could now be added to the list. “I can close the curtains, Wrynn, but much beyond that I can’t help you.” He flinched as the rungs scraped across the curtain rods and continued to quake in a small puddle, looking disconcertingly similar to a half-drowned kitten. “You need to get back in bed, Anduin. Curling up on the floor will ultimately only make this more painful for you.”

“The floor is cold.”

“The bed is soft.”

“The bucket-.”

“Can be moved.” She interrupted. “Get up.”

Groaning, the young King made an effort to roll over and stand which looked painful and amounted to nothing more than watery blue eyes staring at her as if expecting answers as to why it wasn’t working.

“I will not continue to be made to drag you around!” She snapped at him, though it was much more gently that she pulled him upright and supported him over to the bed. “Sleep that off. I’m sending your Blood Elf to collect a few potions which will make all of this a bit less torturous for you; as much as I think you deserve to suffer the fallout from your own stupidity I can’t watch you vomit anymore.”

Whatever he might have tried to say in response was lost within a garbled mess as he rolled over and buried his face in the pillow to block out the light. Sylvanas left their room and proceeded down the stairs and out of the Stonefire Tavern.

She’d get the potions herself, but the idiot upstairs certainly didn’t need to be made aware of that.

Sylvanas hadn’t paid attention to which of the Stormwind guards or her own Dark Rangers were posted on guard duty while exiting their shared room but briefly caught sight of Cira and Lyana as she made her way out of the tavern, ignoring the innkeeper entirely. The streets of the Dwarven capital were by no means empty, but compared to the occupancy the Commons had seen the night before the area outside of the inn now appeared almost entirely abandoned. Hopefully, at least through their time there, it would remain that way because at this point Sylvanas had had more than enough of overly raucous Dwarves.

The stable where their horses had been put up was located just to the left of the inn, similarly carved in stone and built in such a way which to the Banshee Queen would never be anything short of impractical in its entirety. Geryon turned his head just enough to acknowledge her presence while Dreamer, displaying incredible similarity to his rider, perked up his ears and whinnied excitedly.

“He isn’t with me, nag.” She snapped, pushing the Palomino’s muzzle away when he attempted to grab her hood and pull it off. “Stop this!”

Clearly the thing had a rock between its ears because the horse continued his attempts until Sylvanas was forced to step out of the Palomino’s range, glaring at Dreamer all the while as she freed her own mount from the stall he’d been shut up in. That, too, had about as much of an affect
as it did on Anduin. Sneering at the Palomino once more just for good measure and receiving a happy snort in return the Dark Lady led her steed back out into the capital’s streets.

Her hope had been to quickly locate the city’s resident Alchemist and discretely purchase the potions necessary to relieve the implacable sensation of discomfort and worry which senselessly spawned from seeing the Human looking-admittedly falsely-as if he were on the brink of death but that plan—as most of her plans had of late—fell apart the moment she caught sight of Moira sitting astride her ram only a handful of yards away.

It was clear, even though the Dark Iron had extended her the courtesy of approaching on her own terms, that she would force her presence on her if Sylvanas attempted to ignore her. Grimacing, the Banshee Queen swung herself up onto Geryon’s back and prodded her horse forward.

“Why, Good mornin’ Warchief. Fancy seein’ you here.”

“Save it, Dwarf. Though certain holders of my position in the past, and most notably one Orc in particular, might have been thick enough to swallow such a line it’s obvious you were waiting for me.” She hissed. “What do you want?”

“I’m not sure what yer on about. Anduin’s a close friend o mine and I know he doesn’t drink often; hung over would be an understatement I’m sure.” Moira said smoothly, fighting a smirk. “I was just stoppin by ta check on im an see if I might need to bring some potions—.”

“That won’t be necessary!” The viciousness with which she said it was mildly shocking even to her. “The matters being taken care of.”

“No need ta get so territorial. The High King is nice and all, and I won’t deny he’s grown ta be quite handsome, but I’m already once married an widowed with a son. I’ve no interest in Anduin as anythin more than a friend.” Moira said. “I’m not gonna take im from ya.”

“As if I’d ever be worried someone would ‘take’ him from me; one can’t be concerned with losing something which was unwanted in the first place!”

“Oh, of course not.” She said, smirking again. “Ya don’t want im, yer just toleratin im, and that completely explains why yer headed out ta get tha potions necessary ta take care o im instead o leavin im ta suffer.”

“I am not in love with him!”

The Dark Iron raised a highly amused eyebrow. “Now, Sylvanas, I didn’t say anythin about ya being in love with im. Interestin ya’d come ta that conclusion, especially so defensively.”

“I haven’t the time for this, Dwarf!” Sylvanas snarled. “Either leave me be or make yourself useful by pointing me in the right direction!”

“I think I’ll ‘make myself useful’ if ya really don’t mind. I’d like ta talk with ya about yer soon ta be husband.” Moira nudged her armored ram forward and the massive beast began trotting down the cobbled street, snorting all the while as its curling horns swung from side to side. “The alchemist you’ll be lookin for is in Tinkertown; the best way ta get there from where we are is just over this way.”

Great. More Gnomes. That was exactly what Sylvanas needed.

“What about that bumbling fool could there possibly be to talk about?”
“As I said earlier, Anduin’s my friend. A close friend. In no small respect I owe him my life; he stood between me and ‘is father and talked Varian down.” Pale green eyes narrowed into plainly threatening slits. “He’s been through enough, not tha he’d even believe that. Anduin, left to himself, would give until it killed im and I want ta make one thing very clear even if everyone else has just left it implied. If ya hurt im you an I are goin ta have a personal problem. And the Dark Iron clan don’t take well ta personal problems.”

“Is that a threat, Thaurissan?”

“A threat? I’m not goin ta threaten my soon ta be Queen, now am I?” the edge to the other woman’s words wasn’t something Sylvanas failed to pick up on. “But I will make her a bloody promise.”

“There’s no need for your ‘promises’.” The Banshee Queen sneered. “Wrynn hurts himself well enough without my input; I see no reason to waste the effort.”

The rest of their ride to Tinkertown was made in seething silence, Sylvanas glaring at the Dwarf beside her while Moira continued to look extremely smug for reasons which were unfathomable to her. More than a few of the city’s citizens stopped to stare at her as they trotted don the streets of Ironforge, a good handful stopping to mutter among themselves and were all summarily ignored by Sylvanas beyond a brief surge of vindictive glee that ‘the Dark Iron’ was a phrase hissed as many times as mentions concerning her. The resident Alchemist of Ironforge was a Gnome by name of Tally Berryfizz who was just as short, squeaky and overly excitable as the rest of her race.

Thankfully their time spent there wasn’t long as Sylvanas knew exactly what potions she’d come there for and was able to find them with a fair amount of ease and the pair soon ended up back outside of Stonefire Tavern.

“If ya’d rather I came in an gave these to im, I’m sure it would go a long way to preserve yer little charade o not carin.” Moira’s grin only grew wider when the High Elf’s grip on the box of potions tightened reflexively.

“That’s what his rogue is for!” From what she’d seen before she left Anduin was out of it enough that in the darkness of their room it was a reasonable expectation that she could fool him into believing she was Valeera with a fair amount of ease. “You’ve made your point, Thaurissan, unnecessary as it was. Now leave me be.”

“Of course, I wouldn’t want ta keep ya from ‘havin Valeera take car o im’ now would I?”

Sylvanas refused to dignify Moira’s retort with an acknowledgement of any sort and led Geryon back into the stable.

Anduin was precisely where she’d left him and looked just about as bad. Setting the box down on the table with the gentle tinkle of glass she pulled off the lid and drew out the first set of potions and crossed towards the bed. The young King wasn’t easily convinced to remove himself from his position half buried beneath the bed clothes and only just cracked open his eyes once he had done so. He could, at length, be convinced to prop himself up somewhat on the pillows but questioning what he was being fed was apparently too much to ask and the Priest simply swallowed the first potion though not without making a face afterwards.

*It's a good thing those assassins in Dolanaar didn’t attempt to poison him.* Uncorking the second bottle and then the third received the same result. Setting the last of the empty vials aside she brushed gilded bangs back from where they’d pasted themselves against his forehead. “Stop making faces, you child.”
His answering groan was slightly less pained than it had been before; though the Gnome would never come close to one of her royal apothecaries the her potions acted fast. If the elixir for pain had set in so swiftly then the two for settling his stomach and for sleep would be soon to follow.

Her predictions weren’t inaccurate and only a handful of minutes later Anduin was soundly asleep; his face was still pale and slightly screwed up in discomfort but some relief came from knowing he’d been made numb to the vast majority of it and would remain so until the hangover blew over.

The headache that would result from the next evening’s visit to the Gnome’s Capital was something which could be dealt with later together. Even if Anduin had gotten them into this mess all on his own.
“I think that that’s the hardest that you’ve ever hit the drink, Anduin. I’ve never seen you that sick.” Valeera said, grinning even despite the pity in her eyes as the young King, still looking somewhat drawn and with shadows under his eyes, securely wrapped once more in his fur lined cloak nursed a stone mug of strong coffee. “I know that they talk about experience for empathy and all that but was it worth it?”

Apparently having something of a minor flashback, Anduin winced and took a deep draught before lightly setting down his mug. “No. No, not at all.” He said, reaching up with a gloved hand to rub the back of his neck. “I didn’t get the chance to thank you earlier. For those potions. And for taking the trouble to give them to me; it’s a bit hard to remember but I probably wasn’t at my most cooperative.”

“Potions?” Valeera repeated, looking genuinely confused. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“But she told me…” he paused, expression shifting into one of confusion and then a mix of pleased surprise and mildly miffed annoyance. “Light, she’s so intent on not admitting that she’s capable of kindness that she went out of her way to give you the credit for treating me. And wasn’t going to say anything. If I hadn’t brought it up to you I’d never have known.”

“Sylvanas went to get you medicine? And fed it to you? Whatever happened to ‘tender wiles aren’t my toolkit’?” the Rogue smirked smugly at him. “Probably the same thing that happened to your claim of being unable to be bowed by the power of a hangover.”

Anduin managed to look appropriately cowed while reaching for the pot sitting in the center of the table in order to refill his cup. “I might have overestimated my own abilities to hold my alcohol. Or underestimated the ability of a real hangover to make it feel like I’ve been stepped on by Nefarian.” Forgoing cream and sugar entirely this time Anduin took another deep drink of his cup. “One things for sure, I’m never making that mistake again.”

“Ah, the old ‘I’ll never drink again’ claim.” Valeera sat back in her chair with a grin, her own cup of coffee barely touched. “I hate to break it to you, little brother, but that’s what they all say.”

“That’s what Sylvanas said as well.” He said, his cup clinking against its saucer. “And she’s right, honestly. I will drink again but I’ll never drink again.” Blue eyes, underlined by bruise like bags, looked up at her. “If I ever forget I said that, slap me. Preferably before I land myself back in the same position.”

“I’m not going to slap you.” She told him. “But I will take your drink. Does that work?”

“Yes, that works.” Draining the remainder of his cup Anduin got to his feet and, after checking his time piece, straightened the way that his cloak was lying over his shoulders. “I’m not certain where Sylvanas and her Dark Rangers have gotten off to but if we head out to the Griffin roost now they should be there already or just arriving when we reach it. Are you ready to head out?”

“I never have been much of one for coffee.” Valeera sent her cup a last mildly disdainful glance before getting up as well. “Only Ames today?”

“And you. And the small cadre of Mountaineers who’ll be meeting up with us once we arrive. And my fiancé and the Dark Rangers who are with her.” He said, tugging lightly on the hems of his
leather gloves. “We’re only heading to Amberstill Ranch; it’s a ten-minute flight from here into Dun Morough and the area around the Ranch for a small handful of miles, in light of what happened outside Dolanaar, has been thoroughly searched and shut down from unassociated entry. I know that I’m a handful and often cause unnecessary stress to my guardians whilst trying to do what I believe in the moment is worth the risk or inherently less risky than it really is; that I get myself into trouble when I don’t need to. So every chance I have to give some of them a break I’ll take.”

“I understand your logic, Anduin.” Valeera followed him out of the room and down the hall. “I just hope that you’re right; that the precautions which have been put in place will be enough. I don’t mean to suggest that the Dwarves are in any way incompetent and, Light, I know Moira at least will have made certain that the best possible job was done where your safety is concerned but-.”

“You worry.” He smiled softly as they turned down the street, headed back towards the Great Forge. “I know. And I appreciate it. And where I know some of that concern that I’ll melt down into some manner of disaster at an unpredictable moment’s notice has been earned in no small part by my actions over the years, I think that in this case your concern is at least somewhat needless. At worst I’ll come down with a bit of a bad cold.”

“Knowing the way your luck runs, Anduin,” Valeera said, “what for normal people would result in ‘a bit of a cold’ will result in you catching so iteration of death.”

The ambient sounds of crackling lava and pinging blacksmith hammers carried throughout the cavernous hall of the Great Forge of Ironforge, warming the area a handful of degrees above the temperature of the rest of the city. One of the Griffins nestled in the perch’s numerous nests stretched its wings as they passed but otherwise ignored them. Though both of her Dark Rangers were fully content to do the same Sylvanas turned and, though she entirely disregarded Valeera’s presence, spared Anduin an almost imperceptible nod of greeting.

“Are you dressed for the weather, Wrynn, or would you like to put on another layer of clothing?” she asked. “I’m not certain that five is enough.”

“I think I’ll be alright.” Anduin said. “Dun Morough is cold, most definitely, but it has nothing on Northrend and I was fine in Dalaran with less than this.” Though, admittedly, most of that time had been spent inside. “Are you ready to head out to Amberstill Ranch for our tour, my Lady?”

“The snow filled pen of rams won’t get any more interesting if we wait to take this ‘tour’, Anduin. I can think of a small army of more interesting things to do so let’s not waste unnecessary time.”

“Oh, of course not.” He said, grinning as he started towards one of the waiting Griffins. “Time, after all, is a precious and finite resource and the few slivers of a moment which would be lost by us not setting out forth with absolutely cannot be avoided.”

Snickering at the noise of annoyance that last comment brought about, Anduin swung himself up onto the nearest griffin and after waiting for Valeera and Ames to do the same prompted the beast into taking off. Rising on the Forge’s thermals the Griffin took an admittedly rather tight squeeze through a narrow passage into the commons and exited the city through the open doors.

They immediate shift in temperature was jarring but the fur-lined cloak and layers of clothing made him able to weather it passably. Snowflakes spun down around them on gusts of mountain wind, spattering his cheeks and settling in his eyelashes and hair and in the feathers of his mount. The valley opened up below them, a sprawling expanse of arctic white populated by thick forest of snowcapped evergreens and the occasional settlement with curls of smoke rising from thin chimneys into the frigid winter air.
It wasn’t the first time that he’d been to the area but it was the first in many years and brought about faded through snapshots of eating snow, building a terribly proportioned snow being of some sort—a man it certainly hadn’t been—and sledding down the plunging mountainsides atop his father’s shield; dim memories of things he’d once done as a child, and a very young one at that.

A summit had called for his father’s attention, and he’d taken Anduin along as a break from the oppressive heat wave which had fallen over Elwynn that distant peaceful summer. Back before his world had known of things like death and war and dragons. Now it was hard for Anduin to believe that there’d ever been even the illusion of such a thing.

Thinking of it now was like taking a glimpse into another life.

“Try not to think too hard about whatever’s on your mind, Anduin.” Sylvanas’ mount had caught up with his and the two Griffins now flew almost wing tip to wing tip. The fabric of her hood rippled in the wind, what few strands of her hair managed to escape fluttering wildly about, and against the grey-white backdrop of the mountain sky her red eyes looked more vibrant than ever. “You might become too distracted and fall off your Griffin. I doubt that a fall from this height would kill you but having you rebreak your legs would be inconvenient for everyone involved.”

“Foremost among them me.” He said, shaking off the clinging thoughts of the past and grinning at her. “Though I doubt I’d manage to take that sort of tumble in the few seconds of flight that we have left. The Ranch is just up ahead.”

Amberstill Ranch didn’t look like terribly much to the Banshee Queen, amounting to about as much as she’d expected it to though in this case having it live up to her expectations was more a disappointment than anything else. A small handful of buildings hewn directly from the stone of the mountain in the Dwarven way dotted the landscape of secluded knell, most of which was taken up by more of the towering coniferous trees which dominated much of the area. What little clear ground there was had been fenced off and a number of rams in various colors trotted aimlessly about, rooting through the thick carpet of powdery snow in search of grass to eat.

A gaggle of Mountaineers dressed in an atrocious shade of green were waiting for them as had been promised—or, at least in Sylvanas’ view, threatened likely in some attempt to keep Anduin from wreaking unforeseen havoc through the sheer number of eyes which would be on him—and their leader approached almost the moment they landed: a thick set, stocky dwarf with a braided russet beard and a self-important tint to the way he rested his blunderbuss against his shoulder.

Guns. There was never a more clunky, pointless, lack luster weapon in all the history of their world or any other. A crossbow was only a few rungs better, really. A true Hunter used a bow and nothing less and thank the Light Anduin hadn’t been taught to shoot anything else or there’d have been need for a stringent conversation on the matter.

“Ay, Highness. Yer right on time.” The Dwarf said gruffly, small dark eyes sizing up their party. “Two guards each, eh? Bit light. Lucky my boys an I er around.”

“Your King, you’ll find, is not as defenseless as he appears.” She snapped, switching her glare more onto the Dwarf holding the gun than on the offending weapon itself. “Nor am I.”

“Typical Elf: they get a bit pissy around guns see, Highness.” He grunted, patting the polished butt of the weapon in question. “Nothin I’m na used ta; tha Night Elves er even worse aren’t they boys?”

“To be fair, I’m not exactly fond of guns myself.” Anduin said mildly. “Nothing against their effectiveness at killing, it’s just…I’d rather that what I’m hunting not hear me coming a mile off.”
The Mountaineer let out a surly sounding grunt and began to walk towards a narrow, cobbled path. “Whatever ya say, Highness.” He said. “Ultham Ironhorn, tha ram trader, is waitin for ya just up this ere path. My boys an’ I’ll be stickin around right close with ya fer security’s sake: we did a sweep o the area an didn’ find any Defias but better safe than on Moira’s bad side, aye?”

A chorus of agreement went up from the other Dwarves around them. Sylvanas shot a look of annoyance at Anduin which carried a clear demand he send the rifle-totting Mountaineers away but all he could do was shrug helplessly in return. He might have been High King but at the end of the day it was Moira they had to answer to and he’d heard on a number of occasions that his friend could get a bit scary.

The walk to the stables of the Ranch from where they’d landed took less than five minutes; the black-haired Dwarf whom was waiting for them there was, thankfully, totting a lantern instead of a gun,

“High King, Warchief, glad ya could make it.” He said excitedly, the heavy lantern swinging wildly about in a way that made the Priest fear injury for anyone who got too close. “The rams are out ta pasture just o’er this way; I’m sure ya saw ‘em comin’ in but this’ll give ya a closer look at tha herd tha’s tha pride o Ironforge.”

“What do you think, Wrynn?” Sylvanas demanded as they hurried to keep pace with the overly excited Dwarf. “Do you expect these rams to attempt to jump the fence and eat you as well or is that behavior an effect of yours strictly limited to raptors?”

“We’ll have to see if the foals are as gung-ho about biting off my fingers before I can be sure,” he said, smiling, “but I don’t feel any real need to worry over that being a possibility.”

“A ram’s diet consists mainly o’ grains grass and tha occasional Orc, yer Highness, so I should expect tha you’ll be fine around tha herd.” Ultham said. “Sure, they can get a little mean when pushed or when their rider’s threatened but can’t tha same be said fer horses?”

“I think it can be said for any mount,” Anduin said, “it’s simply that some mounts are a bit more vicious than others.”

The curving trail came to an end a moment later opening up along the fenced in sprawl of the paddock. The nearest ram raised its head at the crunching of their feet against the snow and snorted into the frigid air, shaking out its shaggy coat before going back to eating.

“Six thousand square yards of open snow an grass, all tha space our rams could e’er want or need.” Ultham announced proudly. “Nothin against horses, I know tha both Humans and Forsaken are found o em, but there’s no better mount than a ram to have out in tha mountains. There’s na a thing on Azeroth tha can beat em fer climbin.”

“Except a Griffin.” Sylvanas drawled. “Or anything with wings, really.”

“Climbing, not flying.”

“Yes, well, I’m being deliberately contrary Wrynn!”

The next hour was spent making a detailed circuit of the area, accompanied by the constant flow of proudly delivered information their guards and the cadre of Mountaineers Sylvanas was clearly representing for disinterest but Anduin was listening closely enough to make up for that, nodding and smiling at all the right places, and Ultham didn’t seem to notice. Eventually the tour came to an end and they were left to their own devices. Anduin stepped up to the fence of the paddock and
leaned his weight against the sturdy wooden crossbeams, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath of the mountain air. Cold enough to make his lungs ache and tinted with the sweetness of pinesap and the iron tinge of ice.

His brief moment of peace ended abruptly when a snow ball exploded against his shoulder. Starting, blue eyes popping open, Anduin glanced down at himself but barely had the chance to process the silver crystals clinging to his mantle before another met with his back and a third-thrown underhanded and much lighter than the other two-caught him in the face as he turned.

Wiping away the snow with one hand, blinking what remained out of his eyes, Anduin looked over at where Sylvanas had taken up position atop a small rise, an almost playful smirk on her face and a fourth snow ball in hand.

“What are you waiting for, Human? Arm yourself! I’ll have my Faction war one way or another. For the Horde!”

He ducked, this time, when she threw it at him. Avoiding the frosted projectile by a narrow margin and scooping up snow as he went Anduin straightened up and raised the snow ball like a sword.

“Stand as one! For the Alliance!”

“Ya heard the King, laddies!” The lead Mountaineer bellowed. “Snowball fight!”

The Horde side of the ‘battle’ was remarkably outnumbered but whether or not that left the Alliance side with any sort of advantage yet remained up in the air. Both of the Banshee Queen’s Dark Rangers had melted into the shadows of the towering evergreens and at this point could have been anywhere. The Dark Lady herself easily avoided Anduin’s attempt to peg her in return and vanished around the trunk of one of the trees.

“The Horde forces are stranded in unfamiliar territory and massively outnumbered; reinforcements are caught in the mountains and we have them surrounded.” Anduin’s best efforts to sound serious were ruined by the smile which refused to be ousted from his face. “Forward, men! To victory!”

“You heard the King!” Ames was quick to join in as Anduin began stuffing his pockets with snow.

“To war! We can’t afford for the Warchief to get away!”

Limp fully visible with the cold, Anduin pelted headlong into the corpse of trees covering the majority of the property. The Mountaineers fanning out through the forest while Ames and Valeera remained closer to Anduin to better defend him in case of ‘attack’.

Lyana appeared from the underbrush, narrowly missing with the snowball she lobbed at them before promptly vanishing back into the brush.

“Stay with the King! I’ll take care of her!” Valeera went bounding after her and soon disappeared as well.

Anduin and his last remaining guard continued forward into the forest, alert to every sound and eyes on the shadows around them. Catching sight of a trail of footprints in the snow, Ames pointed at them. “She’s left a trail, your Majesty.” He said. “It’s probably a trap.”

“Regardless we can’t afford not to pursue her.” Anduin said. “Are you behind me?”

“Of course, my Lord.” He said. “Any one of Stormwind’s guards would gladly follow you anywhere.”

“And I treasure each of you for your loyalty. Now, we should go armed.” The young King bent and
swiftly made another snow ball. “Are you prepared, brave knight?”

“At your word, my King.” The sprawling grins they both wore ruined the severity of the matter but neither of them really cared. With snowballs in hand they moved forward along the trail which had been left behind, stepping around towering trees and eventually coming out into a small clearing. The instant they were in the open a snowball was flying at them. “King Wrynn!” Anduin was pulled from harm’s way, his guard making a dramatic show of clutching at his snow splattered breastplate as he collapsed. “Man down! Man down!”

“Ames!”

“Your Highness, don’t let her get away!”

Anduin looked from his fallen guard to the direction the snowball had come from and back again, nodding. “I’ll be back for you.” Adding another layer to his snowball just for good measure, Anduin took off running once more. Alone, this time, as he went crashing through the undergrowth. Narrowly avoiding yet another snowball as it whizzed by. He was allowed a brief glimpse of the Banshee Queen before she melted away again and started after her but only made it a couple of steps before another snowball hit him from behind. He spun around in time to catch sight of her again, lobbing a snowball of his own and yet again missing horribly.

“Forest playing tricks on you, Little Lion?” he spun around again but, this time, nothing was there. “Not familiar with facing a Ranger, I see. And your aim with those snowballs could use more work than your aim with the bow.”

No longer sure of whether or not he could trust his sight or hearing the young King picked a direction and started running, occasionally dodging snowballs and changing directions and finally coming to a stop at the base of a particularly tall tree.

“Congratulations, Anduin,” Sylvanas’ voice came from directly above him. “You’ve found me.”

He looked up and was promptly buried by a branch load of snow. The Dark Lady landed nearby with a soft crunch, pegged him once more just for good measure and threw him a smirk before vanishing once again.

“H-Hey!” Anduin laughed, fighting free of the snow drift he’d been buried in and took off again. Kept on track by the occasional glimpse he was permitted until he reached the top of a small embankment where the Dark Lady decided to make a final stand. They exchanged fire back and forth a few times before she lunged at him and both went tumbling down the shield of the little hill, landing heavily in the deep snow at the bottom with Sylvanas on top of him.

Red eyes met blue ones and, for a moment, some charged unrealized intention passed between them. Then Anduin let out a particularly vicious sneeze, expression becoming abruptly embarrassed, and the aura was broken.

“Idiot.” She said, immediately rolling off of him and standing up. “You’re dripping wet in freezing weather, Wrynn. Did you expect not to get sick?”

“In retrospect,” he said, wincing as he sat up as well, “stuffing snow into my pockets in an effort to have ammunition on the go wasn’t the brightest idea I’ve ever had. And I’m not sick, it’s just a sneeze. Those happen from time to time even when you’re perfectly healthy.”

“Well, let’s get you out of the cold before that chances. Get up.” Anduin attempted to do so and managed only barely, hissing as his expression contorted in pain. “Your leg.”
“I’m alright.” He insisted, clearly struggling to balance while putting most of his weight on the limb which hadn’t been lamed. “It’ll just take me a bit longer than it otherwise would have to make it back to Amberstill. I can manage.”

“Not with that hill between it and you.”

Anduin looked at the embankment in question, considering its steepness for a moment before letting out a heavy sigh. “Ames shouldn’t be too far back.” He said. “I’ll wait here; can sit on that tree stump over there to get out of the wind and snow.”

He hadn’t thought it possible for Sylvanas to look any more unimpressed with him. “It’s bad enough that we have to repeat the situation, Anduin.” She said as she slung his arm around her shoulders. “Don’t force us to repeat the accompanying conversation as well. And don’t forget for a moment that you owe me, Little Lion.”

“Not even for a moment.” He promised.

She scoffed in return as they started up the hill.
Anduin could feel himself starting to unthaw the instant they stepped through the portal out of Ironforge, the gentle warmth of Eversong Woods a welcome change after the crisp gelid air of Dun Morough. A sentiment which Dreamer seemed to wholeheartedly agree with as the Palomino let out an appreciative whinny and shook out his mane. Pookaroo snorted back at him and flicked her tail as the wheels of the cart hit the cobbled street with the clatter of wood.

Gilded sunlight filtered down through the spread bows of tall trees, their white trunks and jewel like leaves patterned in colors of amber and gold reminding Anduin a great deal of the trees he’d seen years before in the Veil of Eternal Blossoms. Verdant grass swayed in a sweet wind and a Dragonhawk, clad from beak to tail in vibrant scales and feathers, fluttered into sight nearby. Stopping to consider him with a vaguely aggressive curiosity as if it were unfamiliar with the sight of Humans and wasn’t quite sure whether or not to be hostile. Finally, likely due to Valeera, Sylvanas and her Dark Rangers’ presence and lack of reaction, it deemed them not worth the trouble and continued on its way.

The wildlife weren’t the only ones staring; a small group of Mages in training stood by a shallow lake a few yards off the path, their silken robes seeming to glow in shades of ruby and lavender. Grinning widely, Anduin raised a hand from his mount’s reigns and waved. After exchanging glances of what almost looked like dazed confusion a few of them rather reluctantly did the same.

“You look like a twit.” Nathanos announced his return with a surly growl, his black cloak fluttering behind him as he approached. “It seems nothing’s changed since I left, unfortunately.”

“I greatly appreciate your faith in my abilities, Nathanos, but even I can’t fix everything. Wrynn’s foolishness is a case of unstoppable force meets immoveable object.” The Banshee Queen’s glare carried no heat and only made Anduin’s grin wider. “Report?”

“Everything’s in place for your return, Dark Lady. By the time of your arrival at the end of this week, everything will be in place for…our new King’s stay.”

“No need to choke on it.” Valeera muttered, fully undeterred by the scorching look that the Dark Ranger Lord threw at her.

“We’ve gotten along so far; no need to sabotage all that now.” Anduin said, something stern in his voice which made him sound quite a lot like a father chastising his unruly children. Nathanos evidently didn’t appreciate this but a brief warning glance from Sylvanas kept him quiet. Blue eyes found red ones as he addressed her directly. “As much as I love Elwynn Forest, Eversong Woods really is beautiful. Is this really where you lived?”

Sylvanas didn’t speak immediately, something almost sad coming over her expression. “Where I lived is called the Ghostlands, now, and you’ll soon see it’s far from beautiful. We are scheduled to meet my…dear sisters tomorrow.” The sudden bitterness in her tone made him think that there was something which had happened between them which he wasn’t privy to and had left in its wake an unresolved tension. Though it hadn’t broken bonds, at least on Sylvanas’ end if her reactions at Light’s Hope were anything to go by, Anduin could only hope that it wouldn’t cause problems. That whatever might have broken between them could be fixed, given time. Not only because of the possible blow to their arrangement which would likely occur if they couldn’t but because Anduin knew all too well what it felt like to lose your family. “Now, Lor’themar is all but certainly waiting on us. We should head in to the city.”
“Of course: we wouldn’t want to keep the Regent Lord waiting.” He said, nodding as he gestured towards the path. “Ladies first.”

“What you really mean, Wrynn,” Sylvanas said as she prodded her horse into motion, “is ‘people least likely to get lost’ first.”

“The same result, ultimately.” Dreamer’s hooves thudded evenly against the ground. “One simply sounds a bit more polite than the other.”

The gate of Silvermoon appeared through the trees, a towering structure ornately built from stone in a pale beige color, hung with the fluttering gold and ruby banners of the Sin’dorei and accented with crimson tiling and golden adornments shaped like phoenix wings. Well managed topiaries, tended by multiple ruby ents the size of children’s dolls, flanked the raised walkways which led up to the spire. A handful of elven guards stood to either side: long haired and clad from head to toe in scarlet, they carried shields in one hand and curving scimitars in the other. A few among the group had golden eyes instead of green; a fact Anduin only really noticed because a good number of the guards and civilians they passed took the time to leer at him the way he’d expect someone to look at a starving potentially rabid wolf which had suddenly appeared in their bed. Anduin began to get a distinctive sinking feeling.

“For a race that revers the sun,” he said quietly as they passed an overflowing produce cart beneath the glare of its owner, “this is a rather cold reception.”

“Were you expecting much different? Human prejudice led my people to being used as meat shields during the Third War, and Human monsters litter our recent history. Chief among them Arthas-who, might I remind you, was also a blonde haired blue-eyed Light wielder—and your precious Archmage.” Sylvanas said. “Those who could look past those things, and there were very few of them, retained the name of Quel’dorei. The Sin’dorei are those who could not.”

Anduin, chastised and shamed, lowered his gaze to one of the city’s countless self-sweeping brooms as it made its way along the curving streets. “I tried to stop her but she wouldn’t listen. And what she did…I condemned it. My father condemned it. It was tantamount to a war crime, no better than what Garrosh did at Theramore, and yet…”

“You needed her to fight in the Siege. And to face the Iron Horde and then the Legion.” She drawled. “And let’s not forget that she’s ‘family’.”

“Not anymore.” His eyes darkened from crystal to navy, sadness bowing his words. “How can we be, given everything that’s happened? She’s abandoned me. Twice. I’ll always care about her, but…doors have closed.”

“And you’re just going to walk away without fruitlessly pounding on it first?” Sylvanas’ tone was almost teasing. “Unlike you.”

“Were I in a position where I could simply concern myself with the personal portion of the matter than I would. And I’d keep at it for years if I had to. But I’m-.”

“The High King of the Alliance and must think of both my people and my Faction as a whole rather than being so incredibly selfish as to consider for even the shortest existing moment. Yes, yes, Wrynn. We’ve been over your overzealous altruism before.” Sylvanas said. “I’m in no way upset by your decision to cut the Archmage loose, beyond, perhaps, the irresponsibility of ‘only sort of maybe’ keeping an eye on her. Given her recent stance on the Horde her presence would lead your little gambit to go badly, and as amusing as it might be to watch you run around as if your hair was on fire in an effort to keep it all together I find that I quite like having easy access to you when the
need arises.”

As much as Anduin might have wished he could have reached back in time and pulled the old Jaina Proudmoore, the woman whom had first inspired him to fight for peace with how staunchly she’d stood for coexistence with the Horde, back into existence he couldn’t. And as much as he wished it weren’t the case he knew, now, that Sylvanas was right. He could have his surrogate Aunt, changed and hard of heart to such a point he barely recognized her, or he could have the peace that might assure a future for his people.

In the end, it wasn’t really a choice.

“Don’t be terribly concerned with how this week will go. Most of your exposure will be to the isolated bubble of officials to whom Lor’themar has doubtlessly delivered a number of stern talkings to about politeness in hosting, my sisters and that fool Turalyon. You’ll feel welcome enough. And even if you don’t the coming visit to the Sunwell ought to be sufficient distraction.”

“The Sunwell.” Anduin’s expression became slightly glazed. “I’ve heard of the place, Velen’s told me about it; it’s supposed to be one of if not the holiest site on Azeroth. I never thought that I’d… you won’t be coming with us, will you?”

Sylvanas’ eyebrow shot up as they turned down Murder Row. “Undeath and the Light don’t exactly mix well, Anduin, so what do you think?”

He cleared his throat, turning his attention to the vibrant cerulean drapes visible through a nearby doorway. “Right. Of course.” Anduin said. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“I’ll be with Vareesa and Alleria, and not in the city. My dear elder sibling’s dabbling in the Void has gotten her banned after all.” Sylvanas said. “The schedule for tomorrow is rather simple: in the morning we head to Windrunner Spire at which point you and Turalyon will leave for the boats to Quel’danas. As for my sisters and I…our last meeting didn’t end well and there was much left unresolved when we parted ways. We’ll see how it goes.”

Sunfury Spire was located to the North East of the Gate they entered through, a graceful tower reaching up into the clear sky from the head of a gleaming square filled with the gentle ambience of falling water from the sprawling fountain sitting at the center. Standing at the top of the raised walkway was the Blood Elf Regent, flanked on either side by a blonde-haired Ranger and a dark-haired Mage.

Though still handsome, it was clear that in his younger days—though, perhaps, his appearance was more to do with the rigors of leadership than the passage of years; Anduin’s father had begun to grow grey when he was still in his twenties—he’d been a sight to behold and Anduin thought the vicious scar marring his face only made him more so. His long silver hair had been pulled back into a flowing tail and he was clad in mail armor which carried through the city’s red and golden phoenix motif.

The Ranger beside him had a pair of daggers strapped to his belt and a bow across his back, clad in mail of green and gold. He was grinning, arms crossed across his chest, and looked overall more friendly than the Mage; despite the fact that most of his face was concealed beneath a high red and golden collar Anduin could tell from the set of his fel green eyes that he already wasn’t fond of him.

“High King Anduin Wrynn.” Lor’themar said, his gaze shrewd but not unkind. “Welcome to Silvermoon.”
“Thank you, Regent Lord Theron.” Anduin said, inclining his head. “It’s both an honor and a privilege.”


“That’s hardly necessary.” The Ranger said, undaunted by the sharp look the other threw at him. The Mage’s response was made in bitter Thalassian, the entirety of which except his tone flew over Anduin’s head, but was apparently quite offensive indeed because both the Ranger and Lor’themar looked aghast and Valeera bristled but wasn’t fast enough to speak before Sylvanas beat her to it.

“I’d advise you ground yourself enough, Magister, to pull your head free of your personal concerns and realize what position you’ve found yourself in and never say such a thing again. Certainly not where I can hear it.” Anduin felt the hairs along his arms and neck rise and was immensely glad that, even at her most upset, she’d never used that tone with him. “You may find yourself with a personal appointment with your Warchief and I doubt you’re the masochist that Wrynn is.”

“Rommath.” The Regent Lord’s tone dripped with warning. “I think it’s best you sit this out.”

With a noise of disgust the Magister vanished in a flash of Arcane light. Lor’themar, looking thoroughly embarrassed, returned his attention to the King. “I apologize, King Anduin. You’ll have to forgive Rommath. He’s…not had the best history with your race.”

“No need. I understand.” He said. “And…I can sympathize.”

“Yes,” Lor’themar’s ears tilted back, “the bell.”

“I know that the Sunreavers were framed. As for what Jaina did…I tried to stop her.” He shook his head. “The only ones to blame for what happened with Shenquing are Garrosh and I. I made the choice to run after him alone, to risk my life and play the hero, and all things considered I got away lightly. I could have died. I almost did. But I wouldn’t hold Quel’thallas responsible even if you had been behind it because, ultimately, the sins and triumphs alike of a Faction rest with the High King and the Warchief. No one else.”

The Regent Lord nodded. “I’ve always hard that you were wise beyond your years, Anduin. Now I see it’s based in truth.” He said. “May I introduce you to my better controlled Ranger General, Halduron Brightwing.”

“A pleasure, Halduron.”

“The pleasure, your Majesty,” the Ranger said with an exaggerated bow, “is all mine.”

“Don’t go making eyes, Halduron. He’s betrothed. Specifically, to me! Find your own lion.”

“Making eyes? Why, Warchief, I would never!” That grin didn’t falter, smirk becoming yet more amused as he looked Anduin up and down. “Though, I must say, I’m quite jealous. Of the three of you, you’ve come away like a thief.”

“Yes, well, if you’re finished looking the High King over like a piece of meat, Halduron, I believe you have paperwork to be doing?”

“Oh. Yes, I wasn’t putting it off, Lor’themar, just…setting it aside for later.”

Anduin smirked when Valeera sent him a telling look. Lor’themar shook his head almost helplessly as his lieutenant trotted away. “Please, follow me. We’ve put you up in the Ambassador’s tower for your stay here. Once you’ve unloaded your things I’ll take you to some of
“I’ll remember to catch Wrynn once we get to the Cathedral of Lights, yes.” Sylvanas said. “His guard can fend for themselves.”

The Blood Elf ruler chuckled. “Just as I said at Bladefist Bay during the Siege, you haven’t changed at all.”

As they left Sunfury Plaza behind Anduin leaned over toward Valeera. “Out of curiosity, what did Rommath say.”

She looked as if he’d just asked her to commit the highest form of blasphemy. “I refuse to dignify any of that by repeating it!”

Sylvanas was apparently ready for him to turn to her with his question. “All that you need to know is that it was a grievous insult, and that no one gets away with insulting what’s mine.”

Was he an object now? “I’m…yours?”

“Surely you weren’t under the belief that things were the other way around.?”

“I wasn’t under any belief of the sort. Rather that I thought one of us being owned by the other isn’t exactly necessary.”

“A lot of things aren’t ‘necessary’, Anduin. But that does nothing to change them.” She said. “You’re mine, dear Lion, whether I want you or not. You signed yourself away with that Accord.”

The young King sighed and shook his head. “Well, you’ve proved to be a good owner so far.” He said, flashing a brief smile. “There are worse things.”

“And yet again you prove yourself insane.”

Anduin laughed.

The Ambassador’s Tower matched the rest of the city’s color scheme and looked at first glance to be a nightmare for his leg because all Anduin could think of when he saw it was stairs. Thankfully the Sin’dorei’s remaining dependence on magic came through for him in the form of a translocator orb which took them immediately to the top.

The King had no idea what to make of what he saw. “Well, it’s certainly…um…?”

“Atrocious?” Lor’themar supplied congenially. “I couldn’t agree more.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of ‘eclectic’.” He said.

“‘Eclectic’ is being far too polite,” Valeera said. “Whomever is behind this needs to be shot. Immediately.”

The walls were a mind numbering orange color, the ceiling was pink, the floor was black and the bedspread was fel green.

“I’ll admit to being responsible for this.”

Anduin looked over at Sylvanas in alarm. “You designed this?”
“No, Wrynn, I’ve competent taste. My ambassador was responsible for this.” She said. “Admittedly he was a bit mad. Which is precisely why I sent him.”

“We’ve been friends for many years; I served under her for a time while she was still Silvermoon’s Ranger General.” Lor’themar said. “We joke.”

“And you left it this was in case I ever returned to visit?” Sylvanas asked.

“Actually, we left it this way because it annoyed Hellscream and we simply haven’t gotten around to changing it yet.”

“It’s been years, Lor’themar!”

“There were more important things to attend to, Dark Lady.”

“Like the logistics for holding the ‘Trial of Style’? Or, perhaps, your hair?”

“Like the Iron Horde and the Burning Legion.” Lor’themar said. “But, yes, my hair is important too.”

“I’m sure the coloration will be easier on the eyes in the dark.” Anduin said as his trunk was set down by his guards. “I’m prepared to set out whenever you’re ready, Regent Lord.”

“By all means Anduin, call me Lor’themar.” He said. “I’m ready to set out whenever you’re ready, Regent Lord.”

“By all means, Anduin, call me Lorthemar.” He said. “We’ll head out now, then, if you’re both prepared. Our first stop, the Cathedral of Lights, isn’t far from here. We should reach it, walking, in a handful of minutes.”

Everywhere he turned, Silvermoon was beautiful; graceful arches and sumptuous architecture and golden statues littered throughout the streets and causeways. Amid the lanes and houses were gardens and courtyards of vibrantly green grass styled in ways which would have been nothing short of impossible without magic and left clear the dichotomy of the Sin’dorei’s continued dependent balance between magic and the Arcane. Towering constructs engineered from metal and crystal patrolled the city and Anduin, never having seen anything of the sort before, couldn’t help but stare.

“The Arcane Constructs are one of our fair city’s many measures of defense.” Lor’themar explained upon noticing his interest. There was something calculating in the Blood Elf Regent’s gaze which tread the line of curiosity and left the young King feeling as if he wasn’t the only one doing the observing this time around. “They supplement the defender’s patrols and allow us to maintain constant security without overtaxing my men. Which in turn allows us to have a smaller guard corps than most other cities.” A playful smile pulled at his lips. “I’ve heard that you’ve employed a moderately sized army just for the Royal Guard, let alone the men tasked with the defense of your city and its surrounding areas.”

“And yet it never seems to be enough.” Gnolls. Orcs. Dragons. Defias. Demons. Undead. Murlocs. Wild animals. Hopefully the surge in available forces now that the war with the Horde was over would solve at least some of that.

“Nothing ever does when you’re a leader.” Lor’themar said. “But rumor has it that you’re adored and well trusted by your people. So, you must be doing something right, yes?”

Anduin nodded. “I’ve heard that rumor too.” He said. “Sometimes I wonder.”
The Ranger’s remaining eye fell briefly but with meaning on the statue they were passing. “Concern yourself when you don’t, Anduin.”

“Much like my soon to be husband, Sunstrider was a fool. Though of a markedly more destructive and psychotic sort.” Sylvanas said. “The day that Anduin ceases to doubt himself the earth will turn itself inside out.”

“The repairs seem to have gone well, at least on this side of the city.” Nathanos, apparently having had enough of sitting silently by, endeavored to change the subject. “It’s good to see recovery. It’ll be a great day when every trace of Arthas is erased from the face of the earth.”

“Yes. Repairs have gone well in the past years. Some have seen more work done than others but we’ve done what we’re able both here and in the Ghostlands. In no small part due to generous aid of the Forsaken.” Lor’themar said. “Though I’m afraid it’s not all good news. What has been repaired of Silvermoon is all that will be.”

“You’re going to leave half of your city in ruin?” Anduin asked. “Why? As a memorial?”

The Blood Elf Regent shook his head. “I wish that it could be for so romantic a reason, Anduin.” He said. “The simple fact of matters is that we don’t have the necessary numbers now to make use of all of the space. It would be a pointless expense of gold and labor, not to mention all the other resources required, to repair the remainder when it would be left uninhabited regardless.”

“A people needs space to grow into, don’t they?” Anduin said. “The war is over, and the needless death has ended with it. It will take time, of that much I’m well aware, but the Sin’dorei have a better chance of recovery now that they ever did do they not?”

“I suppose you’re right in that much.” Lor’themar said. “But that still leaves the cost and justifying it as an issue.”

“Why should you bear the weight of your people’s misfortune alone when you have allies? The Horde and, now, the Alliance. If you’ve need of resources or manpower or gold—though with Westfall in a state of ruin I can’t offer a terrible amount on that front—Stormwind would be glad to extend aid.” Anduin said. “With all that’s happened, I think it’s high time Humanity showed that we’re not all monsters.”

“Your generosity is greatly appreciated, Anduin.” Lor’themar said. “Perhaps in the coming years Silvermoon will take Stormwind up on the offer.”

“It stands until you’ve need.” He said.

They arrived at their first destination moments later and Anduin, despite the difference in architecture to what he was used to, was able to recognize it as a cathedral. Like Human buildings of the same function its front was covered in panes of glass but unlike what he was used to they were etched with beautiful designs rather than patterned with color. Depictions of bow wielding Rangers and Magestrixes and battles and landscapes which had all been rendered in painful detail. It wasn’t until they’d stepped inside that Anduin discovered what Sylvanas had meant about catching him.

Instantaneously struck blind by the influx of white light—sunlight filtered through the glass roof and magnified many times over by the decorative panes and prisms which littered the cavernous room—Anduin lost all sense of equilibrium and the only thing which kept him on his feet was Sylvanas’ grip on his forearm. Valeera did her best to handle all three of his guards at once.
“It’s always interesting to see how the other races react.” Lor’themar chuckled; still struggling to adjust to the Light Anduin could only recognize whom had spoken by his voice. “The composition of their eyes always makes the results a little different. I remember the first time you took Nathanos here.”

Now that he could see again Anduin came to the realization that Blightcaller had wisely chosen to remain outside.

“I feel like I just walked straight into a Paladin’s Blinding Light.” He said. “Though, now that I can actually see, I have to say that the cathedral is beautiful. Almost like I’m standing in a minor.”

“Lor’themar has a bit of a stupid habit of taking other leaders here so that he can bring up their reaction later to embarrass them.”

“You make me sound so malicious, Sylvanas.”

“Perhaps this time around it wasn’t.”

“Ah, you speak of Garrosh.” Lor’themar laughed, a pointed curve to his smirk. “You really missed out on that sight. We had to do extensive repairs but, in my view, if was well worth it.”

“No matter how ‘well worth it’ it might have been to see Garrosh Hellscream flounder blindly about and end up on the floor I’ll have to pass on a more detailed description as I’d prefer not to waste further breath on the ogre headed buffoon.” Sylvanas drawled. “Thrall was a fool for ever promoting him; even Hellscream realized he wasn’t fit to be at the helm of anything other than Orcs and he nearly led the Horde to ruin.”

“Quite the opposite of what you’ve accomplished, Sylvanas.” Lor’themar glanced meaningfully between them. “You really have ‘stepped out of the shadows’, soon to marry a child of the Light.”

“Wrynn’s a child of more than the Light, Theron, I assure you. He simply doesn’t show his darker side as often as he’d need to to make that broadly clear.” Releasing him with more aggression than was strictly necessary, likely due to the fact that she’d only just realized she was still holding on to his arm at all, Sylvanas turned away and started back towards the door. “Now, I believe that we have other stops to make.”
Sunlight filtered quietly through the shattered roof of Windrunner Spire, what had once been her family home filled with so many happy memories and light and noise and people she loved reduced now to little more than a crumbling ruin. Bricks littered the ground outside, half buried amid fallen leaves and overgrown grass and weeds and climbing vines had spread strangling fingers of withered greenery across the tower’s crenulated face. With one last glance back at her Hippogryph, left tied to a tree in an area of brush where his silver plumage wasn’t easily visible, Vareesa turned back to the shell of her home and stepped lightly over the threshold.

Any sign of the furniture and furnishings which had once been in the entry way had long since rotted away to nothing. The graceful ramp which had once proceeded uninterrupted from the ground floor of the tower to the top had crumbled in places and fallen away completely in others and in even more places appeared much less than structurally sound. It was painful, in a way well faded by time, and sad to see but not in any way surprising. It had been years, after all, and all of that had passed without any sort of upkeep. Nothing had changed since their last meeting at the spire, little over a month before.

What was surprising was the sight of her older sister standing in the middle of the entry chamber, green hood lowered and golden hair spilling down her back. She turned at the sound of her footsteps slight surprise tilting her features. “You’re here early.”

“So are you, Alleria.” Vareesa said, leaving the arch of the doorway entirely and picking her way across the rubble littered floor closer to her eldest sibling. “It would seem that we both had the same idea.”

“The idea of arriving before the scheduled time and hiding on one of the outer balconies so we can see how they act together when they think that they’re alone?”

Vareesa nodded. “She’s always been…private about legitimate affection.”

“If she’s even still capable of it.”

Her ears canted back. “That’s your reasoning?”

“Our last meeting ended badly far too quickly for me to get any sort of answer to any of my questions. How she ever could have joined the Horde let alone become their Warchief. Whether or not there’s anything left of her that’s still our sister or if she’s…not.” Alleria shook her head. “What’s your reasoning?”

Even back when she’d been living Sylvanas had been renowned for being ruthless, and from how
quickly she’d been able to come up with an untraceable poison Vareesa knew that she’d have more than enough resources to accomplish murder if she wished to. “She’s dangerous and Anduin… Anduin is trusting. And going to be marrying her. Which is a shock in and of itself; I don’t know what I thought when I first heard.”

“It is a somewhat suspicious turn of events.” Alleria said. “So your reasoning is to protect the King? Or, at least, to work out whether or not there’s reason to be concerned for his safety?” Vareesa nodded. “Anduin may be young and trusting but he’s not defenseless. The Light is with him. Even if Sylvanas has become nothing more than an irredeemable monster-and the Void knows I hope that’s not the case-he’ll be fine.”

“I hope you’re right.” Vareesa said. “Where are Turalyon and Arator?”

“Likely arriving in Silvermoon as we speak; we parted ways over the Ghostlands so that I could make the meeting here. The King and Lor’themar will join them later to head to the Sunwell.” Alleria said. “What about you? Where are Giramar and Galladin? I’m sure that Anduin would love to meet his soon to be nephews.”

Vareesa smiled. “I’ve little doubt of that much, but the Ghostlands are a bit too dangerous of a place to take them. They’re only eleven.”

“Anduin had sat on Stormwind’s throne and been taken hostage by a Dragon by that age so I’m told.”

“Anduin is Human, Alleria, and Stormwind’s age of ascension is twelve! They only live near a third as long as we do and where Half Elves don’t live for quite as long as full blooded Elves do they do live longer than Humans and thereby shouldn’t be judged adult by quite the same standards.”

The older High Elf chuckled. “Anyone ever told you that you’re an overprotective mother?”

“Azeroth is a dangerous place and they’re children!”

“We got up to worse.” Alleria said. “Though, I suppose that times have changed.” Changed indeed. She only needed to look around them to know the truth of that. “The High King and the Dark Lady should be arriving soon. We’d better head up or we’ll run the risk of missing something.”

Vareesa tried to keep her mind off of how their last meeting had gone, of how her apology for abandoning their plan and explaining herself through a letter and the subsequent expression of hope her older sister could forgive her had been entirely ignored, as they ascended the ramp and stepped out onto the first-floor balcony. Crouching down once there and seeing to it that all but their eyes and the tops of their heads were concealed from view.

The High King and their sister had left their horses at the bottom of the hill and were making their way up it towards the ruins of the tower. Due more to the incline than overuse, Anduin was leaning a fair bit of his weight against the handsome black cane in his hand, his trademark blue and golden overcoat blazing in the mid-morning sun. Sylvanas was beside him and though it was clear that she wasn’t in a particularly good mood it was also obvious that it was in no way related to him. The young King took in his surroundings with a sad gravity, blue eyes eventually falling on the gravestone which was still barely poking up over the tops of thorny vines.

Sylvanas turned her head in response to his movement as he headed away from her, walking towards it. “Anduin!”
He’d reached the grave by then and didn’t respond, bending down to brush away the accumulated
dirt and grime to reveal the inscription to the light of day. Growling softly Sylvanas tromped over
to him. “Do you visit?”

“Visit?” she repeated sharply. “And do what? Talk to a rock?”

“No. Talk to your brother.” He looked away, his expression falling into deep sadness. “Talking to a
rock is what I do. All that ever came back to me were a compass and letter and a sword, not all at
once and not in that order. To actually have a grave, a body…I don’t know what that’s like.”

Briefly, Sylvanas’ ears swiveled back. “I’ve nothing to say.”

“Forgive me for having trouble believing that.” Flashing a brief smirk, still deeply tinted with
sadness, Anduin painfully lowered himself to his knees in the grass. “Doors don’t refuse to close
when there’s nothing left unsaid.”

“Hardly your concern.” She snapped. “What are you doing?”

“Praying.” He set his cane gently in the tall grass and folded his hands against his chest. “It’s clear
that no one’s come here in quite a while, and with the Ghostlands as they are I’m sure he could use
a bit of Light. It’s only right for a Priest to pay respects to a lonely grave.”

“Your moralizing is nearly endless.” Sylvanas snapped, though more than once through the short
period of silence which followed as Anduin prayed she seemed to be wrestling with the prospect of
joining him. “Finished?” she demanded once he’d risen stiffly back to his feet.

“I am.” He said. “Might I ask precisely what it is?”

“What what is?”

“The tension which seems to exist between the three of you.” He said. “You and your sisters, I
mean.”

Both Vareesa and Alleria braced for some violent retaliation but all Sylvanas did was glare at him.
“That’s hardly your concern!”

Anduin sighed and kept his eyes on Lirath’s grave. “There were a lot of things I wish I’d said on
that day at least if not before. So much I should have said. So much I should have done. But I
didn’t. I let him get on that boat. Let him sail away. And he never came back. I have the assurance
that I’ll see him again. That I will get the chance to say and do those things. But you, if I’m to
believe what you do which I don’t, mind you-no one’s irredeemable-you won’t.” He turned his
head to meet her gaze. “You’ll easily outlive them, me, probably everyone within two hundred
miles of here. There will inevitably be things left unsaid, left undone, but you can limit those
regrets by acting while you have the chance.”

“Regret?” she scoffed. “What could you possibly know about regret? You’ve lived your whole life
sheltered in Stormwind’s Keep!”

“Perhaps not as much as others might.” He said. “But I do know that I don’t regret this.”

The look she sent him then was difficult to decipher; a mixture of something almost soft and utter
horror at herself. “Nor do I. Though that has absolutely nothing to do with you.”

“Oh, of course not.” Anduin smiled and shifted his cane to his other hand, the little gemstones on
in flashing in the light. “Your family is probably here by now. We should head inside.”
“Consistency, Wrynn. Do you practice it?”

He raised a gilded eyebrow. “I’m sorry?”

“Ever since you dragged me into your mad cap peace scheme it’s been ‘us’ and ‘a united front’ and ‘we’ and ‘together’ and yet, suddenly now, it’s ‘my family’?”

His smile grew wider as the sadness lifted from his eyes. “Our family.” He repeated, following her towards the spire’s door.

The eldest and youngest Windrunner sisters were quick to pelt down the ramp and make like they hadn’t been spying but weren’t quick enough. Their sister, unlike Anduin, was plainly not amused.

“Oh,” he snickered, “it would seem that we were being observed.”

“Of course you’d find that funny!” she snapped.

“Why wouldn’t I? I’m not concerned with maintaining the projected impression of an ice sculpture.” He smirked when she glared at him, then yelped in alarm when he was jumped. Before either of them could react to rescue the young King he let out a high pitched shriek of “no, don’t tickle me!” which removed all urgency from the situation.

Alleria and Vareesa exchanged looks of amused surprise. Anduin ended up on his back in the corner with his feet raised defensively. Sylvanas seized him by the boot of his good leg in an effort to pull it off only to have the Priest grab the other end, clearly with a vested interest in keeping his feet protected. “I will drag you across this floor, Wrynn!”

Wide eyed, Anduin shook his head. “I am the King of Stormwind, High King of the Alliance, and I refuse to be assaulted in this manner!”

“You can face this now or you can face this later, Little Lion.”

“There’s really no ‘or’ at the moment, seeing as he is expected.” Valeera stepped through the doorway into the spire, observing the scene playing out in the entry room. “Though I am curious as to why you’re on the floor, Anduin.”

“She’s a cruel torturer! I’m being tickled!”

The other Elf snorted, the looked over at Sylvanas and somewhat reluctantly informed her “stomach ribs and feet.”

“Hey!” Anduin shot her a look of absolute betrayal as he extricated himself at last from his fiancé’s grip and got back to his feet.

“Thank you, Sanguinar.” The Banshee Queen spoke almost as reluctantly as Valeera had, aiming a pointed glance at Anduin who shrank slightly beneath it. “I’ll be certain to make good use of that information later. Perhaps not tonight, but later.”

“The Dragonhawks are outside, Anduin.” Valeera said. “None of us have any doubt Turalyon and Arator will be able to protect you while out on the Isle of Quel’danas, I was nominated to protect you enroute to your man’s day out. Shall we leave these three to catch up?”

Rebounding quite quickly from their half-joking ‘disagreement’, if that was really what it could be called, Anduin turned his gaze on Sylvanas again with a raised eyebrow only to have her inform him “don’t fall of the Dragonhawk” in a manner which was rather short.
“I’ll do all I can to avoid that; wouldn’t be the best way to start my trip to a holy site would it?” with yet another grin and the oh so helpful advice of “try to get along” Anduin followed Valeera back out of the spire.

A beat of silence passed before Alleria stepped forward and bowed her head. “I was wrong. I judged you unfairly out of anger and...I’m sorry.” She said. “I still need some things explained, but what’s more important is that we’ve family and we’ve lost enough time already.”

“I think the same can be said for me.” Sylvanas refused to look at either of her siblings. “Though the fact still stands that you chose to become what you are.”

“A choice of desperation, in many ways.”

“Had fun strangling demons, did you?” Sensing the mounting potential for another argument Vareesa stepped forward. “I know I said this last time, but...”

“I haven’t forgiven you,” Sylvanas cut. “But I refuse to let Garrosh Hellscream or anything connected to him haunt me so we move on.”

Vareesa smiled. “Yes. We move on.”

Alleria had begun to cast her middle sibling in a gaze which held a tint Sylvanas didn’t like at all. “My little sister, Lady Moon, the object of desire of every man who saw her. Any one of them would have killed to have your consideration, yet all you ever did was treat them like toys.” She said. “I never thought I’d see the day, yet here we are. My little sister is in love, and continuing the family tradition.”

“He does have it going for him that he’s better looking than an Orc. And plainly the Void has gone to your head.” The Banshee Queen snapped. “Where Wrynn has proven himself to be less of a chore than expected to be around and possess unexpected, if unrefined, merits in the bedroom tolerating him is all I ever will be doing. ‘Love’ is a fool’s errand which leads one to acting stupid and, frankly, I’ve better things to do. And speaking of ‘better things’ there are better topics of discussion. Pick one!”

The other two exchanged amused glances but let the matter drop. At least for now. “We’ve lost a lot of time and likewise have a great deal of catching up to do.” Vareesa said. “I’m sure we’ll be able to find some topic we agree on.”

Anduin had spent very little time with Turalyon outside of planning for the necessary maneuvers to bring the Lightforged Draeni into the Alliance back when it appeared that war was brewing and he’d never met Arator before now, and yet in another few moments more he’d be speaking to them in a casual setting not as their King but as their soon to be brother-in-law and uncle.

Arator was older than him; not terribly older than him but still older than him. That was...mildly awkward.

The Dragonhawk he was astride-and wasn’t riding one an interesting experience: unlike a Wyvern, Hippogryph or Gryphon it undulated wildly through the air, quickly making Sylvanas’ flippant warning not to fall off hold more meaning-began its descent towards the Sunsail Anchorage.
Beside the curving dock was a gleaming Elven cutter, its narrow triangular sail rippling in the balmy wind as the ship listed gently on the calm surface of the blue water. Lor’themar and the others were already there, Turalyon immediately recognizable by his shock white hair and golden Draeni make armor and Arator clad in a flattering ensemble of red, gold and black. Dismounting rather shakily, much to Valeera’s amusement, Anduin took a brief moment to regain his balance before smiling at his three companions for the day and starting towards them.

“Anduin,” Lor’themar greeted. “I hope the Windrunner ladies treated you well.”

“Well enough. A certain traitor, however…” grinning, he poked Valeera lightly in the arm. “Apparently I did something deserving or ice-cold vengeance and forgot.”

“I don’t think alerting Sylvanas to the fact your feet are particularly ticklish could exactly be classified as ‘ice cold vengeance’.” Valeera said. “Considering she had you by the boot when I walked in I don’t doubt Sylvanas would have figured as much out on her own.”

“Oh, so you admit to treason against my Kingdom?”

“Your hairs lying wrong, little brother. Since your dear future wife isn’t here to fix it, allow me.”

Anduin ducked the Rogue’s attempt to steal his ponytail, snickering and dancing out of her reach. “You’re not as good at that as she is.” He said, his grin becoming more of a smirk. “I’ll see you later, Valeera.”

“Enjoy yourself, Anduin.”

Leaving his sister of choice beside the Dragonhawks the young King trotted to a stop beside the water’s edge. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you last night, Lor’themar, but the tour and the feast were a great deal of fun. I think Sylvanas and I both enjoyed the occasion,” he said, “if, perhaps, for different reasons.”

“Yes,” the Regent Lord chuckled, “I think Sylvanas and I both enjoyed witnessing what I suspect was your first encounter with a hookah.”

“That makes three of us, then.” He said. “I think I prefer being high over being drunk, if only because it doesn’t carry quite the same impact in the aftermath.”

“I’m assuming the hangover came about in Ironforge?” Turalyon asked.

Anduin nodded. “My first experience with a full-fledged Dwarven bash.” He said. “I barely remember it but I do recall being in a lot of pain afterwards and the Sylvanas treating me while attempting to make it seem like it was actually Valeera.”

Lor’themar’s expression tinted with amusement. “Yes, that certainly sounds like her.”

Blue eyes turned their gaze on the youngest of the three men; like all other Half-Elves he’d seen—which was no small amount as Stormwind gladly played host to quite a few of them—he carried a distinct mix of Elven and Human features and his eyes, like Alleria’s, were green. “You’re Arator?”

He nodded. “I am. I’ve heard a great deal about you, King Wrynn; rumors of your incredible abilities are common place among both the Paladin and Priest orders.”

“Please, call me Anduin.” The young King said. “We’re family now, after all.”
Arator’s pale lips twisted up into a smile. “Uncle Wrynn, then?”

“Oh Light, please don’t.”

The older men both laughed.

“Are you looking forward to visiting the Sunwell, Anduin?” Turalyon asked as they headed towards the waiting boat.

“Of course; visiting a Holy site is always a privilege, especially one so deep in what was once hostile territory. Frankly, given all that’s happened, between our races in the last few years, the fact that my presence in Silvermoon would be tolerated at all is a privilege.” He said. “Have you visited before?”

The High Exarch nodded. “A few times, years ago. But this will be the first time I’ve seen it since it’s been restored.”

“If I can ask are the stories true?” Anduin asked. “About Kalecgos and…?”

“Anveena’?” The King nodded. “Yes, it’s true. A rather unconventional romance.” Lor’themar said, sending the Priest a sideways glance. “Speaking of unconventional romances, I’ve known Sylvanas for quite a long time and count myself among her few remaining friends. Though whether or not she considers me the same is, at current, debatable.”

“Oh,” Anduin smiled, “I suppose it’s high time I received my own ‘hurt her and I hurt you’ warning. I can’t be certain, but I doubt Moira let the chance to draw a line in the sand pass untaken.”

“I’m not drawing lines, Anduin, no need to worry. It’s plain you’re not the type to harm others if even the most contrived means of avoiding doing so yet exists; in fact, you seem more the type to harm yourself in the effort to protect them.” Lor’themar said. “I will, however, admit to being quite curious as to exactly how you managed to catch her interest. She’d never have considered marrying you even for a moment if you were really a matter of ‘what you see is what you get’ and I have to wonder what she meant by her comments regarding Janus in Dalaran.”

“Well, I can’t give all my secrets away.” Anduin stepped up to the railing as the crew busied themselves with perpetrations to shove off. “But I’ll admit to having gained more than trauma from a childhood in the grasp of Onyxia and a handful of months shacked up with Wrathion. At this point I think I’d fit in quite well with the Black Flight, not that I’d really want to.”

“So you blackmailed her?”

“Blackmailed? No.” Anduin said. “I simply tailored my actions and demeanor to evoke a certain figure from her past, thereby throwing her off balance and making her more receptive to my carefully worded and well thought through points meant to make her see the merits of going forward with my plan for everyone involved.”

“And that scar on your lip?”

“She kissed me. And bit me.” Anduin told him. “In that order.”

The Blood Elf Regent laughed, the anchor clanking as it was raised from the river bed. “It’s good to see her like this.”

“Like this?” Anduin repeated. “Like what?”
“Happy. I think it’s safely accurate to say that it’s been years.” Turning away, Lor’themar left Anduin standing at the prow of the ship. Quel’danas was already visible; a dark blurry shape on the comparatively near horizon. “We’ll be docking in an hour, Anduin. Take the time to enjoy the weather. It’s unusually fine, even by Quel’thalas’ standards.”

Happy? It was really difficult to tell, at times, with her; Sylvanas’ range of emotion often seemed to be confined to smug, displeased and vaguely sad but Anduin supposed that Lor’themar would know her better then he would, at least at this point. Now alone at the prow, he tipped his face up towards the sun and closed his eyes allowing himself to enjoy the warm rays and the cool, salt scented breeze.

The Isle of Quel’danas was referred to as ‘the jewel’ for good reason; it was an incredibly beautiful place, even by the standards of the Land of Eternal Spring. No traces of Demonic habitation or the battle between Kaelthas’ forces and the Shattered Sun Offensive years before had been left behind, replaced with resplendent foliage and gleaming buildings of impressive make. Their walk up to Sunwell Plateau was a peaceful one, and once inside the plaza they were afforded incredible views of the Great Sea’s calm sapphire waters.

The inside of the complex which housed the font of Holy power was drenched in the shades of red and black, the dry air smelling on incense and carrying the same heavy gravity which Anduin had long since come to associate with sacred places. The Sunwell itself was much larger than Anduin had expected it to be, having thought it would be around the size of the Moonwell they’d visited but it was really more than ten times that size, filled with what looked like molten gold. The Light within him welling until he was almost completely overwhelmed, ears filled with the gentle tinkling sound which he’d been told accompanied the Naaru, the young King stumbled forward to the edge of the font and fell to his knees. His vision whitening out just as it had at Wrynnfall.

Slowly, his eyes refocused. The white stone making up the throne room’s wall’s shown far too brightly to belong to anything but a vision. As his sight returned Anduin realized that he was standing in the middle of Stormwind’s throne room and that he wasn’t alone. Sitting on the throne, watching him with a smile on his face was…himself.

Vision Anduin was dressed identically to his real-world counterpart, but when he rose he walked without a limp and as he came to a stop a few feet away the young King realized that there was something off about his coloring. His skin was ashen, almost, and his eyes appeared brighter. Backlit in much the same way Sylvanas’ were, though in a tone of icy blue. After observing him for a moment, Vision Anduin inclined his head.

“The wolves at your door, Little Lion.” He sounded bizarrely like Sylvanas. “And the ravens on your shoulder. You won’t be able to keep your head above water, but you’re on the right track. Sometimes the Light’s path leads us places no one would expect. Sometimes the ends fate seems to bring us are only the beginning.” His lips curled into a sly smile. “Stand firm.”

Just as abruptly as it had started, just as abruptly as the first vision had, it ended and Anduin was left blinking into the warm glow of the Sunwell. What had that been? A reassurance by the Light that he was acting as he should be, more sure and undeniable than even the word of his most trusted mentor? Or was it another warning in line with the one Velen had given him before he’d left the Exodar? And what was it about his vision-self which had seemed so strange, so…wrong, almost?

Better not to dwell on it, at least for the time being. And as difficult as it was, with the assistance of the Sunwell’s calming aura, the young Priest managed to push thoughts of the matter out of his mind. Allowing himself to get lost in the familiar intricacies of prayer and reflection Anduin lost
all track of how much time had been spent there and almost leapt from his skin when Turalyon rested a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s getting late, Anduin.” He said. “It’s time we headed back to the boat.”

“Of course.” The King got to his feet only with the assistance of the High Exarch and his cane, his crippled leg grown almost unworkably stiff from hours spent held in one position. “Lead the way.”

Lor’themar and Arator were waiting for them at the doorway of the Sunwell’s chamber. “Did you enjoy yourself, Anduin?”

“Immensely.” He said, cane thudding unevenly against the tiled floor. “It’s never a trouble for me to find the Light when I wish to, but it’s rarely that I have the chance to visit a place where doing so is so simple. The only place similar is Light’s Hope Chapel, but as I’m sure you’ve guessed I wasn’t there for a pilgrimage of faith.”

“No,” the Blood Elf Regent chuckled, “you were there to ‘make points’ to Sylvanas.”

Evening had draped the Isle of Quel’danas in shades of blue and violet and crickets could be heard singing in the gardens which lined the cobbled path. Arator turned to him as they approached the docks.

“You seem troubled, King Anduin.” He said. “Did something happen?”

Anduin hesitated for a moment before answering, the ground beneath them shifting from stone to wood. “I had another vision. Only this time it wasn’t of my father, it was…of me. I’m not sure what the Light was telling me but I’m certain it was a sign. That I’ve made the right choice and…that I need more sun.”

“You look like you’ve gotten plenty of sun to me.” Turalyon said. “I’m sure most of that was from Durotar?”

“I’ll admit to having gotten a bit of a sunburn.” Anduin said, smiling. “I’d never been in a desert before.”

The night time temperatures had dropped considerably at the water’s edge, leaving the young King quite grateful for the fact that he was wearing his overcoat. As he had on their journey there, Anduin took up a post at the prow of the ship and watched the lights of Silvermoon grow steadily closer, enjoying the gentle sighing of the waves as they lapped against the wooden bow.

Sylvanas was standing on the stone steps leading up from the Anchorage’s docks, the hood of her cloak down and long hair blowing in the cold wind. There were no signs of either of her sisters, nor of Valeera or any of the Dark Rangers. She started down the stairs as Anduin disembarked.

“Thank you again, Lor’themar, for the opportunity.” He inclined his head respectfully in the other leader’s direction. “It’s not an experience I’ll soon forget.”

“I’m certain you won’t and there’s no need to thank me Anduin. Holy sites, by their very nature, should be permitted entry to all the faithful who wish to see them. Now,” the Blood Elf’s good eye flashed with amusement, “I believe the Dark Lady has decided she’s through with sharing you for the night.”

“I’m quite keen on sparing myself a day of his company given the chance, Lor’themar, but at this point I’d rather Wrynn’s prattle than my sisters’ endlessly reworded insistences of an utterly ridiculous assertion!”
“What utterly ridiculous assertion?” Anduin chirped curiously.

Sylvanas scoffed at him and spun on her heel, tromping back towards the staircase she’d come down. “I will not be mobbed again, certainly not on this matter!” she snapped. “If you must satisfy your curiosity you may do so on our walk back to the tower.”

Smirking, the young King glanced back at his three companions and said “I think that’s my cue to say goodnight.”

“Good night, Anduin.” Lor’themar said, the others echoing much the same as the young King hurried into the shadows into which Sylvanas had disappeared.

He found her waiting for him just around the first bend in the road. “Alright, Wrynn, ask your questions.”

“How did things go?” reaching where she’d waited for him, he fell into step beside her as she started walking again. “With your sisters, I mean. I know that what’s between you can’t be fixed in a day, or even in several, but…is there hope?”

“Plenty, as I’m sure you’ll be pleased to hear. They’re both certain to descend on my end of the wedding like a flock of starving vultures.”

“The House of Nobles will be glad to cover my end.” He sighed. “A bit of vengeance, I’m sure.”

“You’ll also be pleased to know that Vareesa will be bringing her brats and will likewise need someone to watch them. She’ll leverage the angle of ‘bonding time with their new uncle’ to ensure it’s you that ends up saddled with them.”

The young King smiled. “No leverage needed.” The Dark Lady grumbled in response. “I do have another question.”

“Let me guess,” she snapped, “what matter were you talking about earlier”?

Catching sight of a white tail vanishing beneath a topiary Anduin stepped off the path and knelt down. Reaching out a hand and gently clucking until he succeeded in luring the kitten from the leaves, lifting the ball of fuzz and cradling it delicately to his chest. Scratching little ears as he looked around for any signs of the kitten’s mother to no avail. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“No, of course not, but if I don’t I’ll have to deal with you asking about it until you’re as blue as your overcoat.” She snapped. “Take the cat if you’re that concerned, Wrynn, it’s a stray. Even its mother doesn’t care.”

They resumed their trek towards the ambassador’s tower, the kitten tucked securely into the crook of his arm and purring contentedly, in no way phased by being abandoned and subsequently abducted from its bush by an unfamiliar Human. “I think I’ll name him Snowball. For his coloring.”

“You’re not the most original one.” Sylvanas drawled. “My dear sisters are under the absolutely ridiculous impression that I’m in love with you. As if I’d ever both with such a thing with anyone, let alone an idealistic lion.”

“Oh, but of course.” He chuckled. “I believe we’ve discussed this.”

“’Love’ leads to weakness, stupidity and pain! I haven’t the time for any of that! ‘Love’ isn’t something I’ve an interest in nor anything which has a future between us, except perhaps form your
end as you’re just that sort of fool!” She snapped. “The most you’d ever get from me is fond, and even then only barely.”

“Well,” he said softly, blue eyes blending with the night around them, “are you fond of me?”

“Tch!” The Banshee Queen sped her pace enough that she almost left him behind. Fond of him? Fond of him? Yes. She could become fond of him.

Light help them both, she already was.
“Merp! Merp! Merp!” Anduin felt fur covered paws land on his chest and opened his eyes only to have the kitten’s furry head obscure his vision, though around the feline’s fervid efforts to snuggle against him he caught enough of a glimpse of motion to leave him with a sneaking suspicion that Sylvanas had employed him as a method of waking him up.

“Snowball.” Blinking sleep from his eyes as best he could, Anduin reached up and lifted the kitten off of his chest as he sat up. Setting him instead in his lap and scratching gently behind his ears.

“Morning.”

“Some of us have been awake for a while, Wrynn.” Sylvanas said. “And some of us never bothered sleeping to begin with. Now get out of that bed and finish your ritual of checking through your belongings. We’ve come to the leg of this trip that I’ve been looking forward to.”

“A return to your city? I can understand that; I’d imagine that you’re a little homesick after being away in Orgrimmar and Stormheim for so long.” A gentle smile tinted with sleepy amusement spread across his face. “Am I wrong?”

“Nothing so ridiculously sentimental.” Sylvanas drawled. “There’s simply only so much of the living that I can take. And seeing as I can’t escape from you, I must take reprieve from others whenever I can.”

“If you want some time away from me you just have to say so.” Setting the kitten on the bed beside him he got to his feet. “I’m not the warden of a prison, Sylvanas. And I’ve no want to force my presence on you.”

“That ‘break’ would have to be a permanent one, Wrynn, and I think we both know you won’t be having that.” Sylvanas said. “Now get moving, Little Lion, or risk being left behind.”

“I’m going, I’m going.” He chuckled, scratching the kitten’s ears once more before leaving the bedside and crossing to his trunk. The Priest hadn’t taken much out of it, which admittedly was fairly normal as far as his habits went in regards to the spread of his belongings. This time around, though, the time he spent sifting through the contents of his trunk was much shorter than usual. Perhaps due to his own eagerness to escape the horrendous coloring of their lodgings: respectable as Lor’themar’s reasoning for leaving the place in its current state was and as much as it admittedly was her fault that it had ended up this way in the first place Sylvanas really could have killed him for subjecting them to it.

The cat didn’t seem at all bothered by the nearly seizure inducing coloring. And Sylvanas would have to admit that she was minorly regretting allowing Wrynn to take it with them, the thing was mostly quiet, at least, but like most things connected to Anduin it seemed hell bent on forcing her to enjoy its presence. It was likely damaged mentally in some way as it made near constant attempts to ingratiate itself with her while the Priest wasn’t lavishing attention on it and subsequently reducing the mangy beast to a purring mess—which thankfully wasn’t terribly often—and it only happened to be coincidence that its annoyance had served a function in waking him this time around.

At least Valeera had had the intelligence to go out and procure a carrier for the monstrosity because otherwise it’d have swiftly proved even more of a hassle.
“I’m sure it’ll be a little bit weird for you, going to new places. And maybe a little bit scary.” And then there was the Priest’s frankly bizarre habit of talking to the thing as if it was not only able to understand him but to respond which reminded her disturbingly of a certain Lich. The little kitten mewed again as Anduin picked it up and nestled itself comfortably in the crook of his arm. “But it’ll be alright. You’ll love Stormwind: there are plenty of cushions to lay on and windowsills to sun on. And I’m sure the Undercity is nice as well, in its own way.”

“Meeh!”

“Are you done talking to the cat?” Sylvanas demanded. “Ever since you found that thing you’ve been giving it far too much attention.”

“And I’m sure that you’re not in any way jealous.” Anduin grinned in the face of the baleful glare she sent him. “Just a moment ago you were talking about wanting time away from me. As for that, if you wish for more attention you need only ask.”

“And you seem to be gunning for my hostile attention!” Sylvanas snapped at him, turning towards the door. Refusing to acknowledge either his soft laughter or the knowledge that jealousy over a damned kitten was precisely what the awful nettling feeling she’d been suffering since he found it was. Becoming so attached to him, becoming attached to him at all, was almost entirely down to the years which she’d spent isolated and for which, Sylvanas supposed, she could only reasonably blame herself but that didn’t make it any less repulsive. “Put that beast in its carrier and call your guards for your trunk. The Translocation orb in Sunfury Spire will send us directly to the Ruins of Lordaeron.”

Snowball wasn’t particularly pleased with the concept of being put into the carrier, forcing Anduin to repeatedly remove his tiny white paws from where they’d been planted on the frame if the opening and was quite vocal with complaints once the Priest had managed to shut him in the cage, but the collection of Anduin’s trunk and their mounts went without incident. As they made their way through the streets of Silvermoon, back through the wide plaza towards the spire, Anduin could feel the tension in Valeera and his guards steadily mounting.

The young King supposed that he could understand why they would be. What they’d be concerned of: that, as Tyrande had said, he’d be ‘dragged off to the Undercity and made into one of her Forsaken’. Anduin had never been concerned over that outcome, even from the beginning: if Sylvanas was going to kill him it would be for the sake of getting rid of him-causing herself to instead be stuck with him would be counterproductive-and she certainly wouldn’t have waited until the second to last stop on their premarital tour to get around to doing so.

Though he’d be lying if he were to attempt to claim that he wasn’t nervous about journeying there himself for his own reasons. Undercity, Tirisfall Glades, was soon to become his home for half of the year. Two long seasons, be they winter and fall or spring and summer, would be spent there. The Forsaken would soon become his people as much as Stormwind was, and yet…. he already knew from what Sylvanas had told him that he wouldn’t truly be their King. He wasn’t even certain he’d be received well, or even tolerated, by them. Honestly he didn’t know much about the Forsaken and though he’d quickly found even ground with Sylvanas her two Dark Rangers had never really interacted with him beyond bored looks and Nathanos, well….Nathanos was not impressed.

Anduin was well aware that this could end badly, though to be fair the same could be said on Sylvanas’ part for Stormwind. As much as he knew that his people were relieved to have an end to the constant threat of war with the Horde-and despite the fact that no one had rioted yet, at least as far as he knew-Anduin was still concerned for the black and white prejudice of ‘undead bad’ and
he past reputation tainting their ability to see her as anything more than the monster she seemed to want everyone to believe that she was.

As with anything, it appeared, only time would tell.

Travel by Translocation Orb, it seemed, didn’t differ a great deal regarding sensation no matter if one was traveling a few hundred feet or a few hundred miles; beyond a strange shiver of magical feedback, it was little different than using a hearthstone. The room in which they ended up was expectedly dark and dreary, dampness weeping down the bowing walls. Sylvanas did indeed seem somewhat relieved to be back in her city, where she’d come to feel the most comfortable, and made a swift exit leaving Anduin and his party of guards to hurry after.

After a brief journey through a narrow passage of questionable structural integrity they came out into the light of Tirisfal Glades. Not that that light was terribly impressive. The sunlight which filtered down through the thick clouds was a wan, almost jaundiced grey color and a chilling rain misted down onto the wild growing grass reaching to the height of his knees as it poked around bits and pieces of crumbled walls. The entire place felt sad, heavy with the lingering echoes of the lives which had been lost there, and when the wind blew Anduin could have sworn he heard a brazen ringing despite the fact that Lordaeron’s massive bell lay fallen from its tower only a few feet away. Tiny pale lights flittered in and out between the ruins and the overgrowth and, upon looking closer, the Priest realized that he was seeing lost souls left to wonder forever in confusion.

Finding time to try to lay at least a few of them to rest while he was there, an undertaking which could then resume when he returned, was something which would have to be pinned to his to do list whilst he was there.

Undercity had gotten its name for a very good reason, and it was really quite a literal one. The entrance into the city itself could only be had through a single, very small and very dark elevator which only a handful of them could fit on at once. The shaft which they traveled down was very long and very claustrophobic, the earthen press of the walls damping any traces of sound around them. The further down they went the heavier and colder the air became, damp and thick with the sharp cloying too-sweet scent of decaying flesh and powerful chemicals. It took every ounce of good grace and poise not to instantly double over into a gagging fit; there was little he could do to keep his eyes from watering, however, and much to Sylvanas’ amusement his guards weren’t quite as able at containing themselves.

“The Kor’kron overseers once stationed here in the wake of the incident at the Wrath Gate,” said with a pointed bitterness, Anduin noted, “were able to adjust to the conditions within an hour, and Horde heroes who find their way here do much the same. You’ll adapt, though as my city is not a place of the living I doubt you’ll ever quite be comfortable here.” Sylvanas’ heels clicked against the pitted stone floor as she stepped from the elevator. Anduin, half blind despite his best efforts to clear his vision, stumbled after. “If it’s still unbearable by the days end you and your guards are welcome to the rain drenched courtyard outside, though I doubt you’d want to turn down your rooms knowing all the effort my people have gone through to prepare them.”

“Of course not. I doubt that many of the living stay here in any long-term capacity, and it would be wholly unreasonable of us to make the effort of refurbishing a space for that purpose moot.” He felt as if he’d clenched his ribs in a Gnomic vice and proceeded to swallow Dragon’s fire. Hopefully this effect wouldn’t occur every time he came and went. “I’ll admit to being terribly eager to see your city; it’s the one I’ve heard and read the least about. And I’m equally as eager, and nervous, to meet my new people.”

“Your entourage seems even more ‘nervous’.” Sylvanas drawled as the passageway at last opened
up around them.

The first thing Anduin noticed, which was impossible not to notice really, was the vibrantly green plague goo which had pooled in generous quantities in any low-lying areas and made falling from the bridges and causeways which were for the most part responsible for enabling travel between different parts of the city a great deal more hazardous than falling into Stormwind’s canals. Which was saying a considerable amount considering...the sewer monster...which, come to think of it, he should probably have taken care of by some up and coming hero. Preferably before it ate one of the fishermen who frequented the area.

The Flightmaster’s nearby roost was populated not by Wyverns, as he’d come to suspect, or even by the Dragonhawks he’d seen in Silvermoon but instead by titanic bats hung upside down by gnarled taloned feet. They had large, beady red eyes which watched them hungrily as they scooted-or, in Sylvanas’ case, calmly walked-past; Anduin had the feeling that they also had very large fangs and probably sucked blood, but possessed a creeping certainty that determining the truth of that first hand wasn’t something he wanted to do. Tattered violet banners, outlined in a paler shade of gold than Stormwind’s own, hung from almost everywhere that could support them, all baring the standard of a shattered white mask with glaring eyes and consequently giving off the rather discomfiting sensation that one was constantly being watched from every direction. And that wasn’t even considering the actual eyes that were on them.

Every Forsaken that they passed paused what they were doing as they went by, all of them saluting their Queen and many stopping to subject Anduin to an unblinking stare. It wasn’t an unfriendly look, though it wasn’t the disinterest he’d come to expect-it remind him quite a great deal of a crocalisk, actually, or maybe the tigers back in Krasarang when they’d been sizing him up as potential prey-but Anduin rose to the challenge as he did to most things. The glittering smile he responded with led most of them to simply resume what they’d been doing as if they’d never been interested in him to begin with but a few smiled back.

Which led to one of the Apothecaries dropping their lower jaw which was…alarming. There’d definitely be a period of adjustment for everyone involved, it seemed.

“Insatiable as your curiosity has never failed to show itself to be I’m sure that your expecting to be given the same manner of unnecessarily historical tour. I’ve neither the time nor patience for that but I also can’t have you running wild and needing to be rescued from the sewers. So it appears we’ve hit a quandary.” They’d descended a small handful of bridges and had reached the center point of what Anduin assumed was the city’s Trade District. Catching the rather pointed look the Banshee Queen was sending him Anduin dipped his head, smile becoming somewhat sheepish.

“What if I promised to reign in my curiosity and hold my tongue?” he asked. “‘No questions’ would be promising a bit much, but I’ll stick to the important ones.”

Sylvanas’ response was a thoroughly disbelieving snort. “We’ll see how long that lasts.” But she resumed walking. Anduin grinned and trotted in her wake, Snowball curled comfortably in his arms. “My city was once little more than the crypts beneath Lordaeron, but after the betrayal of Arthas and the razing of what would have been his kingdom plans were put in place to transform it into a stronghold of the Scourge. But not long after the dredging began Arthas was called back to the Lich King’s side; with his sway weakened I, along with my Forsaken, broke free of the will of the Scourge and wrested the nascent city from the talons of the Arch Lich Kel’thuzad, forcing him into retreat and eventual hiding on Naxxramas. With their menace gone, my people continued the work which Arthas’ puppetry had begun, this time for our own uses. What you see now is the finished result: completed only recently.” She paused long enough to insure he’d keep to his word before continuing. “There are six Quarters: Trade, War, Magic, Rogue, the Apothecarium and the
Royal Quarter from which I rule and you’ll have to find some means through which to entertain yourself for half the year.”

“I’m sure I’ll at least be able to delegate most of Stormwind’s business from here.” Anduin said. “I’ll only rarely prove an unoccupied annoyance to you of that much you have my word.”

“And I hope you keep your word about not spouting off redundant questions, because I’m both willing and able to have your mouth stitched shut. Potentially on a permanent basis.”

“Lips zipped. Key thrown away. On my honor.”

She didn’t look particularly convinced of that much but never the less resumed her explanation as they left the Trade Quarter behind, emerging onto a narrow road which wound its way along a shallow river of goo proximity to which only worsened the chemical bite of the air. “This is the Rogue’s Quarter and I’d advise you not spend much time her unless you’re looking to be fleeced, either through willingly gambling away your gold or finding it suddenly vanished from your pockets. Where my people won’t harm you, they’re free to do anything else to you they wish. Should you dislike that it’s your prerogative to solve the situation; I’ve no intention to lift a finger.”

“I’ll make certain to watch my coin purse should I ever find the need or desire to consume here, though I’m not a man for gambling really. As I’ve made mention, I believe.” Anduin said. “Would there be any reason I’d be drawn to come here?”

“Aside from your repeatedly demonstrated preference for shoving your head into any hole that has bees?” the Banshee Queen shot back. Anduin snorted. “I’d think not, but acting logically doesn’t seem to be your greatest strength. Fittingly this sector of my city is tailored to Rogues though my Dark Rangers frequent many of its trappings as well. A Priest of the Light has no use for Rogue trainers, you seem happy enough with life not to require poison and I don’t believe you dabble in Skinning, Leather working or Engineering.”

“I’m more of a Scribe and Alchemist myself, and have no intent towards suicide at the moment so you may be right about none of the typical trappings of this Quarter holding interest for me.” Anduin said. “But I’m sure there’s something interesting to be found here if I look hard enough.”

Leaving the shadowed Rogue’s Quarter behind and walking through another short passage they came out into another Quarter which, from the immediately evident presence of a multitude of Mages, Anduin assumed was the Magic Quarter. Dead center of it was a Temple of the Damned, adorned with a massive stone skull; Anduin had read about them and some of their more heinous Necromantic uses in his training and treated the structure to a notably dubious eye.

“The Magic Quarter is where those of my Forsaken whom are in any way inclined towards the Arcane learn their craft. Bethos Iceshard manages most of what goes on here; training, largely, for apprentice Mages, Necromancers and Warlocks respectively.” She said. “I see you’ve noticed the Temple of the Damned: one of your Light trainers warned you of them, I’m sure.”

“Why do you have one?”

“A hold over from the Undercity’s time under Scourge control. Thus far, my people haven’t had need of it.”

“And you didn’t get rid of it because?”

“There may come a day where we do have need of it. Throwing away a potentially valuable piece
of equipment is a stupid choice at best and a decision only a fool would make.” Sylvanas said. “Relax, Anduin. It’s inactive and changing that would take a great deal of effort. Though I find it curious that a potent Necromantic object and not the fact that you’re surrounded by the undead is what’s causing you such distress.”

“I’ll admit to being a bit blindsided. I thought they’d been employed only by the original Horde.”

“Thus far, the current Horde has never used it so you’d still be correct in that assumption.” Sylvanas said. “Moving on.”

An abomination on patrol happened to be passing by as they exited the Magic Quarter, heading around to the next one over, and it stopped on catching sight of them. Affixing Anduin in the gaze of its single, bulging eye while its third arm aimlessly scratched its back with the rusty sickle it clutched in one fist.

“Dis new King?” it boomed, apparently possessing only one voice level which was loud enough to shake the ceiling overhead. Snowball hissed, puffing up in fear and pressing himself back against the young Priest’s chest. Sylvanas simply seemed annoyed.

“Do you not have work to be doing?” she snapped. “Get back to your patrols!”

“Um…hello.” Balancing the terrified kitten on one arm Anduin raised his other hand in greeting with a somewhat shaky smile. “And, yes. ‘Dis new King’.”

“Don’t encourage this behavior, Wrynn!”

“New King speak nice to Gory. New King pretty. Gory like pretty new King.” Apparently having no interest in Sylvanas or her orders the Abomination continued to stand precisely where it was, its arms wildly waving about in excitement. “Gory is guard and farmer. Has field in Western Plaguelands dat he takes care of when not on da duty. King want to see? Gory groweded it himself after lost farmer friends taught him how.”

“Anduin!”

“I’d love to see it, Gory; if not this week while I’m here, then when I return.” Anduin said, smile becoming less alarmed and more amused as Sylvanas’ glare intensified. “But now isn’t exactly the time. You are on guard duty, after all and it wouldn’t be terribly good form to leave your post.”

“Oh, dats right! Gory is on guard duty for angry Queen. Gory forgetted.” Anduin barely contained his laughter as Sylvanas, obviously much less amused, snarled beside him. “Gory see pretty King and kitty later and show them corn. He not so great at growing, but he manage.” With a last jovial wave the abomination plodded away, leaving poor Snowball quite upset and Sylvanas not too much less so.

“The Apothecaries need to start making those brutes more cooperative.” The Banshee Queen hissed as they resumed walking. “They’re meant to be muscle, not to be used for anything that requires intelligence or free will. The Royal Apothecary societies tendency to attempt to outdo themselves each time anything is done only leads to problems.”

“I think he’s sweet.” Anduin said. “Will we be heading into the Western Plaguelands at any time this week? I did promise to stop by his farm.”

“Fox hunting is on the schedule.” Sylvanas informed him. “If you really wish to stop by and look at corn then I suppose a handful of minutes to indulge him can be spared.”
“Marvelous,” Anduin chirped, doing his best to soothe snowball enough that the kitten would stop clinging to his shirt with his tiny claws. “I’ve never been the guest of an abomination before. They seem a bit dim, but otherwise quite good company.”

“Thankfully,” Sylvanas informed him tartly, “Gory is the exception rather than the rule. Now, the War Quarter is just up ahead and, after that, the Apothecarium.”

“You seem rather eager to end this tour and head to the Royal Quarter.”

“Eager to be relieved of the duty of having to hold your hand.”

“Oh, of course. I’m sure that the Forsaken will be pleased to have me set loose upon them.”

“Just don’t distract any more of my guards.”

“I’m afraid that I can’t make any promises there.” Anduin said, smirking. “After all, making a distraction of myself seems to be what I do best.”

The War Quarter reminded the young King vaguely of Old Town in that it housed numerous training dummies many of which, he was mildly surprised to note, were still clutching Alliance war standards. Clearly very old, their blue and golden colors were faded and the fabric itself was tattered and thread bare.

“I expect that this is where you’ll find the most interest as you can be among some variant of your own kind, though I’m not certain how you feel about Shadow Priests.” Sylvanas drawled. “The War Quarter is where my military is based and also houses an Altar of Darkness which has been obsolete and out of use since the arrival of my Val’kyr. And, though a number of the members of the Cult of Forgotten Shadow prefer to lurk in Death Knell’s ruined cathedral, their proper headquarters can also be found here. There are also master Blacksmiths and Miners but that’s off little concern to you. Moving on to the Apothecarium.”

“You seem rather on edge when it comes to Shadow Magic.” Anduin said, blue eyes roving the area as they walked no doubt in an effort to locate some sign of the other priests. “Might I ask why?”

“Anyone possessed of proper sense is ‘rather on edge’ when it comes to Shadow Magic.” She snapped. “Don’t tell me that you, the ‘darling of the Light’, ‘Stormwind’s Golden Boy’, are any different.”

“Well…”

“A handful of Shadow based parlor tricks doesn’t count.”

“I wouldn’t call an in born talent for mind control and alteration a ‘shadow-based parlor trick’.” He said. “Not to mention that Discipline Priests are a lighter version of Shadow Priests in many ways, only without the Void form and the…rampant insanity. Point is that though not every Priest makes a regular habit of sprouting tentacles all over their bodies doesn’t mean that the Priest who claims they’re not well versed in some branch of the Shadow is anything less than a dirty liar.”

“And my point, Wrynn, is that I’d rather keep an eye on the lot of them so that Twilight’s Hammer the sequel doesn’t spring up beneath my nose.” Sylvanas said. “While in the Apothecarium you are to touch nothing and stay well clear of the walls. There’s no telling what Faranell has crammed into those damned cages of his.”

“Keep my hands to myself,” Anduin said, clutching the kitten a bit tighter just for good measure as
they stepped over the threshold. “Noted.”

It was only a small mercy that he’d slowly begun to become accustomed to at least some of the Undercity’s less than hospitable to breathe air because in this district of the city it was undeniably the worst. Succumbing to a fit of coughing, Anduin quickly pulled the collar of his shirt up over his mouth and nose, eyes quickly discerning the offending item to be a leaking beaker of what might have been…actually he didn’t have a clue.

Of all the Quarters in the Undercity the Apothecarium was by far the least pleasant to be in, not only because of the fact that the air was almost unbreathable but because of the…well, decor maybe wasn’t quite the right word. Tessla coils hung from the ceiling as thick as bats in a cave and the whole district, mostly open, was crammed full of bloody tables some of which supported half constructed Abominations, shelves stuffed to bursting with crumbling flesh bound books, towers of vials and beakers of what very well might have been the Plague, acrid smelling candles which had been melted nearly to the knubs and the cages Sylvanas had described. Some of them were empty, and a few showed signs of recent habitation by poor souls whom he doubted still lived but most of them were filled with unrecognizable horrors which jutted eyestalks and pincers at jagged angles.

All in all it wasn’t a place where he felt terribly safe. Eyes back to watering full force as ise throat started closing up, Anduin had to heave a few times before managing to force out the question “this is where they make the Plague?”

“And study the effects and potential uses of Azerite. The Royal Apothecary Society were formerly dedicated to eradicating the taint of the living from Lordaeron, though now that we’ve agreed to share they stand ready to remind those whom might forget to whom this kingdom belongs,” Sylvanas said, heading off back the way they’d come rather than further into the Apothecarium. Anduin, though grateful to be back in the comparatively easier to breathe air, was left more than a little bit confused.

“Weren’t we going to the Royal Quarter?”

“We were. And we are. But I doubt you’d have made it to the main passage without suffocating to death.” She said. “There are other ways in. I’m going to show you one of them and you’d do best to remember it.”

Avoiding the Apothecarium for the rest of his life would be more than incentive enough to ensure that he would. Scrubbing at his eyes in an effort to clear his vision, Anduin made a conscious attempt to reign in his breathing. “I’m paying attention.”

“The third wall sconce on the right.” Heavy, wrought iron and holding a roaring flame. “Pull on it.”

Anduin looked at the sconce, then at Sylvanas and back again. He liked to think that they’d progressed beyond such a point but he still couldn’t entirely bring himself not to consider that she might be tricking him into dumping embers on his head and so it was with some hesitation that he reached up and grabbed a firm hold of the handle of the sconce and pulled down. With a resonant clank the sconce slid a few inches downward, spitting up sparks but not overflowing with ash or embers much to his relief, and the wall beside it seemed to break open. Damp brick slid to the ride to reveal the gaping maw of a dark passageway.

Sylvanas didn’t waste another moment’s time, stepping over the small rise which formed the threshold and vanishing into the blackness. Pausing only long enough to glance back at his guards, Anduin followed her. Black as pitch, the passage was at least short enough that the blindness inherent with using it didn’t carry much notable risk of tripping. The young King soon found
himself standing at a point almost halfway down the curving main passage which lead to the Royal Quarter, flanked on either side by a couple dozen fully armored Dread Guards.

As with many of the Forsaken they’d already encountered they gave little outward acknowledgement of his presence, saluting the Banshee Queen as they passed but their hollow eyes followed him in a manner which would only be described as unnerving. Anduin had lived his entire life wearing judgement as a mantle-the judgement of those he considered his family, the judgement of his people, the judgement of the House of Nobles, the judgement of the Alliance as a whole-but he’d never felt so much like the outcome of that judgement truly mattered as he did now. The Forsaken didn’t take well to the living and he already knew from what Sylvanas had told him that they wouldn’t really see him as a ruler in any capacity but he’d be spending half of every year here from now until the end of his life and so it was tantamount that he be received as well as he could possibly expect to be. He’d approached the matter as he would anything else-treat them as if they were one of the living, not go out of his way to make trouble and learn their names-though how well things would go he couldn’t know.

“Giving yourself mental damage again I see.”

Anduin blinked and did his best to arrange his expression into something a bit less indicative of the turn of his thoughts. “Just a mild headache.” He flashed a small smile which fell flatter than he’d meant it to. “You’ve got quite the cadre of Royal Guards, Sylvanas. An impressive display, undoubtedly, but wouldn’t this intimidate the champions who come to you to lend their service to the Horde?”

“Those champions whom are among my Forsaken wouldn’t be. As for the others, intimidation is the point. Stormwind may be pleased to be little beyond a puppy pile even when it comes to your defenses but we can’t all afford that luxury.” Sylvanas said. “While I’m sure that my Royal Dread Guards appreciate the attention I’d appreciate you giving the process of walking down this hallway a bit more.”

Chuckling in spite of his residual discomfort Anduin removed his gaze from the numerous guards and sped his pace down the curving passage.

The Royal Quarter unfolded before them moments later, a circular room with a cavernous ceiling held up by pillars and lit by heavy chandeliers which dripped with candle wax and the pale glow of the four Val’kyr whom hovered behind a pair of thrones with the gentle flapping of feathered wings; almost translucent in places and patterned in shades of white and black. Unable to contain his curiosity Anduin stared, convinced he was likewise being observed though unable to truly tell where the winged beings were looking, and only pulled his eyes away when the Dark Lady prodded him in the arm.

The Banshee Queen’s throne was imposing and heavy set, patterned in shades of gold and black and adorned with enough Alliance related patterning-foremost among those the fact that the arm rests were shaped like lion paws-to lead Anduin to the sneaking suspicion that the piece had been removed from Teranas’ throne room in the ruined city above. Beside it was another throne, slightly smaller and in some respects more delicate, clearly recently done given the absence of tarnishing to the metal.

So this, and their lodgings, was what Nathanos had been sent back to oversee.

“Originally,” Sylvanas’ lips tugged upwards into an amused smirk, “I’d planned to leave things at a floor pillow but ultimately, as fetching an ornament as you might make seated at my feet, having you literally underfoot at all times would only lead to unnecessary problems for everyone involved.
“My crippled leg is exceedingly grateful for the consideration.” He said. “Though I will say that it was an interesting choice to put a King in a Queen’s seat.”

“That, Anduin, is a King’s seat. But this is a Queendom.” She spared him a final smirk before turning back to the passage. “It’s time that we inspected your lodgings for your stay here, though I wouldn’t expect my Forsaken to have produced anything less than satisfactory. The ‘lion’s den’ shouldn’t be too terribly far from the passage we took down here.”
The Fox and the Hounds

It had taken two days but Anduin could finally breathe the air of the Undercity without suffering a dull aching sensation in his throat and chest, and for the most part he hadn’t gone out terribly much due to the inescapable discomfort, but had been more than pleased to wake up a handful of minutes before to realize that he was no longer fettered by that being the case. Even with the cold reception he’d found during their tour upon his arrival there—well, perhaps nonreactive would be a better description than cold—and the fact that he knew Valeera would not be allowing him out of her sight while they were within ten miles of the Ruins of Lordaeron Anduin couldn’t find himself anything but excited that he’d finally have the chance to begin to build relationships. Snowball reached up to paw at the cuff of his sleeve as Anduin pulled on his overcoat. Smiling, the young King lifted the purring kitten once more into his arms.

“Up for a bit of exploration?” he asked, receiving a mew in return. “So am I. We’ll start where we’ve the strongest chance of making headway and build outwards from there: we’ll see if we can find any of the Death Priests in the War Quarter.”

“Just as long as you’re not going anywhere near the Apothecarium again. Though I doubt that even your insatiable curiosity could tempt you back there.” Valeera performed one last check of her gear to ensure that she had both her blades on her and that they were both sharp and poisoned. “I can’t convince you to go back up to the ruins and help with moving on the lost souls instead?”

“Important as it is to lay those poor people to rest, moving them on will be a time intensive process. Ultimately, beginning to build relationships within the Forsaken beyond their Queen is a much more immediate concern.” He said. “I’m not in danger, I know that much, but I can never be comfortable if my relationship with my people is suffering.”

“And the Forsaken are now your people too.” She didn’t sound particularly pleased with that reality. “Don’t forget we’re headed out to the Western Plaguelands just after noon.”

“Five hours should be plenty of time to get things started.” Anduin said, settling Snowball comfortably into the crook of his left arm and lifting his cane. “Have everything? Not that you’ll need to use any of it, I’m sure.”

“Better not to need it than not to have it, little brother.” Valeera said. “The main reason I’m going with you is in case you decide to stop by Rogue’s Quarter as well.”

“I don’t currently intend to.”

“That doesn’t mean you won’t change your mind, Anduin.” She said.

“Fair enough.” He said, smiling as he headed for the door. “Now let’s see if we can find any of these Shadow Priests Sylvanas is so concerned about.”

Sending one last glance of mild distaste at the bed—simpler than it should have been when playing host to royal blood, but with sheets which were white and not moth eaten; frankly Anduin had been relieved not to find out that his ‘room’ was actually the sex dungeon he’d half expected—Valeera followed him out.

Dingy and oppressive as it had consistently remained since their arrival, the Rogue was not looking
forward to the extended period of months which would soon be spent here and very much doubted that Anduin was either, but the Priest had spoken of sacrifices he’d willingly make to ensure his people’s safety when he’d first told her of his plan and she didn’t doubt he viewed this as a minor sacrifice among many. ‘Lively’ would never be a word that came to mind when she thought of the place, but the streets and shops were none the less crowded with the undead. Shuddering each time one of them looked in her vague direction Valeera was immensely glad that she couldn’t actually be seen. Anduin didn’t have the same luxury of simply blending into the shadows and responded with the curious looks he was given with more of the same smiles and nod. On occasion he’d received a nod in return but there was never any notable verbal acknowledgement which was why, a handful of hours weaving in and out of stores-and getting sidetracked by the merchandise on offer-later when someone called out to him they both stopped short and turned in surprise.

A Forsaken in a blood splattered smock was staring at them from an out of the way opening tucked into a shadowed corner with jaundiced yellow eyes, rotted teeth bared in a permanent rictus and fingerbones on full display as he excitedly waved them over. “You’re the young King of Stormwind, yes? Soon to be wed to the Dark Lady?” he asked, waving around what Anduin only now realized was a rust encrusted meat cleaver. “I’m not certain why another Human would be wandering around but I suppose tourism could have started already.”

“Um…yes, I’m the King,” Anduin said. “Why?”

“Marvelous!” Rather than receive an answer the Priest was seized by the wrist in a surprisingly powerful grip and dragged into the shadowed doorway, spun around at a dizzying speed and dropped into a reclining chair which appeared to have been chewed on with a thump. “The names Marius Slimelight: Necrosurgeon at your service. I hear you’re having trouble with your leg.” All of this said while enthusiastically shaking the stunned Human’s arm with near enough force to yank it from the socket. “Brittle bones? Chronic pain? Trouble walking?”

“I-.”

“Nothing that the healers could do, eh? Not the Paladins or the Priests, not the Druids or the Shamans or the Monks?”

“Well, no, but…” Anduin spluttered, thoroughly alarmed and looking around the place with wide eyes. It smelled of dried blood and rotting wood and carried an aura far too similar to the Apothecarium for his liking. Snowball had crawled into his overcoat to hide. “I have no idea what you’re-.”

“Assisting your situation, King Wrynn. Now, do hold still. This operation shouldn’t take long.” Not that he really had much choice; between the angle of the chair and his leg he couldn’t get up on his own.

“Operation?” he repeated, or more accurately squeaked, as his eyes finally found the disembodied leg lying discarded on a nearby table. By the Light, the thing was still dripping blood!

The Forsaken set aside the pot he’d been peering into with a noise of disappointment. “All my preparation and I forgot the pain medication. Pity. Well, the matter will be over quickly and you’ll be as good as new once I’ve replaced the subpar limb.”

“You’re not going to be ‘replacing’ anything, Slimelight! The Dark Lady has made it very clear that he’s not to be harmed!” A second Forsaken had appeared in the narrow doorway, much to Anduin’s relief, dressed in Mage’s robes of red and black and clutching a burning torch in such a way that made his intent to use it as a beating implement if need be plain.
“I’m not ‘hurting’ him, I’m helping him!” His captor protested. Light, he actually sounded rather offended. “His leg is unsalvageable and needs replacing. All I have to do is take it off, sew the new one on and he’ll be right as rain.”

“The living don’t work the same way that we do, maggot brain!” His savior retorted. “The sepsis would kill him, and that’s if he doesn’t bleed to death! Now let him go, or do I need to have the Banshee Queen come deal with you personally?”

“I was only trying to help!”

“And I’m grateful for that.” Anduin piped up, some of his usual tact returning as the shock began to ebb and his heartbeat to slow. “But he’s right. The shock of such an ‘operation’ would be a bit too much for my body to take, and at this point I’ve lived with my leg like this for so long that I wouldn’t know what to do with a working one so it’s really best we don’t proceed.”

“Oh, well…I suppose that’s understandable.” Marius said after a moment’s consideration, hauling him up from the chair which he’d pushed him into in the first place. “Would you like to take the spare regardless? In case you change your mind?”

Had he really just been asked if he wanted to take a severed leg with him? “…I think you’re better equipped to find someone who’d have more need of it, so it’s best I leave it with you.”

“Yes. Yes, of course.” The Forsaken said, once more beginning to babble excitedly. “I’ll keep it for one of my other customers. Should you ever reconsider, or require my services for another reason, I’ll be here. You’ll know where to find me?”

Anduin was quick to nod and reassure him. “I will. And I’ll be certain to keep that in mind for the future.”

“The Banshee Queen expects him, Marius. The King will be going now.”

Was it really that time already? Anduin hadn’t come any closer to finding the Cult of the Forgotten Shadow then he was at the start of the morning—though, admittedly, he could simply head to Deathknell if really need be—but the mild assault he’d just been through had left his desire to continue poking around the city’s darker corners dampened for the day and so the revelation of just how far time had flown came now as something of a relief.

“Thank you.” He said once the other Forsaken had led him back out into the War Quarter. “Though I’m sure Valeera would have stepped in before he could actually do anything your intervention is greatly appreciated.”

“No trouble.” He said. “Though the fool meant well, I assure you. It’s been so long many of us have forgotten the finer details of what it’s like to be alive: of how delicate the living can be.”

“They do say it’s the thought that counts, though I’ll admit the outcome was mildly traumatizing.” Anduin said. “Might I ask your name?”

“Gunther Arcanus.” The Forsaken informed him. “You may or may not have heard of me.”

“I recall having read something.” What had the name of the book been again? Losses of the Third War? “But it’s been so many years I don’t remember many details. You were a part of the Kirin Tor?”

“Prior to becoming a Necromancer and being lobbed out of their city, much like what happened to Kel’thuzad and his precious cat. The Scourge didn’t know what they were getting into when they
attempted to subdue me as it was simply done for a Lich of my power to break away.”

Lich? Anduin had been under the impression that Liches looked more…skeletal.

“I spent years under the belief that I was the only one until agents of the Forsaken proved that to be untrue. Being reunited with my friend Bethos was a relief; it’s still lonely, living like this, but it’s bearable when one doesn’t’ stand alone, squatting on an island surrounded by ghouls.”

Snickering, Anduin dipped his head as they reached the passage leading to the elevator. “We’d better not let Sylvanas overhear us talking about loneliness.” He said. “Far be it from me to prevent your Queen from being in denial if she wishes to be. It’s always the thankless jobs which are the most necessary.”

“They do claim such things, yes.” Gunther said, nodding. “Good luck with your hunt.”

“Thank you, Gunther. For your help and your escort.” Anduin stepped onto the stone platform once it had settled into place. “I hope we’ll find the time to speak again later.”

The rumbling grind of stone against stone as the platform rose up through the dark shaft quickly faded into the background noise. The young King idly rubbed at his wrist where he’d been grabbed but forced thoughts of the matter out of his mind: it wouldn’t do anything but lengthen the amount of time it took him to find comfort in his surroundings to dwell on it. Valeera lightly touched his back as the platform slowed and reached the top of the passage.

Pausing briefly to clear his lungs of the Undercity’s oppressive air, Anduin adjusted his grip on his cane and set Snowball down on the uneven stone.

“You stay in the ruins while we’re away; don’t go back down into the city until I come back ok?” Snowball mewed in response, yawned and then pranced away into the shadows. “They grow up so fast.”

“I think he ‘grew up’ in that respect before you found him, Anduin.” Valeera said. “He was a stray.”

“Even still, I can’t help the empty nest syndrome.” He grinned as she rolled her eyes at him and started down the hallway towards the glaring sunlight which filtered in from outside. “Shall we? We probably shouldn’t keep Sylvanas waiting too long and I’m really looking forward to visiting Gory’s farm.”

“Leave it to you to become fast friends with an Abomination.” Valeera said with a sigh.

“What can I say,” he chuckled, “I appreciate enthusiasm.”

After so long spent in the dim halls and rooms of Undercity it was blinding to step out into the light of day. Anduin raised a hand to shield his eyes as they adjusted to the brightness, overcast sky and crumbling walls coming slowly into focus. The Banshee Queen was astride Geryon with an assembled hunting party of Dark Rangers behind her, her red eyes gleaming from amidst the scattered ruins.

“Coming down, Wrynn?” she called. “If you’d prefer to stay here we’ll go hunting without you, though I’m sure Gory would be disappointed.”

“I’m coming.” He said, starting down the leaning staircase and setting out across the grey tinged grass. The Blighthounds which had been milling around the party instantly converged on him; approximately wolf-sized and with short muzzles filled with hooked teeth, it was relatively
concerning to have them snuffling at his clothes. Once they’d pronounced him tolerable with a low chuff and trotted back to where they’d been prior to his arrival, allowing Anduin to finally devote his attention to the fact that the space he’d expected to be occupied by Dreamer was instead held by a currently riderless skeletal horse draped in blue and gold.

“Your nag works well enough as a mount in most cases but were you to ride it today you’d only find yourself left behind.” Sylvanas informed him. “Eous will be able to keep pace with Geryon and the others.”

“Oh?” Anduin planted his foot in the left stirrup, took hold of the pommel and pulled himself up onto the steed’s bony back. The stiff, padded leather of the saddle which had been strapped to it prevented riding from being an exercise in discomfort. “Will we be having another race, then? An even footing with horses, may the best rider win?”

Sylvanas’ effort to control a smirk came just a moment too late. “Maybe later, Anduin, as we’re making our way back. Though I’d advise you to expect the same outcome as in Durotar.” She said. “Now go say goodbye to your Elf, Little Lion. We’re expected at the Writhing Haunt.”

“Anduin…”

“I’ll be alright, Valeera.” He said, looking down at where she stood from his perch atop the skeletal mount with what he hoped was a reassuring expression. “With my track record you’ve a right to worry for me, but as much as you may not want to acknowledge the fact there will be times where we won’t be together. But that doesn’t mean I won’t be protected. And I’m not helpless.”

“You being helpless isn’t a factor in this.” Valeera’s ears swiveled back. “I just don’t want to lose you too. House Wrynn is all I have, and you’re all that’s left of it.”

“Poor a choice as I may consider that, Sanguinar, you needn’t be concerned that my soon to be husband won’t be returning in one piece. We won’t be venturing anywhere near the Eastern Plaguelands and will be staying well clear of the scattered holdings of the Scarlet Lunatics; the most dangerous thing he’ll be coming into contact with is a potentially rabid fox so unless he shoots himself in the foot by mistake the worst he’ll be returned with is a few scuff marks.”

“I’ll be alright.” Anduin said. “Please don’t worry for me.”

“It’s impossible not to worry for you, little brother.” Valeera sighed before informing him in a half threatening tone “hurt yourself-.”

“And I’ll have you to answer to. Which truly is a terrifying prospect.” With a last smile the young King shifted his grip on the reins as Eous started into motion, following Geryon and the other horses with Nathanos’ hounds trotting around them. “I’ll see you in the evening.”

Valeera didn’t seem pleased with the concept and grumbled something noncommittal she still allowed him to walk away, and soon Anduin lost sight of his sister as they exited Lordaeron’s towering gate. Tirisfall Glades stretched before them, flowing plains of more grey tinged grass and sickly-looking pine trees. A green tinged haze hung stagnant between the earth and the ceiling which was formed by the clouds and off in the distance a zeppelin coasted in to dock at the tower. Something about the area warned of the Shadow but Anduin knew better than to follow that thread; wherever it might lead was nowhere good.

“King Wrynn?” He turned his head and was met with the blandly curious gaze of one of the handful of Dark Rangers making up the vast majority of the hunting party; he didn’t recognize her as either Lyana or Vorel. “You handle yourself well in the saddle and don’t seem unfamiliar with a
“It’s a common leisure activity for the nobility and helps to control the population of the dangerous creatures surrounding the settlements of Elwynn.” He said. “I haven’t done it often in recent years, either out of other obligation or a lack of desire to subject myself to unwanted company.”

The Dark Ranger tilted her head. “Unwanted company.”

“Anduin and his Kingdom’s House of Nobles don’t seem to get along.” Sylvanas said. “With how vicious some of his offhand comments about them can be one would think he finds sport in tormenting them. But that would clash with his ‘Light’s darling’ image so I can’t imagine it possibly being true.”

The sheer amount of sarcasm was perhaps a bit unnecessary. “Only the amount of sport that they deserve; it isn’t torment when it’s earned. It’s a punishment,” Anduin said. “A facet of Stormwind’s politics I’d hoped you’d join in on.”

“That would depend on how much else our months in your Kingdom have to keep me occupied.” She said. “Though, seeing as we’ve found ourselves in this position to begin with you seem to be doing well enough with wrangling them.”

“I can’t lord Onyxia over their heads forever,” Anduin said. “I sort of exhausted its potency with well, this.”

“They allowed a Black Dragon, the brood of Deathwing himself, to operate unhindered within Stormwind for years and indirectly nearly destroyed your Kingdom and killed both your father and you. There is no exhausting that.” Sylvanas told him. “Had they been among my Forsaken, the very least of their punishment would have been taken to Orgrimmar and hung by their toes from the great Wintersveil tree like ornaments!”

At the mental image of some of the less tolerable members of the House of Nobles finding themselves in that position the young King could barely contain an amused snort.

“Have you hunted with hounds before?” the Dark Ranger continued.

Aware of Nathanos’ baleful gaze on his back Anduin nodded. “On occasion. We’d use them with bears and other more dangerous game.” He said. “I’ve never been fox hunting before, though. There aren’t enough in Elwynn, and Redridge doesn’t quite have the right terrain.”

“The main focus for you will be in staying in that saddle; we’ll see just how skilled on horseback you really are once the hounds have been cast into a covert.” These were words which meant nothing to Anduin and he must have given the Dark Ranger some manner of blank stare because she elaborated further. “A covert is an area of undergrowth where foxes lay up in the day. Casting is when the hounds are released into a covert to chase them down.”

“So it’s a matter of cornering it and shooting?”

“We aren’t going to be shooting anything fool, unless our quarry goes to ground. In which case my hounds would have to dig it up first.” Nathanos snapped. “What kind of royal is clueless in a fox hunt?”

“My father did tell me that it was a staple of Lordaeric culture, but as I’ve already said we either lack the population or the terrain in the south.” Anduin said. “Do you boar hunt around here? If not, then your hounds will certainly find a painful challenge.”
Expectedly, a scoff was his only reply.

The Bulwark was a rough, gate like construction built from wood with the cooperative effort of the Forsaken and the Argent Crusade. The Paladins stationed there, clad in gleaming silver armor, observed them curiously, a few calling out greetings to Anduin as they passed and set out into the Western Plaguelands.

Anduin had confined himself to the grounds of Light’s Hope Chapel during his brief visit to the Eastern Plaguelands and thus hadn’t seen much to the area, but despite a lack of anything to really compare it to the Priest couldn’t help but be surprised by how verdant the area was. Though a few vague signs of the Plague’s presence still be seen in the slight warping of the bark of a tree or a few patches of grass which appeared a bit less healthy than those surrounding it, the land-at least on the surface—appeared well on its way to healing completely.

“The Argent Paladins and Cenarion Druids really have done an incredible job here.” He said, watching the spokes of Felstone Field’s massive windmill turn as they clattered down the road. “Let’s hope that this bodes well for our chances of healing Silithus.”

“If only because the death of the world beneath my feet boding ill for my intent to stay well clear of death, I’ll second that hope.” Sylvanas drawled. “We’ll have to pass through Andorhal to reach the Writhing Haunt; you’ll be pleased to know, I’m sure, that the city your Alliance tried to steal from beneath us is in the process of being rebuilt.”

“I’m ‘pleased to know’ that the two parties which have an equal claim to the area are finally doing what they should have from the beginning: coexisting.” Anduin said. “I promise to resist the urge to stop and speak with absolutely everyone so that we can get around to the hunt we came out for in good time.”

“We’ll have to wait and see if you actually manage to make good on that promise, won’t we?” Sylvanas said.

Andorhal had fallen into the same disrepair as most of the Plaguelands in the wake of the Third War, and the conflict with the Forsaken after the Cataclysm had ripped through the world hadn’t helped matters, but considering the small amount of time which had passed since the Accord had been signed the progress made by the town’s returning citizens was astounding. Anduin remained true to his word inspite of called greetings and a clear want to speak with him, offering smiles and waves and assurances of finding the time to talk in the future and they made it out of the town in good time. The Writhing Haunt really was almost directly behind the portion of the town which showed clear signs of inhabitation by the armies of the Forsaken; though the barn and farmhouse sitting on the outskirts of the property had been left in a state of falling to ruin but the field, though sloppily tilled, was overgrown with cornstalks that towered far above his head.

The Abomination had been eagerly awaiting their arrival, and on catching sight of them bounded over with a shocking alacrity for something so large and enough force to shake the earth beneath their feet.

“Gory has been waiting for pretty King since last night! Gory was very excited to hear that he was coming to see the farm that Gory’s old little farmer friends left him.” The Abomination boomed. “Before pretty King decided to marry angry Queen Gory was just growing corn for birds. Now he grows corn to give to people rebuilding town. Gory make new friends now. New friends who not die because they were killeded.” Reaching over with a massive, three fingered hand Gory pulled an ear of corn off of one of the nearest stalks and held it out him. “King try?”

Raw corn, as a rule, typically wasn’t the most appetizing thing in the world but Anduin hadn’t been
raised to be tactless so he took the corn and sank his teeth into it, holding back a wince as gravel like kernels exploded with a sweet, half chalky flavor. Failing to pick up on this, the Abomination was absolutely delighted and proceeded to drag the Priest around the property prattling on about anything that came to mind. Anduin bore this with his usual good grace and was ultimately let free with a bushel of corn which Gory helpfully tied to the back of Eous.

“You look like you’ve been forced to swallow a lemon, Anduin.” Sylvanas said. “Bad taste in your mouth?”

“I’m rather partial to corn, when it’s cooked.” He said, grimacing. “I’m not sure how I feel about it when it’s not. Regardless, fresh produce is always nice. Where is this covert that we’re going to be hunting in?”

“Just to the north of the Mender’s Stead.” Sylvanas said. “The road we’re looking for is just over here.”

Leaving the Writhing Haunt behind and passing by the Mender’s Stead, a much larger and more neatly grown farm which boasted varied crops such as pumpkins and apples and was tended to entirely by Druids, their party made their way up along the cobbled road. A few of the Druids who saw them stopped what they were doing to stare. Anduin assumed that it was likely quite a sight to see a lone Human comfortably dead center of a group of Dark Rangers and accompanied by the Banshee Queen herself. A black bird cackled in the canopy overhead before flittering away. A rabbit shot off into the tall grass and a handful of hounds went barreling after it, returning a few minutes later with nothing to show for their chase.

They left the road entirely at some point around midday just as the land began slopping upwards into a rather steep hill, the hooves of their mounts thudding against the hard ground. A thick copse of trees was visible in the distance, steadily growing closer, and the closer they got the less playful the hounds became until they were slinking through the grass which perked ears and raised hackles. All ten of them pounced forwards when a hunting horn was blown beside him, baying and howling as they plunged into the undergrowth with Nathanos and the Dark Rangers not far behind.

“Do try and keep up, Anduin.” Sylvanas said as Geryon sailed passed him. Grinning the young King urged Eous forward as well, ducking a low hung branch as the skeletal mount thundered into the copse of trees as well. Keeping low to the horse’s neck and balancing in the stirrups, Anduin changed his grip from the reigns to the beast’s knotted mane. Blue eyes swiftly looking over the obstacles in front of him. The young Priest swerved around a towering boulder and skirted a sweep of what may have been quicksand, catching up with the rest of the hunting party just as the pack broke out into a small clearing, driving a red fox before them.

“Not bad, Wrynn.” A tree had broken off at its base, its great trunk fallen across their path. The fox and then the hounds squeezed themselves beneath it but their only choice, baring doubling back and going around, was to go over it despite its size. Anduin knew just by looking at the girth of the trunk that it wasn’t a jump a living horse could make. “Let’s see how long you can keep it up.”

Anduin quickly realized that the fox hunt was really little more than a pretense for another of their competitions when Sylvanas left her Dark Rangers to continue the pursuit of the hounds, breaking away and heading deeper into the thickest part of the woodland they were riding through. Eous made a sound closer to a shriek than a whiney and tore after Geryon without any input being needed from the King. Along for the ride whether he wanted to be or not and not about to simply drop a challenge Anduin ducked another branch and urged his mount faster. Finding more success in closing the distance between them than he had while riding Dreamer and quickly drawing level
with Geryon’s back flank. With considerable trouble he managed to retain that position, and occasionally claw himself to a position a few inches in the lead, through leaping streams and skirting tree trunks, before finally breaking out into a shallow glen and slowing to a trot. “Would we call that my win?” Eous’ front hooves had broken free of the tree line just a split second prior to Geryon’s.

Sylvanas scoffed, smirking. “No, Anduin, at most we would call that a tie. You win nothing, but lose nothing either.” She said. “We may have to have that race simply to rectify that fact. Now, it seems our quarry has gone to ground. We should rejoin the hunt.” Nathanos and the other Dark Rangers had encircled the hole which the fox had sheltered in, the hounds which had cornered it well into the process of digging it out. Reminded of the last act of their hunt for Kichalo, Anduin pulled down his bow though he didn’t knock an arrow. The Banshee Queen had done much the same, red eyes fixed on the place where the fox was most likely to appear. “Pay attention, Little Lion, or you won’t get a shot in.”

“Won’t so many people shooting at a target ruin the trophy when it’s something so small?”

“This isn’t about a trophy.” Lifting her bow, she drew down on the hole. “This is hunting for the sake of it. This fox happened to get luckier than most, usually they’re torn apart by the hounds.”

Rather gruesome. If this was what fox hunting was maybe it was more of a relief than a shame that the sport wasn’t seen in the South. Perhaps hunting for the sake of a trophy wasn’t truly any better than hunting simply to kill but at least doing something with the body beyond leaving it in scraps to rot made him feel better about chasing down and killing something in the first place. Sighing, Anduin knocked the arrow he was holding on the string of his bow, but didn’t get the chance to draw it. Off in the near distance something howled, answered by another, and the mood around him instantly changed. The hounds stopped digging and raised their heads, snarling, and the Dark Rangers around him suddenly began to radiate an air of sharp hostility.

“Gotten lucky indeed.” Sylvanas lowered her bow only slightly, aim shifting from the hole to the trees around them. “It lives another day and we return to Undercity. I won’t risk your safety.”

“Though I do appreciate the thought, truly,” Anduin said, “I know how to handle wolves.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Wrynn, and those aren’t wolves.” Sylvanas snapped. “They’re Worgen, and they’ve caught our scent.”

“Worgen?” Were they Gilnean? Bloodfang? Feral? Anduin wasn’t certain which would be worse. Gilneans would confirm that Sylvanas was right, that Genn had sent soldiers after him and was perhaps behind the attack at Dolanaar as well and risked the chance that he’d be attacked by and forced to watch be harmed people who might once have been his friends. The Bloodfang would carry a high threat of him being killed, if what had been said about Ivar were true. And ferals would mean that he could well walk away a bit more fond of bloody steaks and moonlit howls himself, and something told him that would lead their pending marriage to quickly be called off.

“We’re going back, then?” his grip on the reigns tightened.

“Immediately. Stay close.” Sylvanas pulled Geryon around and commanded her horse into motion. “Dark Rangers, form up! Protect your King; we’re not going to give those mongrels what they want.”

There was no protest or hesitation, or even the slightest sign of complains from Nathanos who usually never missed a chance to make some sort of expression of disgust whenever Anduin was involved. The hunting party closed ranks, bows drawn and arrows bristling outwards. The hounds growled, teeth bared and hackles raised.
“How many are there, do you think?” Anduin asked as they headed back through the covert at a speed closer to a gallop than a trot. “Ten? Fifteen?”

“The number ultimately doesn’t matter, though if past encounters have taught us anything it’s that packs are never less than five.” She said. “Were you not here I’d send my Rangers to put them down, but doing so now would leave you exposed to attack and create a weakness those beasts could exploit. Though I doubt they’ll still be in the area by then, once we’re safely back in Tiriasfall Nathanos and the others will double back to take care of them: I refuse to allow their incursion into my lands to go unpunished.”

It wasn’t until they’d broken free of the trees and set out back across open ground that Anduin began to relax again, though his gaze continued to dart about their surroundings on occasion; his grip on his bow and arrow tight and a smite ready on his lips. And though every fiber of his being told him not to heed the curiosity, as the forest fell away behind them he couldn’t resist the urge to look back.

The young King couldn’t be certain, but he thought he saw a pair of baleful yellow eyes glaring out from just beyond the forest’s edge.
Scarlets in Silverpine

Chapter Notes

a bit early today; surprise.

They’d found tracks when they doubled back, close to twenty separate sets of paw prints clearly of Worgen origin, but had managed nothing else. They’d left behind no other traces, nothing to confirm their identities or allegiance, and that more than anything else had revealed them as Bloodfang’s pack in the eyes of Sylvanas and the Dark Rangers. Anduin had been summarily asked-read ordered-by both his soon to be wife and his guards to remain within the walls of Lordaeron while alone or within the boundaries of Tirissfall Glades while escorted for his own safety and the young King, not particularly keen on landing himself in the position of having to deal with his own personal furry little problem, had since been uncharacteristically cooperative of such measures which had, at first, led to an unreasonable uptick in suspicion from his protectors though that had since abated.

Beyond a brief excursion to Deathknell two days prior in order to finally establish contact with the Cult of Forgotten Shadow, which in turn had led to an interesting and minorly concerning conversation about Shadow Magic and the nature of the Void’s relationship to the Light the young King of Stormwind hadn’t ventured beyond the Ruins of Lordaeron again though he’d by no means been confined. Much had called for Sylvanas’ attention leaving Anduin with limited ability to try her patience, so he’d instead devoted himself to other pursuits, such as serving as an object of great intrigue for the four Val’kyr he’d seen in the Dark Lady’s throne room and numerous Banshees which had made for quite good conversation once the novelty of being forced to look through them rather than at them had worn off. He’d also spent a brief period of time, prior to being run off by Nathanos who insisted that his hounds would not be treated like house pets, playing fetch or fashioning toys for Snowball out of stitching likely meant for use in the crafting of Abominations. With only a day left before their tour came to an end and they’d return to Stormwind Anduin had finally found his way around to beginning the process of moving on the trapped souls of the fallen Kingdom.

Doing so, as it turned out, wasn’t as simple as he’d originally believed and the Priest had swiftly realized he’d need to have a bit more on hand than prayers to do the job but at least he could do something to ease their pain even slightly. They’d been skittish at first, scattering like fish in a shallow pond when he approached, but slowly reemerged after he’d seated himself on a bit of rubble and remained still for a while. The golden glow of the Light had drawn them in closer from there until, like sparrows seeking bread crumbs, they’d clustered around him, clinging to his clothing with spindly fingers and whispering things he couldn’t understand.

“You do seem to make friends everywhere you go, Anduin.” The Lich was instantly recognizable in his flaming red robes and pointed hat, the stooped form of Bethor not far behind. “Those spirits usually make themselves quite scarce whenever others come near. Though that could have something to do with the sheer number of hair brained adventurers’ intent on turning them into battle pets.”
As if to illustrate the Necromancer’s point the little spirits scattered again, though they soon clustered together again behind the rubble Anduin had perched on. Valeera peered briefly in their direction before going back to her efforts at enjoying the closest thing to a pillar of sunlight slanting down through the clouds that they’d seen since they’d gotten there. Anduin got to his feet with a smile. “Gunther. And Bethor as well. It’s good to see the both of you again. I’ve enjoyed our conversations so far, brief as they’ve been, and had hoped to get another chance to speak with you before we returned to Stormwind.”

“There’s always something which requires a teacher’s attention, be it fledgling Mages or fledgling Necromancers.” Gunther said, shaking his head.

“At least your students aren’t prone to leaving the entire Magic Quarter snowbound for weeks on end.” Bethor said. “I’d much rather have to deal with the occasional rogue ghoul than risk the Dark Lady’s ire for unnecessarily manipulating the city’s climate.”

“I wouldn’t be terribly worried; Sylvanas, it turns out, is quite fond of snowball fights at least when they offer her the chance to pummel me and my Alliance.”

Bethor sent him a look which made it plain he didn’t quite know what to make of such claims. “The Banshee Queen participated in a snowball fight?”

“The Banshee Queen started a snowball fight.” And she’d finished it too but that was beside the point.

“And how did that go?” Gunther asked.

“Horde: one Alliance: zero for the moment.” Anduin admitted with a shrug. “I’m going to do what I can to make it a faction wide yearly event, maybe taking place in Alterac Valley or Winterspring. If nothing else, it will serve as a pressure valve.”

A commotion from the nearby gate ended their conversation there, the spirits skittering away in alarm and vanishing behind the bits of ruin dashed throughout the area. Valeera appeared beside him, daggers in hand, and Anduin’s own hand fell to Shalamayne’s hilt which he’d taken to carrying with him whenever he came up from the Undercity. A moment later the source of the noise came into view: a Dread Guard carrying another wounded Forsaken and running up the broken path.

Inspite of the dreariness of the area leeching deep into his lamed leg Anduin was heading towards the pair at the swiftest pace he could manage without a beat of hesitation, the Light sparking at his fingers before he quickly thought better of it and allowed the golden glow to fade. “Lay him down, quickly; wherever it’s flat. I need to see to his wounds!”

Apparently not having expected to be jumped by a healer the Dread Guard stared blankly at him for a few moments before doing as had been instructed. Lamed leg screaming in protest Anduin fell to his knees, skidding to a stop with enough force to open tracks in his good pants. Admittedly it wasn’t quite what he was used to, given that glaringly fatal wounds to the living were simply facts of life for the Undead and he was forced to contain the instinct to attempt to undo damage which would only lead to a waste of his energy but once he’d managed to do so the Priest quickly discovered the cause of Forsaken’s state.

Burns. Massive, silvered splashes splattered across every inch of open flesh and with recognizable traces of Holy Magic still lingering. Whoever had attacked them had been a Paladin or a Priest. A Light wielder. Like him.
“Those damned Scarlet. Not again.” Bethor drawled from behind him. “No matter what we do, how many times we go into that bleeding monastery, how many half-baked ‘heroes’ we throw at them we never quite manage to get rid of them.”

“They must be a part of the patrols in Silverpine Forest.” Gunther said. “The retreat of the Worgen was by no means a victory; even after Bloodfang left the fighting wasn’t done. Their mad order swooped in like vultures to prey on the chaos and have since entrenched themselves on Fenris Isle. Things have only gotten worse since then.”

“The Scarlet Crusade.” Anduin’s fingers curled into fists. “Zealots, the lot of them. They always claim, to be the closest to the Light and yet in reality are the furthest from it.”

“You can’t use the Light on him, Anduin.” Valeera said. “You’ll only do more damage.”

“I know.” He said, reaching into himself and finding the shadow instead of the Light. “I’m not terribly well versed with Shadowmend but it’s the only spell I have at hand that will lend any aid, and at least I can do something to give him a better chance to reach someone who does know what they’re doing.” Cold, violet magic curled around his fingertips, wholly different than the Light. Tar like and sluggish, resistant to his direction and only reluctantly obedient. Pushing the spell as far as it would go before releasing it and sitting back on his haunches. “Where were you attacked?”

“Not far from the border between Tirisfal and Silverpine.” The Dread Guard said.

“Can you take me there?”

“Anduin-!”

Blue eyes turned on her, open and earnest. “Valeera, I need to do this. They’re my people as much as Stormwind and the Scarlet have proven themselves a menace for years. Helping them now will do leaps and bounds to improve my standing here and someone has to do it.”

“Someone, yes. But ‘someone’ doesn’t have to be you.” Valeera said. “Please, Anduin. For once don’t go running off into danger alone.”

“I never said that I was going alone. You and I, this Dread Guard and a number more we’re certain to encounter along the way. That’s about the size of a group of adventurers.”

“You’re not an adventurer Anduin, you’re the High King!” Valeera said, pleading. Already aware that she was wasting her breath. “Sometimes I wonder if you understand that.”

“I do understand that. But I also understand that this isn’t something that I can just decide not to do.” His tone became firm. “Are you coming with me or not?”

Clearly not pleased but well aware that there was little which could be done to sway him Valeera sighed, ears pinned back and expression scrunched. “You stay within reaching distance, am I understood?”

His answering smile was brief, rapidly transforming into dire seriousness as he turned his focus back to the Dreadguard. “Can you take me to where he was attacked?” worded like a question but spoken with a tone that clearly wasn’t. With what he’d been told about the Forsaken it was still a fifty-fifty shot at best that he’d be listened to, but after another moment and with what almost looked like a put-upon shrug, the Dreadguard nodded.

“The bat that I rode in on is just outside the walls…King Wrynn.”
“Can it carry three?” he asked.

“Not safely."

“Good enough.” Cane clacking against the ground Anduin took off running for the gate with Valeera just behind. “Let’s go!”

“Are we just going to let him go?” Bethor demanded, motioning almost helplessly after the rapidly retreating figure. “The Dark Lady has made it explicitly clear she doesn’t want him leaving Tirisfall until tomorrow, and would prefer he remained in Undercity. Even without considering the fact that those mutts are still out there the Scarlet Crusade are a far cry from ‘safe’. All that they see beyond their own is undeath, Light wielder or not.”

“We’re not just going to let him go, no.” Gunther started back towards the elevator leading into the city below. “But we’re not going to waste time attempting to chase down a bat on foot either. It’s better that the Banshee Queen be made aware of matters as immediately as possible; she’ll likely want to send the Dark Rangers to retrieve him. We should also make one of the Death Priests aware that there’s a Dread Guard in need of treatment.”

“I’ll happily handle that,” the Mage said, “which means you get to explain this to Sylvanas.”

“With his reputation for hunting down trouble no matter how hard it tries to hide,” Gunther said with a heavy sigh, “I think we all knew that something like this was only a matter of time.”

The elevator ride down into the Undercity seemed to take longer than usual and the pair parted ways at the bottom of the shaft, Bethor making a swift retreat before his friend could change his mind about potentially taking the blast. Rolling his eyes, the Lich made his way towards the Royal Quarter at an urgent enough speed to attract the attention of some of the Royal Guard though none of them attempted to prevent his passing. Sylvanas lounged on her throne, the picture of boredom as she half-listened to the droning of an Apothecary while shooting occasional brief glances at the empty throne beside her. She silenced the Apothecary on catching sight of him and turned her head.

“I expect you have a good reason for this interruption, Arcanus.”

“Anduin’s run off, my Lady, with Sanguinar and one of the Dread Guards.”

A vague noise of acknowledgement. “I knew that Wrynn could only bare to behave himself for so long.” She said. “Where has he gone? Brill? Back to Deathknell, perhaps?”

“To Silverpine.” He said. “He’s taken the matter of the Scarlet Crusade into his own hands.”

“The Scarlet Crusade?” the clawed tips of her gauntlets bit into the gilded arms of the throne as she wrenched herself to her feet. “And you allowed him to go running headlong into a situation where he’d be up to his neck in frothing zealots? I thought I made it clear I wanted him safe!”

“I’ll inform the fool’s guard, my Lady.” Nathanos said.

“No, Blightcaller; if they can’t keep an eye on their King to begin with they can’t be trusted to retrieve him in a timely manner.” Sylvanas snapped, leaving the Apothecary where they stood without so much as a dismissal and starting towards the passageway. “Collect Lyana and Vorel and meet me at the stables. Even with a headstart our horses can easily outstrip Wrynn’s.”

“He took a bat, my Lady. Three to the same mount.”
Leave it to Anduin to not only barrel into danger but do so on a mount so over its capacity that making it to said danger would be a miracle in and of itself. “Catch up once you’ve found them.”

“As you wish.”

No questions were asked as she rushed to the city’s Trade District and commandeered the first bat she could stand to get her hands on, though there was little doubt in her mind that plenty of questions existed especially seeing as flying wasn’t something she often bothered with. Not with such haste. It wasn’t until she was out of the city and headed towards the South that she stopped to consider exactly what she was doing or, more accurately, why. What was the strange urgency boiling her blood at the mere suggestion that that fool could possibly have gotten himself into a potentially life-threatening danger? Could it really be that she was, of all things, concerned for him?

No. No, of course not. Even considering such a thing was patently ridiculous! As much as his presence was a-somewhat lessened-annoyance she’d since grown used to it and the lack of him constantly being underfoot would be noticed but not missed. It was a product of at risk pride and nothing more: if he was going to get himself killed that was his concern, but she wouldn’t allow Anduin to fall to an old enemy, be they zealots or mongrels.

The trees whizzing by below thickened and grew taller as the border between Tirisfall and Silverpine came and went. The provisional walls and gratings of the Rear Guard was barely noticeable among the thick grown grass and thorn vines which had all but consumed the rutted roads. Shoreline dipped into the rippling pale blue waters of the lake surrounding the half crescent of Fenris Isle, the crumbling fortress and village erected atop it years ago heavily drapped in banners baring the red flame of the Scarlet Crusade. Crimson eyes scanned the area below for any signs of his having been there; she didn’t have to look far.

Scarlets were streaming from the fortress and ruins like worker ants from a broken hive towards some not yet visible clash on the Isle’s eastern side. Over the gentle curve of the shield of earth and grass, a column of white fire lanced down from the sky in the same display she’d seen in the ambush outside of Dolanaar. Pulling the bat around and forcing it lower, Sylvanas pulled down her bow as the slope of the isle’s side fell away behind her.

He may not have had the natural aptitude with a blade or years of experience on the battle field that his father had, but nevertheless the countless hours of training he must surely have gone through to learn what it took to lead a force in battle hadn’t been entirely wasted and though his methods lacked sorely in finesse they were effective enough. And where her relatively offhand comment about the doom of any future he might have had as a Paladin, largely owing to his clunky sword work, still remained mostly true clearly, when pushed far enough, he came quietly naturally by Avenging Wrath. Wings of golden light flared from his back, mantled and gleaming as he flung Smites and Penances around like treats at a parade.

The Scarlets they were facing seemed about as sure of what to do in the face of him as the small group of her Forsaken he’d managed to muster to his mad cap effort—a few still sent him half-nervous glances every once in a while as if expecting the next punishing blast of Holy magic to be aimed at them—and most simply ran at him after a brief hesitation, for the large part then to end up quite familiar with the sharper end of Shalamayne. What few of them proved marginally smarter than that were swiftly taken care of by Valeera, who somehow managed to remain nearly invisible even when Sylvanas knew to look for her.

“Wrynn!” Pegging three on her way down and a forth once she’d rolled onto her feet Sylvanas rounded on him with a glare. “I should have known better than to take my eyes off you, especially
when you were cooperating!”

Wiping blood from his blade he turned his head, blue eyes misted over with white radiance. “You know me and trouble. I simply can’t resist the occasional date.”

“Well, from now on you’re to take me with you on these ‘dates’! You’re bound to get yourself killed!”

A crusader lunged at him from the side and Anduin pivoted, blocking the strike and kicking him away only to immediately recoil in pain and almost go down. “I’d be careful if I were you.” Wincing through a smile, healing magic at his fingertips, he rested the hand not busy with his weapon against his lamed leg. “You sounded like you were genuinely worried for me for a moment there. And if we can’t have an insinuation that you might actually enjoy my company we certainly can’t be having that.”

“What we ‘can’t have’ is anymore of this behavior. But seeing as you’ve already stuck your nose into this matter I don’t see any reason for you not to stick around and see it to its end.” She said. “Nathanos should be arriving with Lyana and Vorel any moment now. Once they’ve joined us we’ll push forward into the keep and dispatch their leader. Such measures will in no way get rid of them, but it will serve to lessen their menace. At least for a short time.”

“I’m surprised that they’re not with you.”

“Lyana and Vorel weren’t nearby when Arcanus informed me of what you’d taken it upon yourself to do. I am able to take care of myself and require no protection, especially not in my own lands. You, however…”

“So, in other words,” Anduin said, a full-fledged grin spreading across his face that highlighted the smear of blood across his cheek, “you were worried about me.”

Sylvanas offered no acknowledgement to that statement, simply allowing it to drop between them like a stone in favor of devoting her attention to the three rapidly approaching bats. “There they are now. And the flow of crazed Paladins is slowing down.” Red eyes found him again. “How bad is the pain?”

“Pain?” he repeated, eyebrows knitting together in confusion.

“Your leg, Wrynn! How bad is the pain?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m not in any pain at all.” An obvious lie, both in the set of his features and the fact that his attempt to cast another heal on himself covertly fell quite flat. “We’re moving on the keep, then?”

The Banshee Queen nodded. “Yes. The others will meet us over the wall.” She started up the slope of the hill at a run, clearing their path with a hail of black arrows. After alerting Valeera to the planned change of venue Anduin followed albeit much slower and with a limp which was quite pronounced. A pity, Sylvanas thought, that that expansive set of wings were useless beyond an outward expression of righteous fury finally brimming over.

He was only halfway up the hill by the time she reached the base of the crumbling wall. Nathanos and the others had already gone over the other side. It would have been simple to follow them; to clear the whole of the keep and leave him to find his own way in. The only visible entrance required one to scale a pile of rubble which was, perhaps, a bit too much for his crippled leg. Leaving him was the smarter choice all things considered, time especially, and it wasn’t as if he
was undefended. By now most of the island’s hostile population had been obliterated either way.

Nathanos had made the shorter scramble up the opposite side and now stood waiting for her, impatience on his face as his gaze briefly returned to Anduin. They could have been done there by now, she knew. The entire premises emptied twice over before he even reached the crest of the hill. There wouldn’t have been a hint of hesitation before; no concern. The slow and the weak were left behind to fend for themselves or die if they couldn’t.

She turned back and briefly, as she did so, caught a flicker of dismay on her Champion’s face before his expression smoothed over back into its usual mask of control. Anduin was limping the last few yards now, Valeera hovering just behind his shoulder as if expecting him to collapse at any moment. In honesty, with the set of pain on his face and the fact he’d begun lightly quaking it wasn’t a concern that was terribly off base. Still the Priest didn’t allow himself to slow down, shoving the blade in his hand back into his belt and beginning the effort to drag himself up onto the collapse. Mounting the slide of rock and timber herself with a great deal more ease Sylvanas seized him by his wrists and, with assistance from Valeera, managed to half-drag himself up the collapse and down the other side.

At this point he could no longer stand, wings disappearing as indignation gave way to exhaustion and pain. Face creasing with concentration as he funneled another stronger spell into the old injuries.

“Every moment we waste here gives them another chance to regroup and ambush us.” Nathanos snarled. “Leave that waste of time with the Rogue to lick his wounds. All he’s good for is slowing us down.”

“He’s right.” Eyes half unfocused with pain he looked up from his position kneeling on the ground. “Running off like that was stupid; I should have thought more. As much as I might like to pretend otherwise I’m not capable of what I might have been had I not been crushed by that bell.” He said. “I’ll be fine out here, between Valeera and the Dread Guards we left outside. And it’s not as if you need my help.”

“At least he’s not completely brainless!” Nathanos hissed bitterly. “Lyana-.”

“No.”

“My Lady!”

“We’re not leaving you out here, Wrynn. You started this and you’re going to finish it, even if we have to stand out here waiting all night.” Sylvanas said. “I’m not about to allow you to quit now, after forcing me to drag you up that collapsed wall, all because you’re in a bit of pain. Numb yourself and get up.”

Valeera glared but said nothing. After another moment, Anduin sighed and nodded. “Give me a moment. It shouldn’t take too long to patch things up on a temporary basis.” He’d be paying for it for weeks to come with a plague of chronic pain, he knew that full well, but at this point it couldn’t be helped. There was really only so much he could do especially in so short a time and in such an environment, the pain ebbing only slightly and leaving his teeth still on edge, but he could stand and that was what mattered.

Nathanos was very much not pleased with the situation, that much was evident, but Anduin supposed that wasn’t really his foremost concern at current.

“Alright.” He gingerly rose to his feet and set weight against his leg. “We can continue now.
Though I’ll certainly need to see a healer when we get back to Stormwind.”

“I’m sure that whatever poor bastard you’ve employed as the royal medic will be in no way surprised to see you, nor to learn what led to you straining your injury.” Sylvanas turned away from him and started towards the keep’s doorway. Undefended, though whether that was the norm or a product of the toll their visit had taken on their forces in the area Anduin had no way of knowing. Either way, they were able to simply walk in uncontested.

They weren’t presented with much choice of where to go from there. Portions of the structure had collapsed over the years, leading half the entry way and the stairwell into the basement blocked off. Funneled upwards onto the second floor and then the third they met with sparse and easily overwhelmed resistance. It wasn’t until they made it to the keep’s uppermost level, when the floor plan opened up from claustrophobic halls into an open floor plan, that they came face to face with their leader.

Square shouldered and towering and clad head to toe in scarlet plate, small pig-like eyes glared out at them from slits in the man’s helm. Slowly, radiating menace, he splayed his hands against the table that he sat behind and pushed himself to his feet revealing the claymore strapped across his back.

“By the Light,” Valeera hissed in alarm, “with height like that he’s got to be half-ogre!”

“I’d heard rumors it was possible that some among the most powerful undead among the Scourge possessed the capacity to enslave the Light with their unholy magics but I hadn’t thought it true until today.” He growled. “You may have managed to cut your way through my forces, but your reign of terror stops here.”

“The terror that will be stopping here is yours.” Anduin said. “The world isn’t divided into the Scarlet Crusade and the Scourge, and where beating back the forces of the Lich King is a noble pursuit not all undead are a part of the Scourge. Some of them are simply trying to eke out a new existence as what a monster turned them into; they’re innocents who didn’t want this and you’re attacking unprovoked!”

“Scourge or not, undeath is a blight upon this world that needs to be eradicated. If you’re not Scarlet and you’re not one of them then you’re a sympathizer of them and that’s even worse! It makes you a traitor.” He grunted. “They don’t deserve to exist, there’s no place for them in this world, and if you’d protect them then there’s no place for you either.”

Blue eyes narrowed. “That’s not your choice to make.”

“Enough talk!” Anduin may never have had a terrible knack for being a warrior himself, but he’d spent enough time around them through the years to be able to predict a charge before it came. The arcing sweep of the claymore was met with a glowing wall that shook beneath the blow but didn’t break. “How dare you stand with them and use that power. You sully the Light with your filthy hands and fetid tongue!”

“Which speaks nothing to what your order does to the good name of Priests and Paladins everywhere. It’s almost impossible to believe that you’re an offshoot of the Silver Hand.” He said, straining against the increasing pressure of the massive blade against his shield. “On a different note, I suppose it would in no way help your opinion of me to know where my ‘hands and tongue’ may or may not have been. Or that, at least in name, I’ll be the Forsaken’s King by the end of the coming week.”

“Come out from behind that shield, Priestling. You weren’t cowering in the face of my men earlier.
Don’t tell me you’re scared of a real fight.”

“I’m not sure I’d call a confrontation between the two of us ‘a real fight’. But that’s really beside the point.” Anduin said. “Far be it from me to chide your tunnel vision but I’m just the distraction.”

Valeera was on his back a moment later, daggers throwing up sparks as she wedged their blades into the chinks in the man’s armor and twisted until one of his plates peeled back before leaping off him and out of reach. The Scarlet rounded on her with a roar like a bull but didn’t get the chance to take a step before the Banshee Queen and all three of her Dark Rangers fired. Whatever poison or magic was on the heads of their arrows was incredibly fast acting, because it wasn’t more than a moment later that the man fell with a heavy thump and didn’t move again.

Bowing his head, Anduin averted his eyes and allowed his shield to crumble.

“The Scarlets have been done away with and your little adventure is at end.” Sylvanas returned her bow to its place across her back. “Satisfied?”

“I wouldn’t say so, no. Mad or not, dangerous or not, those were Human lives. Regardless of the necessity of this I don’t feel good about it.” He said. “But I have had my fill of action for the day.”

“Good, because we’ll be returning to the Undercity soon.” She turned towards the doorway. “But first, you’re going to ride with me to the Sepulcher. We won’t be disturbed there.”


“Because it’s time I answered your question.”

“Anduin-.” Valeera said.

“I’ll be alright. And there won’t be any more fighting and very little walking so my leg will be alright as well.” He said. “You should probably let Gideon and the others know that I’m alright. They’re probably worried for me.” He turned to Sylvanas as they reached the first stairwell and said “I’m surprised they didn’t insist on coming along.”

“They weren’t informed.” She told him. “With your tendencies it’s best I prove able to go after you myself as soon as possible. And I’ve never had a need for guards and protections beyond as a point of formality as I’m perfectly able to protect myself.”

“I’ll tell them.” Valeera agreed, though somewhat reluctantly, as she shoved her daggers back into her belt. “I’m sure that Gideon, at least, will want to respectfully demand you don’t do this again.”

Anduin sent the ragged ramp of stone and timber and half-critical stare. “Yes, I think you’re right about that.” He said. “If I tried to climb that now, even with help, it would take until the wedding.”

“I don’t think your Kingdom would be particularly pleased to learn that their beloved regent wasn’t present for an important event he’s meant to be at the center of because he’s still trying to crest a pile of rubble.” Sylvanas said. “One to a bat this time. Even if we are only going to the opposite bank I don’t want to have to waste time fishing you out of the lake.”

“I’d rather avoid a swim at the moment myself, so I think I’ll take that advice.” Anduin reached up to grab a firm handful of the bat’s fur and pulled himself up onto its back. “And, in honesty, the flight in was a bit hectic.”

“Hectic.” Sylvanas repeated tartly. “That’s a bit kind.”
“Perhaps.” A small smile tugged at his lips. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

The flight from Fenris Isle to the opposite bank lasted only the better part of a minute at which point the young King and the Banshee Queen parted with the rest of their body and changed mounts. Where the skeletal horses they found waiting for them had come from Anduin wasn’t certain but supposed it wasn’t a matter important enough to ask about.

“The Sepulcher isn’t far.” Sylvanas steered her mount up the slope of the bank. “We’ll follow the road. Stay close.”

Situating himself in the saddle in the manner which caused the least strain on his aching leg, Anduin urged his horse forward and fell into step beside her. The sun hung halfway over the horizon and evening had begun to tint everything around them in deep shades of purple. The hooves of their mounts thudded over grassy ground and up onto the rutted road.

“Sylvanas Windrunner, Ranger General of Silvermoon and Sylvanas Windrunner, Banshee Queen of the Forsaken are two wholly different people. Unrecognizable to many including, I suspect, my dear sisters. When I look back on my life I see a fool, for many different reasons not the least of which being that my death came playing the hero.”

“‘Playing the hero’ implies vanity and needlessness.” Anduin said. “Maybe the story I’ve heard isn’t true, but from what I was told you fell protecting your people from a monster. Sacrificed yourself to save-.”

“I saved nothing, Anduin! Silvermoon was left in ruins; the Sunwell was destroyed; my people were almost entirely wiped out! It was all for nothing!”

“At least you tried.” He said. “That’s more than 95% of people alive could say.”

“Yes. But did you ever stop to wonder, Wrynn, if that might be why they’re still alive.” She snapped. “My people learned nothing from the Orc’s invasion of our homeland and deluded ourselves into the belief that our Runestones would protect us. This time we were betrayed not by the Trolls but by one of our own: Darkon Drethir. When our wards came down the Scourge fell upon our lands like locusts, tainting everything they touched for decades to come. My Rangers and I attempted to hold them back but we were cut off and surrounded on all sides. Pinned down. Every outrider I sent for aid was slaughtered. Finally I was given no choice but to face him myself and my pride was my undoing. I was not prepared for Frostmourne and was quickly felled, but my death was not enough for the man child who would soon fashion himself as Lich King. I’d spited him with my resistance, so he tore away my soul and raised me as a Banshee. Locking my body away in a trunk both as a taunt and as a sick trophy. But the Lich King’s power began to fade soon after and Arthas was forced to return to the crown of the world with his tail between his legs to rescue his master from the mad half-demon.”

“And that was when you broke away and freed the Forsaken?”

Sylvanas nodded. “Once I’d reclaimed my body, yes. My effort to trap and kill the Death Knight whelp fell through when Kel’thuzad rescued him in the nick of time but vengeance would still come. Delayed, but not denied. With the assistance of the Dreadlord Varimathras, a serpent of a Demon who later betrayed me and was behind the incident at the Wrath Gate which almost lost my people their place in the Horde and would have doomed us all.”

“A Demon? Betrayed you?” Anduin injected perhaps a bit too much false surprise into his voice.
“My word.”

“Yes, Wrynn, I’m well aware I should have seen it coming.” She snapped. “Turn here.”

A broken, curving path led off from the main road and through the lopsided gate of a wrought iron fence. Gravestones dotted the area, some partially sunken into the earth or standing lopsided and others with faces worn blank by age. Crumbling mausoleums crouched atop the roiling hills like malformed sentries. Sylvanas dismounted with the clink of mail and no explanation and Anduin followed suit, out of curiosity if nothing else.

He didn’t make it far before the ground gave way beneath him, swallowing his left foot, and he found himself staring up at the sky in confused alarm. Sylvanas looked down at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Fond as I’m aware you are of poking fun at the concept of your own death, ‘one foot in the grave’ isn’t meant to be taken this literally.” He took the hand she offered and was hauled back onto his feet. “Watch your step. Most of these are hollow.”

“Thanks for the warning.” He said, a bit more mindful of where he was setting his feet. “As for not being meant to take things literally, I do a lot of things I’m likely not meant to.”

“And say a lot of things those around you wish you wouldn’t.” Sylvanas said.

“They do say that that’s the mark of a long-lasting relationship.”

“Oh?” she turned back to him. “What would that be?”

“A 50/50 shot that, whenever they open their mouth, you want to slap them.” His smirk was slightly lopsided.

“50/50?” Red eyes fluorescing in the half-dark, she draped her arms around his shoulders and ran the talons on her gauntlets lightly up his spine. “I want to slap you 95% of the time, regardless of whether or not you’ve opened your mouth first.”

“Only 95% of the time?” he said. “What about the other five?”

“I employ another means to shut you up.” The hand on the back of his neck slid up into his hair and pulled him down to her. His arms wound around her waist and pulled her closer, a soft chuckle rumbling in his throat. “Some would say it’s more affective.”

“I’d agree with some.”

“Certainly.” With a practiced motion she hooked one finger in his hair band and tugged it free, stepping out of reach immediately after. “It’d be in your best interest to advocate for the less painful option.”

“I thought I was a masochist.”

“Selectively, perhaps.”

“Perhaps.” He stepped forwards, smiling, and extended a hand. “My tie?”

“You want it back?” feigned surprise.

“I’d appreciate its return, yes.”
“Well, Little Lion, if you really want it back you’re going to have to come and take it.” Dropping her hood, smirking all the while, Sylvanas pulled back her long hair and secured it into place. “Not a hairstyle I often employ but it’s said that change is good. Perhaps I’ll keep it this way. What say you?” with a last challenging glance she darted away into the deepening shadows.

“Hey!” Snickering Anduin started after her, somewhat impeded on his aching leg. “Come back!”

He chased her through the low light and sinking gravestones, up and around to the foot of the largest mausoleum in the cemetery. When Anduin caught her, laughing, against the pitted stone wall and managed to retrieve his tie he was well aware that it was only because she’d allowed him to.

“We should head back, Anduin.” Sylvanas said, watching him tie his hair back. “We already won’t make it back to Rear Guard before nightfall, and we can’t allow ourselves to forget that those mongrels are still out there.”

“You’re right. And I think I’ve kept Gideon waiting long enough.” He said. “Ladies first?”

“Someone needs to make sure you don’t fall into another grave.”

As they started down the hill, neither of them noticed the lurking Worgen slink away into the gathering night.
Welcome to the Lion's Den

Chapter Notes

Early again but i know i'll be straight up dead tomorrow because tests are the source of all evil so i figured i'd go ahead and throw the new chapter up here now.

Snowball was fast asleep inside his carrier and Anduin couldn’t help but wish that he could be that calm. Their tour, for all intents and purposes, was over. They’d be returning to Stormwind this morning and most of that time would be spent overseeing, or perhaps more accurately being subjected to, the final stages of preparation prior to their wedding. It was time to face the music, as it were. To suffer the consequences of his decision, made with only the best interests of Stormwind and the Alliance at heart. The question of what his people might think of his choice had been doggedly pursuing him since the day he’d sent the formal proposal but, up until now, it had been something he’d succeeded in fending off with the assured serenity of the knowledge that it could be dealt with later.

Unfortunately, now, ‘later’ had arrived. He’d come to the bridge that he had no choice but to cross, and for all he knew he was overreacting but there was an equally good chance that the lattice boards were crocolisks in disguise. His people cared for him, trusted him and knew that nothing he’d do would put himself or his reign before them but they’d lost so much to the Horde throughout the years. To the Orcs especially during the First and Second wars. Wives and husbands. Parents and children. Home and hearth and dignity. And now he’d be marrying their Warchief, asking that they call her Queen, bringing the Horde not to what might have been seen as ‘justice’ but into their city as friends. The possibility of an end to the House of Wrynn via wide spread revolt loomed large, if perhaps starkly overblown, and it was difficult to resist the urge to start biting his nails.

“Are you panicking?” Valeera raised an eyebrow.

Anduin pulled his gaze away from the crated cat in his lap. “No.”

“You’re panicking.” He couldn’t convincingly talk his way out of it. Anduin sighed. “Let me guess, you’ve suddenly come by the fear that your adoring subjects whom you’ve never done anything but love to pieces and run yourself ragged to help have turned on you for the great crime of lying down on the altar of the ‘greater good’ for their sake and that we’ll return to find Stormwind aflame, under some sort of twisted martial law and inhabited by cats and goats living together in total anarchy?”

“In less floral terms.” The young King struggled to swallow down the urge to vomit out of nerves.

“It’s baseless, Anduin.” Crossing the room, Valeera sat down beside him and threw an arm around his shoulders. “Shaw would have made sure we knew long before now if anything like that was going on. I think a much more accurate concern is that you’ll be swarmed by the public to the point where you can’t move an inch through the streets.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I know I’m right.” She pushed his bangs back from his face and held him closer. “You’re the most
beloved King in Stormwind’s history. As far as the vast majority of the population of your
kingdom seems to be concerned you’re the physical embodiment of the Holy Light itself and can
do no wrong.”

He chuckled in spite of himself. “I wouldn’t quite go that far.”

“Maybe not.” She rose to her feet. “But even still I’m certain everything will turn out ok. Just you
wait. Are you packed?”

He nodded. “Yeah.” Gloved fingers fiddled with the handle on top of the carrier in his lap. “I didn’t
really sleep last night. Too busy worrying. And…rather than just stand around staring at the ceiling
I figured I’d do something productive.”

“Understandable.” She said. “Ready to go home?”

“I think we all are.” Anduin told her, getting up as well. “The Forsaken aren’t deserving of much of
their reputation, at least as far as I’ve seen, but the Undercity itself is undeniably an acquired taste.
And as fond as I am of travel and exploration it’ll be nice to finally get back home.”

“Even knowing that a little over half the House of Nobles is lying in wait to use you as a pinup
doll?”

Anduin heaved a heavy sigh, another reluctant smile tugging at his lips. “Please,” he said, “don’t
remind me. Count Ridgewell and Lord Hale must be slavering at the bit to lock me in the lion
bucket purely out of spite.”

“You’ll only have to wear it for the actual ceremony, which spares you the helm at least. You’ll be
given the chance to exchange for something she can more easily rip off you once the reception
starts.” Valeera’s tone suddenly reminded him a great deal of the one that his father had used
whenever his friendship with Wrathion was brought up. “The Ladies of the House of Nobles are,
I’m sure, notably less thrilled. I’m sure Sylvanas won’t waste a moment whipping them into
shape.”

“If only I could have such success with their husbands.”

“She can probably help with that by going through their wives, but I’m sure you’d have to do a
little more than just ask nicely to receive that in return.” She said tartly. “Gideon has all of the
information regarding the schedule, so we should probably speak with him before the portal opens
in the next…two minutes.”

“I’m right behind you.” After a week in the Undercity Anduin had begun becoming used to what
life would be like among the undead, and had begun to have success in making friends there, but it
would come as nothing short of a relief to return to Stormwind. Not only because it was his home
but because it offered sunlight as something difficult to escape from rather than something difficult
to find. And even if it meant a return to the politics and the paperwork, Anduin was looking
forward to a return to normalcy.

And yet that traitorous, niggling sensation that he’d promptly be trussed up and tossed into a canal
refused to leave him.

His guards had already gathered in the Magic Quarter, the cart filled with everything they’d be
taken with them short of the cratered kitten still in Anduin’s arms. As to be expected Sylvanas and
her party were already present, along with Gunther and Bethos whom the Priest assumed were
there both to bid them farewell and to open the portal.
“Your Majesty,” Gideon nodded respectfully as the young King approached. “Iceshard will be opening our way back into Stormwind in another few minutes, but before that, if I may, I’d like to run over your schedule.”

Anduin dipped his head in acknowledgment. “Please.”

“We’ll be dropped off in the Keep’s green, at which point we’ll proceed to the Royal Infirmary so that your leg can be treated.” He said. “If you’re pronounced fit to leave you’re slated for an appearance in Cathedral Square: The Orphanage, specifically, is expecting a Royal visit.”

For the first time that day a full-fledged smile spread across Anduin’s face; he’d made a point of spending near as much time at Stormwind’s orphanage throughout the years as he had at the cathedral and was seen more as a big brother by the children living there than as a ruler: to the Matron and staff’s near eternal disgrace, didn’t use any of his titles and simply called him Andy. Something he’d shamelessly encouraged, himself knowing what it was like to grow up with a dead mother and a father who was absent more than he was there.

“An orphanage? Marvelous.” Sylvanas drawled. “What’s the stop after that, Wrynn? A soup kitchen? A terminal ward? I thought this was your turn to give a tour, not ‘bring your trothed to work day’.”

She had said that she hadn’t had time for children but had never definitively said she didn’t like them. In fact, some of her reactions to the question led Anduin to suspect the truth of matters might be quite the opposite but he supposed he’d have to wait and see. “It is my turn to give a tour, provided that I can survive the gauntlet that is the Royal Infirmary, but the Cathedral of Light is one of Stormwind’s most beautiful sights which no true tour could miss and the Orphanage is just across the square. It wouldn’t be an inconvenience to stop there. Not to mention, though it’s perhaps a bit early to be considering such matters as we’re still a week out from being married, its currently the most likely source of my finding an heir.”

“The most likely source aside from the one all but sitting on top of you, you mean.” Anduin tilted his head in confusion but didn’t speak. “You have three nephews from whom you could choose, though Arator is perhaps a bit old for the post. They may not be of your blood but they are of mine and that’s more than one of your orphans can claim.”

“Vareesa’s twins?” Anduin’s brow furrowed, blue eyes lightening slightly as he contemplated matters. “Perhaps, though I’m not certain the House of Nobles would accept either of them. Stormwind may accept Half Elves enough to allow them to live in our city without much of the prejudice found elsewhere but as much as I wish such weren’t true-accepting someone with even a drop of inhuman blood in their veins as Heir Apparent may be too much for the House of Nobles to take.”

“At least your people accept them in some way.” Sylvanas sounded almost bitter. “That’s more than mine could say.”

“And even ignoring that hurdle,” Anduin continued thoughtfully, “it would be terribly presumptuous, not to mention negligibly remiss, to simply proclaim Giramar or Galadin, or Arator for that matter, Stormwind’s Heir Apparent without first asking—at least in the twins’ case—Vareesa’s permission and their own. I know from personal experience that being Crown Prince isn’t the fairy tale it’s made out to be by those who don’t hold the position. Even if Onyxia hadn’t attempted to destroy my kingdom from within I never would have had a proper childhood. Nor really any at all.”

“I can’t know for certain how my sister would react to such a proposition.” Sylvanas said. “Though
I imagine the reaction would be a better one than to a suggestion of the other potential solution.”

“And that would be?”

“Laying with her in order to produce an Heir of both our blood.”

His eyes nearly bugged from his head. “By the Light, Vareesa’s still in mourning by many accounts, not that it would change matters even if she weren’t, and Alleria’s married!”

“Regardless, when you ask her I’d suggest you bring a couple extra guards.”

“I don’t doubt I’ll need them.” He said. “She is, after all, related to you and I’ve seen enough of what you’re capable of to be glad we’re not fighting anymore.” The Banshee Queen’s response was an indeterminate noise, not about to admit that she could say the same.

“My Lady,” Bethor piped up suddenly, “it’s time for your departure. I’ll open the portal for you now.”

“You’d do well to, Bethor.” The Frost Mage needed no further encouragement and soon Anduin was viewing a distorted image of the castle green through the gleaming rift of a portal. “Well, Little Lion, as this is to be your ‘triumphant return’ I think it’s best you lead the way.”

Anduin nodded, steadied his returning nerves with a deep breath and prodded Dreamer forward. His surroundings shimmered, arcane feedback crackling along his skin, and then bright sunlight struck him blind.

“Guards men, your Kings returned! **Attention!**” The clank of armor rang out as a line of nearby footmen snapped into salute, his eyes adjusting to see familiar faces and armor polished to a shine. Smiling at them and nodding his head in acknowledgement he called them softly to ease as the rest of his party came through, followed by Sylvanas and hers and then the cart full of their belongings.

“This is where sparring and target practice can be done, though it’s usually only used by the guard.” He informed her, noting the way her eyes roved subtly around the area. “It’s a practical space, and well-tended, but doesn’t offer a terribly great view of the Keep or the city. There are much better places to get a proper vantage and I have every intent to show you a few.”

“But first,” Sylvanas said, “you’ve a visit to make to your healer. Don’t look at me like that, Wrynn. You did this to yourself by riding off into the sunset with some of my Dread Guards for a playdate with the Scarlet Crusade and now you have to weather the consequences.”

Again, the young King dipped his head, letting out a resigned sounding sigh before dismounting onto the plush grass. “One of the stable hands will be in to take our mounts to their lodgings. With any luck I shouldn’t be terribly long: while I’m being seen to Stormwind can receive you-.”

“I’ll be going with you, Anduin, if only to more quickly learn the location of the infirmary.” Sylvanas, as per usual, swung down with far more grace than he had. “I’ve a sneaking suspicion it will be a common place to find you should I ever have the need.”

Yet again the young King turned red up to his ears. “That would depend on the day.” He began to hobble towards the side entrance of the keep. It was painful to watch and, doubtlessly, even more painful to engage in; Valeera moved to assist him but Sylvanas beat her to it. “More often than not I’ll be in my study or the throne room. Working, I suspect I’ll be there even more than usual once the projects in Westfall begin, if I’m not personally on the ground. Which, if I have my way, will be more often than not.”
“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Little Lion.” The Banshee Queen almost sounded amused. “Let’s first make sure you’re not going to lose one of your paws for yesterday’s foolish escapade.”

“I’ve been through worse.” He said through a particularly harsh wince, clenching his teeth. “I’ll be fine. Just a potion or two and I’ll be on my way.”

He wasn’t entirely off base, as if turned out, though it took a little bit more than ‘just a potion or two’. Stormwind’s Royal Healer was an aged, severe looking Holy Paladin who, after checking the young King over, chided him almost harshly on stressing the old breaks so severely, applied a powerful poultice and a pressure bandage to go along with those potions and sent them on their way alongside a litany of warnings to the effect of ‘don’t do anything so stupid ever again or I’ll be forced to do something drastic’.

If more Paladins were like that one Sylvanas might have had a better time getting along with them.

Still looking sufficiently chastised Anduin rubbed the back of his neck in an almost apologetic manner, the foot of his cane clicking against the gold patterned tile. “Well…since we’re already inside why don’t I show you to your rooms? I know you don’t sleep and you’ve told me that you don’t make a habit of ‘drifting’, as you called it, but at least then you’ll know where it is if you’ve ever a need of it.”

“My rooms specifically?” she raised an eyebrow. “I though man and wife slept together in Human culture.”

“Man and wife do, yes, but we won’t be man and wife until the end of the week. And I know we’ve shared a bed on the tour but…its different in the Keep. Apparently.”

“Let me guess,” Sylvanas followed him up a curving staircase and down a white brick hallway strewn with oil paintings and tapestries, “this is another of your hang-ups surrounding ‘propriety’.”

Anduin’s response was a sheepish half helpless shrug. “It won’t be much longer.”

“Just short of seven days.” She said. “Can I really be certain the curse of your tight laced ‘propriety’ will be so easily bested simply by a ring and a vow.”

“The term will vanish from my vocabulary. You have my word.” He smirked.

“We’ll see about that, Wrynn.” She retorted. “How much further?”

“We’re nearly there.” And they were. Turning a final corner and heading a handful of paces down the next corridor Anduin stopped outside the first of a handful of doors. Dark stained and made of sturdy wood, it appeared heavy and likely served well for assuring privacy. “This was my room, prior to my ascension, and it’s my hope that one day it’ll belong to my Heir. The Queen’s rooms and Royal Chambers are at the far end of the hall just this way.”

“And the other doors?” little more than a mild curiosity but it still slipped out. His face briefly contorted into something pained but the expression quickly passed and he turned his head away.

“Those rooms stand empty. They’ve never seen a use and now I’ve little doubt they never will. I wanted-.” He cut himself off and started forward once more, this time at a faster pace. “Peace is more important than personal hopes for my future. I knew what I was giving up…but it’s still hard to let go of it completely. Regardless, we should continue; we’re expected after all and should make this detour brief.”

It was blatantly clear that any attempt to further the subject would be shamelessly avoided so
Sylvanas allowed the matter to drop and resumed trailing him down the narrow corridor until they reached another set of doors; a double set directly at the end of the corridor and a second door slightly to the right.

“Through these doors are what will be our quarters after all the pomp and circumstance is over. Until then,” opening the offset single door Anduin gestured her inside, “ladies first.”

Though doubtlessly smaller than the fabled Royal Chambers of which, thus far, she’d only seen the doors the space was by no means small and furnished tastefully enough. Recently cleaned as testified to by the faded but still present scent of dust which had built over the years the floors and furniture were fashioned from the same dark wood of the door in high polish, the walls had been washed with a faint powder blue and between the curtains and the bedspread there was a bit of an overabundance of floaty white cotton.

Definitely a contrast to what amounted to her Quarters in Undercity, though whether or not it was a bad one had yet to be seen.

“The intent of your nobles is that I stay here during the last few nights before all of this is at last put behind us,” Sylvanas plucked lightly at one of the curtains as it fluttered in the breeze from the open windows, “but what’s to stop me from heading those few steps next door?”

“The Palace Guard runs shifts outside my door.” He said. “They won’t be inclined to let you in, Queen to be or not.”

Another smirk. “Where there’s a window there’s a way.”

“But we’re on the fourth floor.” He looked mildly alarmed. “That’s quite a drop.”

“Between my training and the superior balance of my race I’m certain that I’d manage should I wish to.” Sylvanas said. “Not that I predict I will, the brief period of respite from you is as always welcome, but perhaps just once. Simply to prove a point.”

“What point would that be? That you possess skills at breaking and entering?”

“Breaking’ to enter is the last resort of those without finesse.”

Oh boy. “Finesse or no,” he said, if only to steer matters something close to back on course, “we should be heading back. We’ve kept the others waiting long enough and…it’s time I faced my people.”

With two parts of him claiming equally that he was overblowing matters and that he should crawl under his bed and never reemerge at war, and feet dragging behind him as best they could while he walked with the assistance of a cane and one leg half-numb Anduin began to make his way back through the castle halls, Sylvanas trailing after in silent but no less noticeable amusement.

The main entrance of the Keep was located at the end of another long corridor, paved in a plush rug of blue and gold lined in close to twenty royal guards, fully armed and armored and split off in pairs, but the Banshee Queen couldn’t help but notice at once a very glaring problem: lax as she’d known the city’s security was in many ways she hadn’t realized things went quite to the extent of having an uninterrupted straight shot from the door to the throne itself. The young King could shove all the armed protection he wanted into the general vicinity, but it still wouldn’t do as much for thwarting assassins as a corner would.

The throne room itself was cavernous, a fact which had only been hinted at from the brief glimpse she’d caught into it as they’d made their way off the green, fluttering banners of deep cerulean
bearing the familiar lion standard hung bolted to the walls and ceiling. At the center of the room, stood proudly atop a raised pylon of glinting marble, stood the Lion Seat itself—a monstrosity in its own right of metal and stone, impressive in and of itself even knowing she was looking at a replica—and, beside it, a second throne; smaller, if only barely so, and lithe crafted from gold and silver. The delicacy of the patterning and leaf work led Sylvanas to suspect that the final touches, at least, had been outsourced into Dwarven hands.

“Thank the Light,” he eyed the second throne with relief as they rejoined their party in the entryway. “I haven’t seen it before now, and a part of me was afraid we’d find something a bit more, well, overt.”

‘Overt’ indeed. She snorted. “Surprising as this may seem to you, I prefer what’s there over a more skeletal theme.”

In spite of his ever-rising tide of nerves he chuckled. “That would make two of us. I’m not sure how well that would blend next to four golden lions with half a mountain on their backs.” He said. “Every time I sit in it I feel like I’m being swallowed.”

“If it’s really such an issue for you I can take the Lion Seat.”

This time it was a proper laugh, and a small smile stayed stubbornly stuck to his face as they left the Keep for the grand stairs. The first thing she noticed, it was impossible not to notice it with its sheer size, was the massive statue of the former King looming above a quietly trickling fountain. It also didn’t escape her notice that Anduin was actively avoiding looking at it as they passed. From the vantage point on the landing above the staircase leading down across the draw bridge and onto the streets of the city itself, over the top of the portcullis gate, the different colored roof tiles denoting the separate districts were fully visible. As a further means of stalling, she didn’t doubt, he paused their progress and took the time to name them off and recount sights or people or escapades. Blue for Trade District, where Champions of the Alliance could be seen swarming the streets on the daily and where the Auction House held periodic dance parties for reasons no one really understood. Brown for Dwarven District, where the Deeprun Tram to Ironforge was located and where one could find the best armor, weapons and ale the city had to offer. Purple for Magic District, where the janky spire of the Mage Tower rose skyward like a lopsided chimney and where, if one wasn’t careful, they could find themselves accidently polymorphed by a fledgling Mage. Red for Old Towne, where the Sl:7 kept their headquarters and he, along with the help of a pay as you go Champion, had helped himself to Shaw’s cache of sensitive documents during the Cataclysm. Yellow for Cathedral Square, marked by the soaring belfry of the Cathedral of the Light, which stood dead center of the bustling capital and then, beside the sea, the green, well-tended park and the white stones of Lion’s Rest.

She didn’t doubt, if really pushed, that Anduin could talk enough to leave them rooted there for the next year and that he sorely wished he could but, ultimately, obligation won out and, with some trouble on account of his leg, the Priest led the way down the last set of stairs. Geryon and Dreamer were waiting for them before the draw bridge and they clattered across once they’d pulled themselves up into the saddle, their guards on foot behind them.

His shoulders held tension as a mantle as they left the shadow of the Keep, but slowly relaxed as they were met with warmed greetings and relieved curiosity rather than the derision and thrown vegetables he seemed to have been expecting. Shallow canals of pale blue water, salt or fresh she couldn’t tell at a glance, cut their way through Stormwind’s streets like ribbons and combined with the shade of tall buildings helped to keep the streets cool even in the heat of midday. The air held the unmistakable scent which could only be the sea. Off in the distance a harbor bell clanged in dulcet tones. It was different than Orgrimmar with its oppressive heat and baked white sky,
different from Lordaeron as it had been before its fall with looming walls and pelting rain, and Sylvanas didn’t think she’d ever been stared at quite so much without something unsavory being hissed as she passed.

“This full-scale riot leaves much to be desired.” Sylvanas informed him as they trotted passed a street merchant who called to them a sunny greeting. “I spent time preparing to fend off efforts of being thrown into Stormwind Harbor, and all of its been wasted.”

Ease had returned to his smile by now as they crossed an arching bridge into Cathedral Square. “If you’d like to go swimming Olivia’s Pond is home to a much lower population of bloodthirsty sharks.” Anduin said. “We can stop by there at the end of the tour. It’ll be twilight by then, and should be quite beautiful with the water reflecting the sunset.”

The mischief in his eyes made it well clear that Anduin was well aware her comment had meant to be rhetorical. “Perhaps a raincheck.” She said. “I meant what I said about seeing to it that you finished what you started, even if I have to personally chain you to that cenotaph to do it.”

“Vigil at a grave isn’t exactly a romantic activity.” He averted his eyes, their blue tint darkening. “And yet that didn’t stop you at Windrunner Spire.”

“As I said then, it’s the duty of a Priest to pay respects to a lonely grave.” He said. “And, besides, we’re to be family.”

“I see little difference here.” Sylvanas said. “Varian and I were only allies briefly, but even as enemies I respected him as a warrior and a leader to his people. And you didn’t deserve to lose him. Not like you did.” Those blue eyes shifted back to her, showing the first hints of becoming over bright. Hazy like the horizon just before a deluge of rain. “And like you said we’re to be family. Don’t you think he’d want to know?”

Anduin nodded, battling to keep his voice steady. “Yes, he would. He’d…he’d want to be there. And he will be. He will be there, just not…physically.”

A tart smirk. “Ghost wolf indeed.”

As they made their way up the last few feet of a narrow, curving street between two buildings-grimmer than anything in Silvermoon would ever have been allowed to become and slightly lopsided-which seemed to loom over them, Anduin composed himself admirably.

“We’ll get matters at the orphanage out of the way first, and then begin our tour with the cathedral if that’s agreeable to you?”

“Getting exposure to a grubby pack of brats over with as immediately as is possible is quite agreeable, yes.” Sylvanas said. “Don’t draw this out.”

“They’re good kids. You’ll see.” Said with a slightly watery smile. The Banshee Queen rolled her eyes but Anduin, as usual, remained undaunted.

The square opened up before them moments later, yards of white Stormwind stone populated by small well-kept trees and little flowerbeds filled with blossoms of every imaginable color. At its center was a grand marble fountain filling the square with the gentle tinkling of water all beneath the great shadow of the cathedral: a towering structure which showcased the best of Human architectural capabilities, comprised of graceful steeples sweeping buttresses and mosaics of stained glass. The orphanage was comparatively underwhelming, a weathered almost cockeyed building fenced in with wrought iron and crouched at the Cathedral’s foot. Another small garden of
tended flowers. A patch of grass which passed as a yard, offering just enough space for the children to play on. Said children had been gathered outside to await their arrival; close to thirty boys and girls ranging in age from two to twelve, in clean trousers and plain dresses who stared as they approached and, despite the best efforts of the matrons to contain them, swarmed like Murlocs the instant they’d passed through the gate.

“Andy! Andy! You’re back!”

“We haven’t seen you since before those meany Demons came! We thought you’d forgotten about us!”

“Are you really gonna marry the Warchief? Is that her? She’s pretty! Do Orcs really eat rocks?”

“Children, behave!” One of the Matrons rushed over, looking quite overworked and with a few strands of auburn hair escaping from her bun. “I’m so sorry, Highness. We have talked to them.”

Anduin, smiling, shook his head; he’d already lifted one of the smallest children into his arms and had four more clinging to his sleeves and shirt hem. “No need. I’m glad they’re pleased to see me and they’re right, it has been quite a long time. Having said that,” though his expression remained gentle it gained a stern edge as he focused his attention on the children who’d gathered around him, “you lot need to be a bit more respectful of your Matrons’ wishes. Yes, Tom, that means you too. They do their best for all of you and only want to keep you safe.”

“But Andy, they make us put shoes on before we go outside!”

“And wash our hands before dinner!”

“And eat our vegetables! Even broccoli!”

A collective chorus of “ewww!” went up around them. The haggard looking woman sent the young King a pleading look. Anduin chuckled warmly, shifted the girl in his arms and rested a hand atop the head of the boy whom Sylvanas assumed was Tom.

“I don’t like broccoli either,” he told them, “but even Princes, even Kings, even Warchiefs have to wear shoes when they go outside and wash their hands for supper and eat their vegetables. Right, my dear?”

“I’m undead, Wrynn, we don’t do much eating. Certainly not of vegetables.”

“Were you really forced to eat vegetables, Andy?” the boy asked.

“Yes, love.” Anduin confirmed, smile becoming even more amused than before as Tom crossed his arms and grumbled something offensive about broccoli’s mother.

“You’ve been to all the Horde territories, haven’t you?” another asked, overly energetic and bouncing up and down on their heels. “Do you have stories?”

“Stories! Stories! We want stories!”

“Alright. Alright. I’ve got a few of them.” Feigning a thinking gesture with his free hand, he began walking out into the yard and most of the children trailed after him like ducklings. “Where would you guys like to start?”

“Orgrimmar!”
“Undercity!”
“Teldrassil!”
“That’s not Horde territory, Lina!”
“Yeah, but purple elves!”
“I want to hear about Dragons!”

A small but insistent tug on her cloak drew Sylvanas’ attention away from the King and his pursuing gaggle. The girl who had dared to approach her was small for her age, with mousy brown hair pulled back into a pair of braids and runny grey eyes. Her dress was pink and sun faded. With no explanation she held up the doll in her hands; lopsided and ill proportioned, clearly made from salvaged burlap by unskilled hands, it had button eyes and almost twisted looking features. Confused, Sylvanas narrowed her eyes. “What, child?” harsher than it needed to be but if the girl registered this she didn’t react. Pushing the misshapen burlap creation more insistently towards her. It was small enough that it fit easily in the grip of one hand, its arms and legs flopping limply over the plating of her gauntlets. “Is this for me?”

She scuffed the toe of one shoe against the ground. “In case you get lonely.” With no further explanation the girl skipped away to join the rest, all of them laughing madly while Anduin picked them up and swung them lightly around, leaving the Banshee Queen to stand there holding the poor excuse for a doll. She could easily have thrown it away, left it in the yard or tossed it into one of the canals, but without thinking much about it it went into Geryon’s saddle bag instead.

It took almost an hour before Anduin managed to extricate himself from the clutches of the swarm and, after bidding farewell to the children and the Matrons, rejoined her on the other side of the orphanage’s gate.

“With everything that happened since my ascension I haven’t been able to spend the time with them that I’d have liked.” He said. “It’s nice to see them all again. Shall we begin the tour?”

“Little reason to delay.” She brushed passed him and headed around the fountain. “Leave the horses. No point riding them three feet forward.”

Grinning, Anduin followed her across the square and up the steps of the cathedral. The wooden doors at the top stood open and welcoming and they stepped into the hypostyle hall; cavernous in much the same way as the throne room of the Keep it was dim, lit only by the sunlight which filtered in from outside, and the scents of perfumed oils and incense and standing water from the front hung like a pall over the room. At this time of day, the pews stood empty, but a blonde woman in white and gold Priest’s regalia stood behind the altar. She emerged on catching sight of them and offered a shallow curtsy.

“King Anduin. Lady Sylvanas. It’s good to see that you’ve returned.” She said. “Have you been told any details of the wedding?”

“High Priestess Laurena,” Anduin greeted her with a smile. “Not yet, no. I’m sure there’s someone waiting to inform me, but for now they’re content to wait in ambush.”

Apparently used to such hyperbole Laurena only smiled. “Is there anything I can help you with, Highness?”

“Not at the moment, to my knowledge.” He looked to Sylvanas in an obvious invitation to object. “The Cathedral of Light is our first stop on a tour of our city. I think I’ve spent enough time here
through the years to be able to do it justice, but you’re welcome to accompany us in case I miss something.”

“I’m sure you’ll do marvelously, Anduin. But I’m afraid I’ve requirements for my attention and am unable to linger.” She said. “Light be with you both.”

“Well, it appears we’re on our own.” He said, smiling again and offering his arm. Smirking when she refused to take it. “Shall we?”

“The day isn’t going to wait for you.”

“The Cathedral of Light is the most striking monument of the Church of the Holy Light and plays home to some of Azeroth’s most powerful and influential leaders, Paladins and Priests alike.” Anduin began to chart a slow path around the Cathedral’s open hall. “It’s also the oldest building in Stormwind; though it, too, was badly damaged during the Second War most of the foundations are entirely original, as are three of the walls. Its reconstruction was overseen by Benedictus, only a Bishop at the time, and Alonsus Faol and played home for a period to the Order of the Silver Hand.” The fact that it was also the place where Arthas had first become a Paladin of said order went unmentioned. “The catacombs have twice played home to refugees, both during the First War and during the reconstruction of the city in the wake of the Second. They’ve also played home to Twilight’s Hammer Cultists during an attempt to blow it up but, thankfully, their plans were thwarted. Every night at sunset the Cathedral rings a solitary bell; its separate from those used to mark the hour, supposedly enchanted and said to be the sweetest sound ever heard.”

“The sweetest sound ever heard?” Sylvanas scoffed. “We’ll see about that.”

“True or not it’s a part of the city’s legend; texture and flavor. Perhaps best not taken too seriously but touted regardless,” He said. “The basement, the staircase of which is right over there behind the altar, contains both a library of Holy texts and, below that, the catacombs themselves. Would you like to go down?”

“I’ve no interest in musty books and empty shelves meant to hold bodies.” Sylvanas said. “Surely there’s more to your city than a church, Wrynn. Show me that.”

Another smile. “Shall we head back into the Dwarven District then?”

“Just when I thought you’d learned your lesson, you set our destination for a tavern? Whatever happened to ‘I’ll never drink again’?”

“I’m not heading us for a tavern, Sylvanas.” Anduin said, chuckling as he led her back out into the city sunlight. “But the Dwarven District is where the Deeprun Tram is located. And the Deeprun Tram is where the Brawlers Guild is located. It’s quite a spectacle and I think you’ll enjoy it.”

Metal walls and the inescapable smell of crude oil; cheering crowds and a fighting Gnoll which called itself Meatball. Two entrances to two well-guarded prisons, one of which was surrounded by water. Quiet, calmly fishing fishermen. Market stalls and busy storefronts staffed by everything from Gnomes to Half Elves. The towering statues of the Walk of Heroes. The colorful portals set into the Earthshrine like jewels in a crown and the other half of Deathwing’s jaw, hung from an archway on heavy chains and guarded by a burly pair of Draconid in different colors.

At the cusp of nightfall, they found themselves standing at a tall overlook which rose above the city’s docks and the white marble of Lion’s Rest. Twilight had begun to fall, staining the gentle waves of the harbor in shades of amber and crimson and gold. Off in the distance rang the single tone that he’d described, silvered and lacy as it echoed through the still air. With a deep breath and
a final moment’s hesitation the young King started down the stairs.

It didn’t escape Sylvanas’ notice that, though she followed him, their guards did not.

Lion’s Rest was built of the same white marble as the rest of the city, set into a verdant hamlet which had been salvaged from the destruction Deathwing had wrought on what used to be the Park. Four pathways stretched like spokes from another burbling fountain, hemmed in with cropped hedgerows and shaped trees. At one end, wreathed by a short wall of falling water, was a cenotaph listing the names of the Alliance heroes who’d fallen to the Burning Legion and opposite it, overlooking the sea and guarded by a pair of snarling stone lions, was an empty coffin chiseled into the image of the former King.

As Sylvanas hung back he hobbled up to the foot of the monument, circled around to its head, and knelt down. Resting shaking hands against the cold stone, the twist of emotion once more invading his features. “Father,” his voice broke, “I followed the advice you gave me. And I did it. The war with the Horde is over. I… I’m getting married at the end of this week. To, well… to the Banshee Queen. I’m not certain you’d exactly approve, but… she’s very different from the image of herself she likes to put forward.” The cackling of a gull filled a beat of silence. “I know that I haven’t been here as often as I’ve wished to. As I should have. I miss you badly. I wish that you were still here, but… I think I’m going to be OK now. It’s been hard, but I promise to do the best I can to make you proud, however long I may rule.”

Much like he had at Lirath’s grave Anduin bent his head in prayer, and the light of the setting sun which streamed in from the west highlighted his figure in an amber tinted halo. Waves whispered at the monument’s foot, masking the sound of her footsteps as she came forward to stand beside him.

The stonemason whom had made the monument was clearly at the height of their craft, yet even so they’d failed to achieve a true likeness of the fallen lion. Heavy and rictus, the stone lacked the sharp focus. The flashes of anger which would flare up like a flame. It was stone, and nothing more. Not the King who’d been respected, nor the opponent who’d been feared, nor the father who’d been loved. Hollow, much like a body became upon death. Like Anduin, too, would be one day; his golden hair turned grey with age and clouded eyes faded of their color. A tomb? A pyre? What would be left for her once he’d gone to his precious Light?

Alarmed by the sudden turn of her thoughts Sylvanas quickly shook them free. “My sisters should be arriving in the city within the next few days to assist with the preparations. Vareesa will be bringing her sons and will need someone to watch over them while we’re busy.” The Banshee Queen took pains not to look at him but motion from the corner of one eye made it clear he’d straightened up and turned his head. “That means you, Wrynn, so I’d advise you clear your schedule. Even a King’s work won’t get you out of this one.”

“She would I want to get out of it?” she still refused to look but could tell that he was smiling. Could hear it in his voice. “I’d be honored for the privilege of taking care of Giramar and Galadin for the day. Longer, even, if need be.”

“Honored?” finally she looked at him; still young and gilded, for now. She’d always thought her sisters foolish for falling in love with Humans. For tying themselves to men whom, even when they weren’t being actively murdered by Orcs, they’d far outlive and yet… “You’ll soon regret saying that, boy King. I can promise you that much.”
I will (eventually) get back to my set schedule but I won't have time to post tomorrow or Saturday because I need to finish the first draft of a paper on the linguistic makeup of Thalassian as a language (JINS courses are amazing because none of the subjects make any sense and I'm in a 'Languages of Speculative Fiction' course so that's why that's the topic I chose lol).

On another note, there are flowers included in here the meanings of which are mildly alluded to but won't be explained in chapter: they will be explained in a note at the end of the wedding chapter. I'm interested, in the mean time, of what meanings you guys can come up with (shouldn't take more than a quick google search from anyone who wants to but it won't be obvious because they all have a bunch of meanings and some depend on color). I'll probably post the most amusing ones in a note on the wedding chapter as well, and will say who got the closest.

The particular flowers are -
Carnation
Stock
Queen Ann's Lace
Hydrangea

Calling the hour ‘early’ was a bit of an understatement but Anduin had long since grown used to operation at all hours and was able to push the feelings of exhaustion tugging at his limbs aside though that did little to conceal the light beginnings of shadows which had gathered under his eyes. The morning air was grey and cold with the mist rolling in from the sea, smelling strongly of salt and brine, but his overcoat served its job as good protection. Sylvanas walked beside him down the familiar cobbled street, empty at that hour aside from themselves and the occasional patrol of the city guard, heading across the Trade Quarter’s main square and towards the Magic Quarter.

“You’re certainly getting an early start.” He said softly, cane in hand. “Surely preparations won’t take that long.”

“We don’t all suffer from the misfortune of a horde of Nobles controlling what we wear. Not to mention that clothing for the coming occasion isn’t the only thing I need to get.”

“Ah, yes. Flowers.” A smile tugged at his lips as blue eyes found the book she was holding; old and worn but well cared for it detailed a list of plants and their associated meanings. Anduin well recalled making notes on a number of the pages. “What were you thinking?”

“Candytuft. Geranium. Orange lilies.”

“Just when I thought we’d made progress I find out you have your eye on the one flower on Azeroth that will call me stupid.” But he didn’t seem upset by the matter, though whether it was simply him shrugging it off or suspicion that she meant to choose something else and simply wasn’t telling him Sylvanas couldn’t tell. “Roses are traditional.”
“Roses imply a message I’ve no want to broadcast.”

“Roses broadcast a lot of messages all dependent on their color.”

“You know exactly what color I mean!”

“Red?” another chuckle. “I love you’ would certainly be a surprise coming from you, especially after our past conversations regarding exactly how you feel about the ‘foolishness’ of the emotion. Whatever you do come up with, I’m sure it will be interesting.”

“I’ll try not to make it too complicated for you, Anduin.” Sylvanas said as they stepped through a stone archway into the Magic Quarter, the flagstones transitioning to grass beneath their feet. “You might start bleeding out the ears.”

The Priest chuckled again but said nothing else as they started up the ramp which wound its way around the spire of the Mage Tower. The small room atop it was warm and mildly claustrophobic hosting a permanent portal to the Blasted Lands which had been installed during the war against the Iron Horde and a staircase which curved away to another chamber which housed a small handful more permanent portals and served as a receiving room for those who traveled through registered, temporary ones.

A portal, pale blue and shimmering, fizzled into existence just as they crested the stairs. Alleria stepped through first, dressed in her usual ensemble of gold and forest green, followed by Vareesa in blue and, behind her, two children. Boys with red hair and a near identical mix of Human and Elvish features. He couldn’t make out which was Galadin and which was Giramar, though he did know Giramar was the elder of the two if only by moments, and smiled at them both. These were his nephews, potentially the closest thing he’d ever have to children of his own, and Anduin already knew he’d be doing all in a King’s power to spoil them. One of the twins smiled back and started forward but the other caught his hand and held fast, anchored behind Vareesa and with his eyes firmly on the floor.

“Galadin,” Vareesa said gently, stepping sideways and lightly herding both her sons in front of her, “your Uncle isn’t going to bite. Look, he’s thrilled to meet the both of you.” The younger twin grumbled something which sounded rather unwilling but was powerless against Vareesa’s grip and soon both twins were standing before him. “Thank you, Anduin, for agreeing to look after them for the day. I know that you must be terribly busy.”

“Not as busy as I might have been, had things gone the other way. Really, it’s no trouble.” He said, his smile never slipping. “I’ve been looking forward to spending time with them for quite a while, and it comes as a welcome break from pushing documents, important as that task may be.”

“Be advised, Vareesa,” Sylvanas said, “he might not give them back.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Would you let me keep them, Sylvanas?”

“You need to prove yourself capable of not acting like a child before I allow you to care for one full time!” She informed him. “I have enough trouble babysitting you.”

“Babysitting?” Alleria repeated with an amused grin. “Interesting that you’d call it that, given what I’m sure the two of you are up to.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” Valeera snickered. “Come to think of it, I’ll admit my curiosity. What’s it like bedding a Stormwind Lion?”

Rapidly turning red in the face Anduin cleared his throat. “Ladies,” he said quickly, “there are
“Ah, again with his damned propriety. He claims it’ll be done away with once we’ve wed but I’m not convinced.” Sylvanas, smirking, brushed passed him. “We’ve a few hours left before the wedding and much to see to; I’d prefer to get it over with. We can discuss Wrynn’s merits on the way.”

Still somewhat pink in the face but relieved, at least, that the topic of their interest had been moved out of earshot of the two young boys Anduin turned his attention back to the twins. “I’ve heard a lot about the two of you throughout the years.” He said. “I’m glad to finally get the chance to meet you, especially now that we’re to be family.”

Excitement somewhat reigned in, though still clearly about to burst its banks, Giramar bowed his head and said “it’s nice to finally meet you too, King Wrynn.”

“Light, there’s no need for that kind of formality. I get enough of my title from everyone else.” With a conspiratorial wink, Anduin said “you can both just call me Uncle Andy if you’d like.”

Giramar beamed. Galadin continued glaring at the floor, clinging to his brother’s sleeve. “Alright!”

“It’s terribly early; if the two of you would like to sleep a few more hours you’re welcome to choose a room at the keep. If not, we can have a bit of fun.”

“We’re not tired!” Giramar informed him brightly, though Anduin had little doubt that was only partly true. “What will we be doing?”

“A top-secret mission: a highly dangerous foray into hostile territory to steal important treasure from a vicious guardian. A task even the Seventh Legion isn’t up to.” In honesty, if Halford Wyrmbane and the Royal Chef were locked in a pit at any point in time Anduin wasn’t certain who would win, but by now he knew that making off with the proverbial dragon’s treasure before they were considered properly cooled and ready for the royal table was rather simple.

“Treasure?” Giramar nudged his brother excitedly. “Hear that, Galadin? We’re going to be just like those amazing adventurers who pass through Dalaran so often!”

Galadin’s scoff made his relation to Sylvanas clear. Briefly, his glare flickered to Anduin and then returned to the floor. The young King canted his head but decided better of touching the matter just yet.

“We’ll head out then, good Sirs.” Gently guiding both boys before him Anduin started back towards the tower’s door. “The beast makes its lodgings in my castle’s kitchens; its minions often patrol the area and we must be mindful not to be caught lest they tear us apart.” Reaching the ramp spiraling down the tower’s spire Anduin pulled a silver whistle from the folds of his clothing, a trio of armored white Griffins swooping down in answer. Keeping a careful eye on the pair to ensure they both got on safely and had a secure hold, Anduin swung himself up into the saddle of his own mount and they took wing towards the Keep. Giramar couldn’t contain his curiosity and even Galadin couldn’t resist peering down over the side at the city below.

Their mounts touched down at the foot of the staircase leading to the Keep’s door and they dismounted. Anduin greeted the guards astride the door with a nod and shepherded his nephews over the threshold. Leading them down an off-branching hallway and towards the kitchens, motioning for quiet with a wide grin.

“We need to be swift and quiet to avoid attracting attention.” Anduin said. “Follow me, smartly
now.” Lifting his cane so that it wouldn’t click against the floor he crept to the door and slowly pushed it open, peering inside and then motioning them over. Giramar rushed over, dragging his still reluctant twin behind. The kitchen was warm and a buzz with a rush of activity, filled with woodsmoke and the scent of freshly baked pastries. Diving behind a counter as one of the staff passed, Anduin poked his head up to scan the area and then motioned for them to follow his example. This continued throughout the whole of the massive room until, finally, they ended up at the front crouched beside him at the foot of another counter. Anduin reached up, felt around blindly and quickly found what he was looking for, passing the piping hot pastries to each of them before sticking one into his mouth and grabbing three more with a second roguish wink.

“Your Majesty!” The Royal Chef materialized beside them seemingly from nowhere, making all three scramble to their feet in alarm; pitching towards the door, snickering wildly and with their stolen loot in tow.

“We’ve been spotted! Quickly! Make for the doors!” Out of the kitchens down the hall and up a set of stairs. Around a corner. Down another hall. Ducking behind a tapestry and into the hidden alcove behind. Grinning, mildly winded and still clutching the sweets like a trophy Anduin plopped gracelessly down onto the flagstone floor and licked berry jam from the pads of his gloves. “We should be safe here. The guardian doesn’t know this castle quite as well as I do.”

“True as that may be, King Anduin, even you don’t know this castle quite as well as I do.” Stepping from the shadowed corridor the Spymaster raised an eyebrow. “Teaching them to be brigands already? Vareesa will be disappointed, I’m sure.”

Anduin looked down at the treats in his lap, then at the other man and held up the second one he’d taken for himself in a silent plea.

“Bribery and theft? I’m afraid I have to take you to the Stockades.”

Anduin snorted as the Rogue, after making a show of false reluctance, took the proffered treat. “Go ahead, Mathias, I’d pardon myself within the hour. I am King, after all.” He said. “If anyone should go in the stockades it should be chef Flay: these pastries are too good to be anything but criminal. Something the matter?”

“It’s not urgent enough to demand your immediate attention, Highness, but I do request both your attention and that of Sylvanas as soon as is possible.” He said. “There’s been an uptick in Defias activity in Westfall, ramping up exponentially as the wedding draws closer. They’re up to something but Vancleef is clever and my agents haven’t yet been able to determine what. All the same, measures have been taken to increase the city’s security and ensure your safety.” A brief glance in the direction of the boys, both of whom were watching the conversation with expressions of concern though whether that was due to knowledge of what the Defias Brotherhood were or a reaction to the tension in their voices Anduin didn’t know. “I don’t need to remind you what they want.”

“The end of my bloodline. Stormwind in flames. No, you don’t need to remind me Mathias.” He said. “After they’ve returned and I’ve spoken with Vareesa we’ll head for that briefing. Until then…”

“Of course.” With a swiftness only a Rogue could ever hope to accomplish and through some mechanism Anduin doubted he could ever understand the Spymaster vanished as quickly as he’d come.

“That was Mathias Shaw, the leader of SI:7.” He said. “Don’t let what he said frighten you. Stormwind is perfectly safe.”
“You’re worried about them.” It was the first time Galadin had said a word to him and the young King would have to admit that he jumped slightly. “You’re worried about them but you’re not worried about her. Why not? She’s evil!”

“She?” Anduin repeated, brows knitting together. “Do you mean Sylvanas?”

“Yes, her!” He snapped. “She’s evil. A monster who joined the Orcs! She’s one of the ones who murdered my father and she murdered your father too! So how could you want to marry her?”

“Gal!” Giramar looked more scandalized than Anduin had previously thought a child his age could be capable of. “We’ve talked about this; you shouldn’t go around calling people monsters. Besides, she’s family!”

“I don’t care!” Galadin’s raised voice resounded off the stone walls. “She’s evil and he’s stupid!”

“Galadin.” Gently but firmly Anduin seized his nephew by his small shoulders, meeting wild eyes with a steady blue gaze. “Garrosh Hellscream was responsible for your father’s death. The Burning Legion was responsible for mine. The Horde stood with us against the former Warchief for what he did. And Sylvanas didn’t abandon us at the Broken Shore, she was forced to retreat. Your father and mine were very different men, admittedly, but they were both heroes. And they both understood that what they were doing was for the greater good. To protect others and to save our world. I know it’s hard and I know it isn’t fair but where what I’ve done now won’t bring my father back or your father back it means that my suffering, that yours, isn’t pointless. And we carry on with the blessing of the knowledge that we’ve protected others from a similar fate.” Gently, Anduin wiped away the tears which had begun to form with his thumbs. “It’s not the same. I know that. I can never replace your father and I won’t try, but I promise to be there for both of you as much as I can. I just hope that that’s enough.”

Galadin’s expression had screwed up into a failed attempt to ward off the tears and, for a moment, Anduin expected his nephew to start yelling again, maybe lash out, but then he threw his arms around his neck and buried his face in the front of his shirt. Breaking down. The young King reached up and gently ran his fingers through his nephew’s red hair, bringing Giramar into the hug as well, and pulled them both close. Feeling two sets of arms wrap around his shoulders. He still remembered poignantly what it had felt like to believe that he had lost his father at ten years old, and the wounds from actually losing him were still raw, and the two boys in front of him now, approximately eleven, had lost theirs when they’d been even younger than that. It was for them, and people like them, that his heart bled because he knew that the peace he’d brokered had come too late.

“You’ve both suffered enough, and I promise that I’ll do everything in my power to see to it that you never have to suffer like that again.” He said. “I want both of you to remember that, if you, or your mother, ever need anything I’ll do all I can to make sure it gets to you. We’re family now, and there’s little more important than that to a Wrynn.”

Anduin’s crippled leg had had more than enough of being bent in one position but he ignored the mounting discomfort and remained where he was kneeling on the floor in that out of the way alcove until sobs turned to sniffles and then died away completely and then he pulled back. Giramar observed his twin with concern. The young Priest smiled at him gently.

“You’ve kept that pent up for a while, haven’t you?” Embarrassed and still scrubbing at his eyes, Galadin looked away. “Take a bit of advice that was given to me by, well, your Aunt actually; don’t hide from your pain, because leaving wounds in the dark will only lead them to fester. I’m still recovering from my father’s death myself, but addressing it…it’s helped. Would you like to talk, Galadin?” His nephew shook his head. “Not today then, I suppose. That’s alright. We’ve the
better part of the day while your Aunts and mother are busy and I doubt that hiding out in this alcove for hours is anyone’s idea of fun. What would you boys like to do?”

“You’re supposed to be good at telling stories.” Galadin said, still rubbing at his eyes. “Can you tell one? About the land that you got lost in?”

“Pandaria?” Anduin smiled and, with all the alacrity of a man three times his age, rose on his lamed leg. “I’ve plenty of stories from that time in my life and I’ve little doubt you’ll enjoy at least a few of them. The library isn’t far and is a much more comfortable place for us to spend long stretches of time. Shall we?”

Both twins nodded and, smile softening yet further, Anduin followed them out.

“By the Light Sylvanas, don’t keep us in suspense!”

“Yes please, dear sister, divulge: you did agree that we’d discuss our young King’s ‘merits’ on the way. Well, we’re half way to Sew Nice and you haven’t said a word.”

High Elven laughter echoed through the quiet streets like silver bells and the few people out at such an early hour of the morning stopped to look towards the sound, meeting with the sight of the three sisters exchanging smirks and snickers as they walked along. This hadn’t been done since before Sylvanas had fallen, since before Alleria had vanished through the Dark Portal, and like many things of late the Banshee Queen wasn’t certain how she felt about it.

“The salacious information you’re no doubt expecting won’t be forth coming.” Sylvanas told them. “Like I said, he’s quite hung up on the idea of ‘propriety’. I know nothing of his ‘sword play’ as of yet. I’d assumed it was a Human thing, or at least,” red eyes turned onto her older sister, “a Light wielder thing.”

“Turalyon was a soldier, Sylvanas.” Alleria said it with a smirk, green eyes sparkling in the newly minted sunlight. “No less noble or honorable than Anduin, but rather quite frustrated by his time at the front once I found him and quite willing to lay with me once the subject was broached. Vareesa?”

“Rhonin didn’t have any qualms for it either, not quite yet married or not.” Vareesa said. “You really haven’t done anything.”

“I never said that.” Sylvanas’ smirk tilted further upward into something sly, remembering the successful if less than difficult ‘hunt’ at Thunderbluff where Anduin, slightly drunk, had quickly found himself trussed to the headboard. “I’ve managed to get him twice by now, though once was to his credit and I’m still convinced he planned for us to get stuck on that damn bridge in the pouring rain.”

“Details!” Alleria pressed, grinning.

“If you must know, your High King has a bondage fetish of some sort and cuts quite the figure tied down to a bed.”

“Ah, I knew it! He isn’t vanilla! That’s thirty silver Alleria: pay up!” Vareesa looked gleeful. Alleria sighed but reached into her coin purse and handed the pieces over.
“You placed bets on my soon to be husbands knots?”

“Don’t act so surprised, Sylvanas. No one’s forgotten that the two of you did the same thing to me.” Alleria snickered. “Now what’s this I hear about him scheming to get the two of you caught on a bridge in the rain?”

The scent of petrichor and wet rock. Pale blue eyes stark against the grey backdrop of the overcast weather. The warmth of his skin, at once pleasant and searing. “He used the weather to his advantage to ensure that no one would be around to interrupt us when he demonstrated what he’d learned from our previous encounter. As should be obvious with all he manages to accomplish with words alone, Anduin’s quite clever with his tongue.”

A pair of delighted squeals issued from her two sisters. “How does he compare? To the others you’ve had?”

“You seem almost inordinately interested in Anduin’s prowess, Little Moon.” Sylvanas drawled. “Frustration?”

“Not at all. I’ve my sons to busy myself with looking after and…” Vareesa looked away. “It’s too soon to move on. You wouldn’t understand and I wouldn’t want you to, because you’d have to have lost him.”

“Why must the pair of you continually insist on this ridiculous assertion that I’m in love with him?” the Banshee Queen demanded. “I’ve grown used to his presence and I’ve developed, perhaps, a mild appreciation of the fact that he spares me enough consideration to think I’m more than a mindless beast, but nothing more. And if you don’t have your eye on him why such interest?”

“Shouldn’t it be obvious?” Alleria cut in, amused. “You were never one to be possessive, to such a degree, of your men. There was little need for you to be. And little occasion. Remind me, Vareesa, what the record was of how long she kept one. Two days?”

“Something closer to a week, if I recall. Maybe five days.” Vareesa said. “A Rogue, I think he was.”

“Dawnsinger.” Sylvanas said offhandedly. “He came the closest to figuring out what I required of him, but still couldn’t quite make it.”

“The closest before Anduin, it seems.” Both of her sisters were grinning now, watching her expectantly.

“Hidden kinks aside, Wrynn is a blushing virgin.” She said. “He lacks experience but his nature is to push boundaries in hopes of reaction and he picks things up quickly. Not to mention that building his responses from the ground up does nothing but help his chances of fitting my needs. Now, I think I’m quite through with this topic of conversation.”

“Will you at least fill us in after you’ve gotten him over the line? Though I’m sure the two of you will be shut away a few days after, at it like rabbits. A King needs an Heir after all.”

“I’m not able to have children.”

“Doesn’t mean you can’t use the excuse to have an obscene amount of sex.” Her younger sister’s smirk was slightly lopsided. “Make up for lost time.”

“What are you after, a to the last detail description of the Little Lion’s ‘little lion’?”
Vareesa snorted. “Not quite that far. I’d just like to know if my dear sister has finally met her match.”

“’Match’ isn’t quite the right word.” She grumbled, the creaking sign at last coming into view. “Now, enough of that. This isn’t a conversation to be overheard by the Tailor.”

With a last titter of amusement both of her sisters fell silent, much to Sylvanas’ relief. Sew Nice was a towering building in the eastern portion of Stormwind’s Trade District and it was immediately evident, upon crossing the threshold—if the fact that they’d been commissioned to produce the clothing for the Royal wedding in the first place hadn’t been enough of a giveaway—that it catered exclusively to the Kingdom’s rich and Royal. Swaths of fabric hung from the walls on all sides: a gleaming expanse of linen dyed in all colors, Frostweave, Embersilk, Windwool and a fact which led her to suspect Gallywix was already sticking his flabby fingers into Stormwind’s pie, Shal’dorei silk. Clean, well-organized and scented with a hidden source of potpourri the store was lit by a handful of windows set high on the walls.

Sylvanas still wasn’t certain how she felt about the prospect of having to wear something designed by others in a no doubt appallingly Human style which she’d had no hand in and was only mildly reassured by the lack of horrific puffy dresses as her eyes scanned the area, landing at last on the wooden mannequin posted against the far wall. A bare wood torso attached to an iron pole it sported nothing but a near completed cloak crafted from heavy fabric and dyed a bloody scarlet, attached to a single shoulder piece and secured halfway across the chest by a thin pewter chain sporting a clasp shaped into the symbol of the Horde.

Hopefully the Alliance symbolism in her outfit would be equally as subtle. If she came out of this dressed up like a billboard Stormwind would be looking for a new Royal Tailor and she’d be attending the ceremony in her typical ensemble. She didn’t think Anduin would be terribly bothered, given his own complaints about the mysterious ancestral plate he’d be adorning at least for the first part of the night.

Well, he’d be bothered about the tailor.

“They’re really serious about the ‘unity’ angle.” Alleria followed her gaze. “I’m sure that he’ll be pleased about that much.”

“From what I’ve been lead to believe anything is a relief over what the nobility is forcing him into; and to be completely fair the design of the ancestral plate is incredibly outdated but I guess that’s the point of ‘ancestral’ being in there, isn’t it?” a woman appeared from the backroom of the shop, voice slightly muffled by the pins clenched in her mouth and with a pincushion clutched in one hand as she made a beeline for the mannequin. Quickly adjusting the cloak and pinning the cut line into an orderly pleat. A Half-Elf with cropped black hair, the partial points of her ears only just visible. “Human fashion really is horrendous, especially in formal situations, but I do what I can. I’ve measurements already so his Highness’ clothing only needs a few quick corrections the day of. Yours, however…” turning back the woman observed them with eyes a shade of brown which could only have come from her human parent. “I think I got passably close, but I’ll definitely need to make a few more in-depth fixes. Follow me, if you wouldn’t mind.”

The back of the store was much less organized than the front, a cluttered workspace filled with papers covered in ink designs. Another company of mannequins, mostly bare but one sporting the rest of what was likely Anduin’s outfit and another what seemed to be hers. Much to Sylvanas’ relief it was much closer to what she was currently wearing than the ridiculous belling dress she’d expected to have to bite and claw her way out of. A bit less revealing (which was somewhat disappointing as watching Anduin attempt to avoid staring at her while in front of a large crowd
would have been the highlight of the event) and made of cloth instead of mail it sported the same pattern of dark blue and gold as the overcoat she’d so often seen the young King wearing. Discretely attached beneath the shoulder piece was a veil of diaphanous gold which had been embroidered in such a way that, if viewed under the right lighting and at the right angle, appeared to hold the image of a lion. Loose in some places and tight in others, the necessary changes were noted and they were quickly released.

The walk to the florists was much shorter than the walk to Sew Nice had been but Sylvanas was under no illusion that their last stop of the day would be any faster than the first had been. After waving away with more force than was necessary the man who’d attempted to greet them at the door the Banshee Queen subjected the premade bouquets arranged on a table for her perusal a withering glare and left her sisters to look through them, slipping between the shelves. Flipping through the pages to those she’s marked in reminder of what she was looking for and quickly coming to realize that it was a much taller order to find four flowers than she’d ever expected. There seemed to be no immediately evident order to the store and it wasn’t until both her sisters had caught up that she finally succeeded.

“Carnation, Hydrangea, Stock and Queen’s Lace?” Vareesa said. “Those aren’t exactly wedding flowers.”

“Wrynn speaks plant, apparently.” She drawled as they circled back to the front of the store. “If a flower says it he might actually manage to get the message through his pin sized head.”

“And what message is the flower saying?” Alleria seemed supremely amused.

“That’s of personal concern. Besides, the damned carnation is only there for filler!”

“Convenient filler.”

With an exasperated noise Sylvanas left both of her sisters snickering behind her and dropped the flowers on the counter before making for the door. She’d never have imagined finding herself in a situation where she’d actually be running back to Anduin but at least he shut up when she told him to.

Sometimes.

The sun had nearly reached its highest point in the sky as they passed beneath the palace gate to the polite acknowledgement of the Royal Guard. More guards than she remembered seeing earlier that morning. The palace doors were equally as open and the throne room still equally as friendly to assassination attempts but that wasn’t enough to convince her that nothing was amiss. Anduin and her nephews were nowhere to be found and where to begin looking for them she had no clue beyond, perhaps, the lawns where he could act as if he were closer to their age than his own. Luckily, they ran into Ames before having to search the entire castle and were pointed towards the library.

Stormwind’s Royal Library was an expansive room just off the main hall leading up to the throne, filled with towering shelves of old tomes and occupied by a number of scholars who couldn’t be bothered to look up from their work and acknowledge them. Kept slightly hotter than the rest of the castle no doubt in an effort to better preserve their stock the space smelled strongly of parchment and dust. They found the young King curled up with the twins on one of the couches scattered throughout the room, fast asleep and with one of his nephews tucked comfortably to each side and an old adventurer’s journal still clutched limply in hand appearing as if in danger of falling to the floor at any moment. Ignoring Vareesa and Alleria’s exchanged comments about how ‘adorable’ the scene was Sylvanas slipped the text from his hand and looked down at it: a detailed image of
the Throne of Thunder had been rendered on the yellowing parchment.

She closed the book and set it on a nearby table before looking back at him. For a split second, without reason or invitation, the two boys beside the sleeping Priest appeared to have blonde hair instead of red.

“Anduin!” Her sudden irritation made it come out sharper than it should have and all three started awake, the young King blindly grabbing at the twin near the edge of the couch to keep him from toppling onto the floor. Giramar and Galadin slowly sat up and pawed at their eyes as Anduin blinked blearily around a cavernous yawn.

“Light, we must have been more tired than we thought, huh boys?” he smiled and his gaze quickly located journal on the nearby table. “We’ll have to finish the story of the Siege of Lei Shen’s fortress the next time I see the two of you.”

“Can you tell us about your tour too, Uncle Andy?” one of the two of them, Sylvanas couldn’t be bothered to tell which, mumbled.

As expected Anduin flashed an indulgent smile and ran his fingers through his hair. “I’d be happy to, Galadin, and I hope that I’ll see the two of you soon: and not just at my wedding to your aunt. Now, I’m sure your mothers missed you.”

Both threw their arms around his neck and hugged him before getting up from the couch and trotting over to Vareesa who greeted them with a smile and a gentle squeeze of her own. “I hope the two of you are ready to go, because just as soon as I’ve spoken with your uncle we’ll be heading back to Dalaran.”

“We’ve plenty of open space at the keep, Vareesa.” Anduin said, brushing wrinkles out of his clothing as he rose to his feet. “We’d be happy to host the three of you here, at the very least until the wedding.”

“That’s kind of you, Anduin, but it really isn’t necessary.”

“We’re family.” He said. “I insist.”

At the mention of potentially staying in the keep both boys perked up. “Can we, mother? Please?” Vareesa sighed and looked over at them both. “You really wouldn’t mind?”

“Well…” Sylvanas began.

Anduin cut her off with a swift “of course not!” which earned him a mild glare. “It will be nice to have those rooms see use. For some of them it will be the first time since the Keep was rebuilt after the Second War. Alleria?”

The eldest Windrunner sister smiled. “I’d be glad to stay at least until the wedding. I don’t think Vareesa or I would want to impose.”

“Boys, why don’t you go and pick a room to stay in?”

“Yes mother!” Giramar chirped, taking his younger twin by the wrist. “Come on, Gal! Let’s find the room with the best view!” The twins swiftly rushed off, vanishing through the library’s open door.

“They weren’t trouble, were they?” Vareesa asked as they stepped away, weaving between shelves
until they found themselves beside a small window.

“Trouble? Light, no. But…I think it may be best if you encourage Galadin to talk. About what happened and how he feels. I tried to do the same thing: to sit there and bare it until time made the wounds go numb but it wasn’t until your sister forced me to realize that would never happen for me to begin getting better. It’ll still be a long road but…even now I feel better. But that’s not what I wished to talk about.” Anduin fiddled with his gloves. “Please, allow me to finish before you take this the wrong way but…a King needs an Heir and the treaty will be stronger if that Heir shares blood with at least one of us. Adoption wouldn’t manage that, but…”

“But?” Vareesa prompted, raising an eyebrow.

When Anduin looked at her it was with a heavy grimness. “I know firsthand that being Crown Prince is anything but a fairy tale but…Arator is a bit too old to go through the years of training it would take not to be eaten alive in Stormwind’s Royal Court but neither of the twins are.” He said. “I wanted to ask your permission before I broached the subject to them. And then their desire for the post before I approach the House of Nobles. If the matter even makes it that far…”

“You’re not certain they’d accept either of them as the Heir to the Lion Seat.” She said. “Because they’re Half Elf.”

“They’re Half Human too.”

Vareesa sighed. “You’re a good man, Anduin.”

The young King focused his gaze on the window in front of them. “That’s what people keep telling me.” He said. “Sometimes I wonder.”

“That’s how you know it’s true.” She said. “But they’re twins, Anduin. I’m not sure how you’d ever go about choosing between the two of them.”

“I wouldn’t.” He said. “I’d proceed by the same protocol as Kings with twin Heirs have had in the past, though it’s only happened rarely in my line: they’d rule together.”

“If Gidwin and Galadin would want to be King then I won’t stand in the way of you taking them under your wing, Anduin.” She said. “The leader of a country, let alone a Faction as powerful as the Alliance, is quite the career for a mother to aspire for her sons and I can’t think of anyone on Azeroth who’s example I’d rather they follow.”

“Thank you, Vareesa. Saying that is very kind.” He said. “Now, I think we should be getting back to where we left your sisters. I’m afraid Sylvanas and I need to be briefed on matters of importance by my Spymaster.”

“Of course.” Vareesa said as they began making their way back through the shelves. “And thank you.”

Anduin canted his head. “For what?”

“For finally dragging my sister out of her sewer. You’re good for her.” She said. “And, regardless of what she claims, it’s obvious she really does care about you a great deal.”

“I think we’re friends, at least.” He said. “And in a political marriage, the sort of marriage I was doomed to by my station, that’s as much as I ever could have hoped for.”

“Can I ask what you feel for Sylvanas? Do you love her?”
“I think it’s too soon to call it love.” He said. “But it won’t be much longer before I can answer that question with ‘yes’. Though I’m not sure she’s particularly pleased with that reality.”

“That does sound like her.” Vareesa said. “Please, don’t let her frighten you off.”

“If that was going to happen I think I’d have headed for the hills by now.” He said. “She was quite vicious at first and made a point of explaining in great detail just how easy it would have been for her to strangle me in the night when we first got to Orgrimmar.”

Sylvanas and Alleria were still standing where they’d last seen them; after biding both of his soon to be sisters in law a polite farewell and explaining the situation to the Dark Lady Anduin led the way to the Keep’s war room. How, exactly, Mathias always managed to know precisely when and where he needed to materialize Anduin doubted he’d ever understand but the leader of SI:7 was, yet again, present even before they were and something told him that he hadn’t been waiting there all day.

“You said that SI:7 had concerns over growing Defias activity, Mathias?” Anduin asked once the door had been securely shut behind them. “That you’ve reason to be concerned they may plan to strike during the wedding?”

“As I stated earlier, your Majesty, the Defias Brotherhood has shown concerning increases in activity which have steadily been ramping up with each day that the wedding draws closer. They’ve been paid to run a job by someone but we’ve been unable to work out by whom: Vancleef is clever and matters aren’t helped by the fact that we were forced to work together under the banner of the Uncrowned during the Legion’s invasion. Entry into the Deadmines while remaining undetected is impossible.”

“For SI:7.” A vicious smile played across Sylvanas’ face. “The Shattered Hand will be plenty pleased to have the chance to show you up. And though expecting word by tomorrow is asking perhaps too much, even from the Forsaken amidst their ranks, but they’ll have word. Concern yourself, Shaw, with bolstering the cities defenses for whatever may be attempted in the meantime while my Horde handles the real work.”

Briefly, Mathias’ expression flickered towards a bemused smirk. “The Shattered Hand’s aid will be appreciated, and something I doubt she’d expect. SI: 7 is grateful for the help.” He said. “The City Guard has already been informed. Patrols have been tripled and security considerably tightened.” Mathias turned his full attention to Anduin. “I must ask, Highness, that you remain inside unless absolutely necessary until we have more information. And that you bring at least Fearbreaker, if not Shalamayne, and a full guard along with you.”

“You’d be better off putting him in a leash and collar; he was quite cooperative in Tirisfall until he wasn’t any more, at which point he’d decided that playing tea party with some of my Dread Guards and the Scarlet Crusade would be a marvelous way to spend his time.” Sylvanas said. “Nathanos will accompany him as well.”

“Nathanos isn’t going to like that.” Anduin said.

“Which should serve well in keeping your little expeditions to a minimum.” Sylvanas said. “Your guards are incompetent to the last and far too complacent around you given your tendency to bolt at strange times. I can trust my Champion to be impossible for you to shake, making it impossible for them to kill you no matter how many they send.”

“This isn’t-.”
“Negotiable? You’re quite right, Wrynn, it’s not. How many times must we go over the fact that I’m not going to let you die until I’m done with you until it sticks?”

The young King sighed. “We’re to wed tomorrow. I’ll only have a brief period of time to greet the other leaders before the nobles pull me away for torture,” at this much Shaw snickered, “so there’s no need for either of you to be so concerned. I can behave myself until we’ve word on the matter and the Defias have been dealt with. Contrary to what the public may believe I don’t have a death wish.” Neither of them looked particularly convinced. “Are we finished here, Mathias?”

“Until further word comes in, yes.” The Spymaster said. “You’ll be alerted as soon as we have word.”

“Thank you, Spymaster.” Anduin said. “I have every confidence that, between SI:7 and the Shattered Hand the matter will be resolved safely and with all possible speed. Now,” a heavy sigh, “a very unfortunate reality is that I have a lot of paperwork to catch up on and should probably get back to that as soon as possible.”

He almost seemed to be dragging his feet as he left the room. It took much longer than he’d expected to even put a mild dent in the fortress of ink and paper littering his desk and it wasn’t until late in the night that he finally collapsed onto his bed. He’d barely nodded off before being startled back awake by the sensation of the bed beside him depressing. He spun around to be confronted by highly unimpressed red eyes.

“Go back to sleep, Wrynn. And don’t look so surprised. I’ve already told you that getting through that window is child’s play for me.”

“But,” his voice was slightly slurred with disturbed sleep and keeping his eyes open was difficult, “what are you doing in here?”

“It seems like paperwork makes you forget things you’d been informed of just hours ago.” By now Sylvanas had made herself perfectly at home in his bed and Anduin was helpless to stop her. “I lack all confidence in the Stormwind Royal Guard and am not about to stand by and allow a pack of Human mongrels to take away my toy.”

Sleep made his smile entirely lopsided. “So, you’re protecting me?”

“Go back to sleep, Anduin.” Now she sounded put upon and the young King couldn’t help but laugh as his pulled the sheets up to his chin.
Royal Gate Crashing

Chapter Notes

Alright, so as promised here we have the results:
Most amusing would have to be Devious_Hat's translations of the three bonus flowers
Most accurate would be a tie between Nixor's and Devious_Hat's.

The proper translation will be in the notes at the bottom

Despite his deepest hopes for peace which he knew the new King of the Alliance shared a few
months prior to that day Thrall never would have believed that he’d ever find himself sailing
unopposed into the harbor of the opposite Faction’s capital aboard a cutter proudly baring the red
flag of the Horde or that he’d be taking his mate and children with him and yet that was precisely
what he was doing now. The deep blue water of the Human harbor lapped at the bladed prow of
*The Orgatha’ar* and the towering white walls of Stormwind cast long shadows across the wooden
decks. It was instantly clear that the fortress city was holding its breath in anticipation to celebrate,
at long last, the true mark of the end of the war. Banners and ribbons hung seemingly from every
wall and the sweet smell of white roses and magnolia flowers joined the salt of the sea in the air.
Guards littered the area, stood at full attention, and though they were dressed fully in ceremonial
plate rather than their more practical standard armor and sported gilded halberds rather than swords
the sheer number of them failed to strike Thrall as anything other than strange.

Heavy hoof steps marked Baine’s approach as the Tauren joined him at the rails, looking out over
the scene with concern as their ship dropped anchor beside the open dock they’d been directed to.
“Extra security.” His voice was grim. “Something must have happened. I doubt they’re so
concerned about protecting Anduin from us.”

“He came back unscathed, aside from what happened outside of Dolanaar, from the wedding tour
so I think you’re right.” The former Warchief said. “It must have something to do with the Defias.”

Baine’s ears flicked back against his horns. “If they attack tonight it won’t just be Stormwind’s
guard they’re fighting. He has friends in the Horde, more so now than ever before.” On the docks
beside them were a myriad of other ships marking the presence of the other race’s delegations: the
blue and lilac sail of Kal’dorei ship flapping in the wind; the gilded hull of a Blood Elven vessel
glinting in the sun; the horned skull adorning a Forsaken Dreadship throwing odd shadows across
salt scored planks. “That the Royal Guard feels it necessary to heighten security so much
regardless speaks ill to how bold they must have become.”

Thrall couldn’t help but agree. “I wasn’t in Orgrimmar at the time, but Saurfang tells me Anduin
hasn’t changed since I last saw him.”

Baine’s low rumble rolled across the deck. “Had you expected him to?”

“No. But years ago I’d have said the same as Jaina.” A brief beat of grim silence. “I hear that
Sylvanas has grown quite attached to him.”

“She seemed to be beginning to be when they found their way to Thunderbluff. If things have gone
beyond that, I wouldn’t be the one to ask.” He said. “Though, knowing Anduin, I wouldn’t doubt he’s grown on her considerably.”

“That she’d agree to marry him at all, to treat even briefly with the Alliance, comes as a shock.”
The gang planks dropped to the dock with the loud clatter of dried wood. “I’ll admit my concerns over Vol’jin’s decision to name her his successor. She always has been…volatile.”

Aggra, holding six year old Durak and three year old Tanti each by the hand, emerged from below deck and cast the city a gaze of wary interest as another ship, this one bearing Rokhan and several other Trolls along with Saurfang and his party, slid passed. Together, they disembarked.

Standing on the other end of the dock, under the watchful eye of every guard present and-somewhat surprisingly-Nathans and engaged in animated conversation with a pair of Forsaken, was Anduin. He’d grown considerably since the former Warchief had last seen him, his long golden hair pulled back into a neat tail which tumbled down the back of his overcoat and a black cane in one hand. Catching sight of their arrival he politely extricated himself and turned to greet them with a gleaming, genuine smile.

“Baine. Thrall. And you must be Aggra.” He said brightly. “I’m so glad you could make and…oh, who’s this?” blue eyes fell on Durak and Tanti and, despite both being nearly Anduin’s size, the two children shyly hid behind their mother.

“My son and daughter,” Thrall said, “Durak and Tanti.”

“They seem to be feeling a little bit shy today.” The Priest seemed mildly disappointed. “Maybe that will change later. How long do you plan to stay? Celebrations should span at least the weekend.”

“We wouldn’t want to impose.”

“Impose? Nonsense! The war is over and Orcs are as welcome in my city as any other race. Anyone who attempts to say otherwise will be answering to me directly, and though I may have a reputation for kindness I can be hard if need be.” Said with the same ferocity as the young Prince he’d once been had when he’d challenged Garrosh on his views of honor.

“The ceremony begins in a few more hours.” Baine said, sounding amused. “Shouldn’t you be off somewhere getting ready?”

Anduin’s expression went suddenly slack and he opened his mouth to respond, but before he could there was a shout of “Majesty, this childishness is unreasonable!” from the top of the harbor stairs and their attention was drawn to a pair of well-dressed men making their way purposefully towards them. Nobles. The young King instantly tried to bolt and, after coming to the realization that his only real hope of escape would be to swim for it and making a near perfect imitation of a cornered Tallstrider-squawk and all-Anduin seemed to begrudgingly accept his fate.

“Lord Hewitt.” He simpered, an uncomfortable smile on his lips. “Count Ridgewell. I’m…merely greeting some of my guests and hadn’t realized the time.”

Neither of the older men looked particularly convinced, not that any of the amused onlookers could blame them as Anduin’s efforts at lying had been poor at best.

“If enforcing compliance is necessary,” the Dark Ranger Lord drawled, “I’d be happy to provide a Tranquilizing Shot.”

“Oh!” With every reason to think that Sylvanas wouldn’t be terribly bothered by the matter if it did
come to it as Tranquilizing Shots weren’t fatal and quickly determining that delaying being locked into a metal suit wasn’t worth taking an arrow to somewhere undignified Anduin let out an annoyed huff and held up his hands in surrender. “There’s no need for such measures. As I said, I simply lost track of time. Let’s hasten to the Keep, now; no need to tarry. I can’t afford to be late for my own wedding.”

Despite this the young King persisted to drag his feet and Thrall suspected this had more to do with the ‘Lion bucket’ he was mutinously hissing about then the fact that he’d be meeting the Banshee Queen at the altar. Knowing it was better to grin and bear it and get it over with quickly than to resist and draw it out Anduin gave the nobles no further trouble and changed into the light leather padding which went beneath the armor before starting the hours long process of securing the countless straps and buckles on the boots, grieves, breast plate and spaulders and then attaching Shalamayne to his hip. Feeling much too heavy for his comfort and really quite square, stripped of his cane and with his leg struggling to support the added weight, Anduin stumbled down the stairs of the keep to be met by Gideon and Ames along with Dreamer, outfitted in a crinet and shaffron of gleaming plate and a peytral baring Stormwind’s standard.

“You too?”

The Palomino’s snort seemed to say ‘we never speak of this again’ and Anduin was all too keen to agree, pulling himself up into the gilded saddle and taking the reins. Stormwind’s streets were paved in roses and lined with cheering crowds; his own citizens and visitors of all sorts from the races of both the Alliance and the Horde all wanting to catch a glimpse of the mounted King and, later, the skeletal horse-drawn carriage of the soon to be Queen even if they couldn’t all quite fit into the doubtlessly crammed full cathedral or wait until the open reception in the city’s square, kept back from blocking his path by a line of watchful guardsmen. Anduin took the time to nod and smile at each in turn as, with every hoof step Dreamer put behind them, the ceremony which would properly seal the Accord drew closer.

Dismounting at the base of the Cathedral’s stairs and pausing just long enough to hug Valeera as she took Dreamer’s reigns, he squared his shoulders and walked through the open doors. The reddened light of late evening slanted in through the beveled windows and a great host of candles worked together to leave the space lighter than he’d ever seen it. As expected, every inch of space was packed by people of all races and stripes and, as Anduin strode proudly up the isle to stand before the altar he was able to recognize a few faces: Velen, Moira, Baine. Jaina wasn’t there. Neither was Genn.

He didn’t know what he’d expected.

Movement from above caught his eye as he reached the altar and he looked up in time to catch brief sight of a shadow-winged and approximately dog-sized-flit between the rafters far overhead but he wasn’t given the chance to truly process its implications the doors to the cathedral opened again and all eyes, including his, turned towards it. Jayiah really had outdone herself, Anduin couldn’t help but think. Accompanied by her sisters the Banshee Queen was clad in an intricate ensemble of Stormwind blue and gold only a few shades darker than her skin and just shy of revealing enough to be improper. Her hair was free from the hood usually used to contain it, a thick curtain which spilled down about her shoulders and gave way to a thin lacy cloak of golden fabric which billowed lightly as she walked and seemed to reflect a pattern of lions. He offered her a hand as she reached the altar and she rolled her eyes but took it, allowing him to offer unneeded assistance up the stairs. As she reached the top and stood across from him red eyes looked him over and a delicate eyebrow rose.

“You couldn’t find a larger set of spaulders?”
He smiled, turned pink and looked down. “Atrocious, aren’t they? I feel like a block of unformed wood.” Anduin said. “You vastly outshine me as things stand, my Lady.”

“Things will be equalized once you find a can opener.” Her nails tapped sharply against the hardened metal. “Shall we get this over with?”

“It won’t be long.” Another small smile as blue eyes found the flowers she held. “Far from the traditional wedding bouquet. Had Brigham run out of orange lilies by the time you made it there?” A scoff and a sneer, though it carried no bite. He dipped his head. “Treating you with dignity, basic humanity, is hardly something worthy of recognition. All the same, you’re more than welcome.”

“Shut it, Wrynn, before I gag you with these!” It was only half threateningly that she brandished the bouquet and Anduin couldn’t help but laugh as Laurena took her place between them and the altar. Silence fell completely, almost stifling as it covered the room like a veil. The Queen’s ring, his mother’s ring, found its place on her finger for a second time. Tradition left little room for personalized words but all things considered Anduin doubted Sylvanas would have had much to say in so public a venue regardless. And at last, after what seemed like both an instant and an age, the last beats came. The call for objections: more rhetorical than a true invitation. Anduin expected this to go without a hitch, just as the rest of the ceremony had.

By now he should have known better.

A woman, face concealed by a hood and her tall figure one he didn’t recognize, stepped from amidst the thick crowd; pulling back the hood revealed feathered black hair and harsh eyes.

“Personally, I have none: let your King marry a corpse that can’t bear, it’ll only make ending his line easier, but my employers aren’t pleased by his little gambit and since I’m currently representing them I’m afraid my boys and I have to rain on this happy little occasion.” She pulled a glowing blade from beneath her loose clothing and pointed it at him. “Seize him!”

The nearest guards closed ranks around them but physical seizure wasn’t what the Defias’ leader had in mind. A Mage was hidden somewhere among the figures who’d used the crowd to hide and the Arcane crackled across his skin; the spell acting too swiftly for him to call out a warning as he felt the teleportation take effect. Just as he winked out of existence something heavy collided with his back.

The next thing Anduin knew he was lying dazed on his front on the deck of a ship anchored just far enough off the coast that it wouldn’t be easily visible from Stormwind. The weight on his back vanished and, a split second later, there was the sound of an arrow leaving a string followed by a thud and a yowl of pain. Twice more before a gruff voice snarled “get up, Wrynn!”

Nathanos barely spared the time to glare down at him before knocking another arrow and downing a third Defias, then a forth, then a fifth and clearing the deck. Still slightly impaired by the rapidly retreating effects of whatever spell he’d been hit with Anduin struggled to his feet.

“Thank you.” He said.

The Dark Ranger Lord turned away from him with a sound of disgust, pulling a horn from his belt. “You mean nothing to me.” The ghastly shriek echoed across the water and the winged form of a bat soon became visible streaking towards them through the falling night.

“Then why did you save me?”

Red eyes ran him through as the great bat circled the masts then swooped down to the deck beside
them. Unlike Sylvanas’, they’d never warmed. “Because you mean something to her, against all logic, and that means everything to the Forsaken.” He turned away. “Bloodwing will take us back to your city. Those mongrels will pay for attempting to rob my Lady and you will use that sword and armor to make yourself at least passably useful.”

His tone brokered no disagreement and in honesty Anduin wouldn’t have tried as he preferred the Blightcaller’s demands that he make himself useful over the typical attempts of his own guards to lock him in a closet for safe keeping and clambered most ungracefully up behind the other man. Leaving the Defias ship anchored where it was to be combed for evidence by SI:7 they flew back across the harbor and were deposited back in Stormwind’s streets only a handful of minutes later.

‘Making himself useful’ proved difficult as Nathanos was clearly on a warpath and quite vindictively shot at everything that moved and wasn’t dressed in Stormwind’s colors.

“Anduin!” They’d only just managed to make it back into Cathedral Square before Valeera and Sylvanas swooped down on them’; the Banshee Queen had managed to produce a sword from Light only knew where and, despite being entirely devoid of even the slightest splatter of blood, had clearly cut her way through a number of foes to get there and Valeera wasn’t much better, daggers white knuckled in her hands and green eyes darting viciously around. “Well done, Nathanos, for acting swiftly to return him to me.”

“Vancleave got away and the rest are on the run, but the Guard managed to catch or kill quite a few. They’ve been taken to the stockades and the SI:7 are already on the case: Mathias is overseeing matters.”

“We’ve captured the ship they seem to have used to get here as well: I trust both the SI:7 and Shattered Hand will be able to wrest free whatever clues might be there.” Anduin said.

“Everyone’s still inside?”

Valeera nodded. “The Royal Guard locked the Cathedral down, near about, to prevent any more of them from getting in.”

“Good.” He started back up the stairs towards the securely closed doors. “The Accord won’t be truly sealed until we’re wed, everyone’s come out and gone through so much trouble, we were almost finished as it was and I see no reason to delay any further. And what better way to throw matters back into the face of whomever was behind this then by going through with what they tried to prevent?”

A low buzz of tense conversation had filled the room in the wake of the attack and the absence of the guard but it once more fell silent as Anduin-Shalamayne still drawn and leaving a trail of crimson droplets in his wake-through the doors open and calmly made his way back to the front, casting Laurena in an expectant gaze. “Now that that little interruption has been dealt with,” he said with a huff, “I believe we were at ‘you may now kiss the bride’?”

Chapter End Notes

Carnation (dark red) - deep love and/or affection
Stock - contentment with the way life is now
Hydrangea - thank you for your understanding
Queen’s Lace - sanctuary
Altogether meant to mean: Thank you for your understanding and for being my sanctuary. I've found happiness with and have fallen for you.
The Wind and the Lion

Though the mood had never quite returned to the carefree attitude it had been prior to the unwanted interruption Anduin’s swift and relatively casual return had done its job and much of the panic was quickly resolved and, as the last of the attackers were put an end to be it through arrest or otherwise—the ceremony was carried through to its proper end and the night was allowed to proceed onwards almost as it had meant to be: the only change was that, out of a desire to keep Anduin out of the open to further tempt disaster, the initial plan to hold the reception in the Trade District’s square owing to the much greater space it offered was scrapped and matters were moved over to the ballroom of the Keep. Relieved at last to shrug off the ancient plate which had rested on his shoulders like a heavy burden all through the night and ignoring the fact that the doors were almost impossible to get in or out of owing to the sheer number of guards who’d cram themselves into them, Anduin swiftly changed into the scarlet and silver ensemble of satin and cloth which had been left for him and exited the small room located at the end of the ballroom’s hall.

“King Wrynn” Elowynn and Laurence had replaced Ciara, who’d been standing outside of the room when he’d gone in. He nodded at them both, smiled and started back towards the ballroom well aware of the fact that they trailed him only a handful of steps behind until he reached his destination and slipped into the crowd; they pulled back at that point, but Anduin was more than well aware he remained under close watch.

The night’s affair was many times larger than even the greatest soirées held on the premises in the past, figures ranging the full spectrum of races packing the space from wall to wall to the point where it was almost uncomfortable and near impossible to move, but despite that the crowd was happy and talk and laughter rang clear above the sound of the band warming up. Even crammed as it was it didn’t take Anduin long to find Sylvanas tolerating conversation with Thrall and Baine.

“As much a shame as it is to have the weather go to waste, I’m still equally relieved to be free of that metal suit.” He flashed a lopsided smile as he trotted to a stop beside them and Sylvanas turned. “I didn’t get the chance to say it earlier, my Lady, but you truly do look beautiful tonight. More so than usual.”

“Once more with the unoriginality.” She looked him over with keen, appraising eyes. “I’ll admit that your royal tailor is good at her craft. The Elven blood, I’m sure.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” He replied with a gentle chuckle. “And as for the matter of my originality, as we’ve said, I lean more towards honesty instead. What I say may have been said, and said better, by others many times before but it will never be more heartfelt.” Another snort and a roll of her eyes as he turned to the other leaders. “I must apologize, gentlemen, but I’m afraid I have to steal my lovely wife away. At least temporarily. It’s tradition that the royal couple be the first to dance, and I doubt the band will begin to truly play before we’re on the floor.”

“By all means, Anduin, don’t let us keep you.” Baine said, amused. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in red before; it suits you.”

“Watch it, Tauren.” Sylvanas stepped up to Anduin, putting herself half possessively between them. “Or I might get the idea that you and my husband are more than simply friends.”

“I am quite fond of Baine but not in the way that I’ve come to be of you, Sylvanas. You’ve my fidelity, no need for concern.” He said, smile never slipping. “And thank you. It’s a nice change of pace to wear Horde colors. Now that the war is over, I may do so a bit more often.”
“Are we going to dance or would you prefer to have a conversation with them instead?” her
demand was half-ferocious, glaring up at him as she grabbed his wrist.

Amused, nodding to the pair before returning his full attention to her, he motioned towards the
open space meant to serve as a dancefloor. “Shall we?”

“It’s almost unbelievable.” Thrall said as he watched them go, Anduin apparently quite content to
be dragged along behind her through the tight-pressed crowd. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

“I don’t think anyone did.” Baine watched them reach the open floor at last and turn to face each
other. One gloved hand delicately took hers as the other found her hip. Her free hand placed on his
chest instead of his shoulder, lower than was usual in ballroom dancing, over his heart. “But those
of us who knew him should have known better. He got through to Garrosh, in many ways. He got
through to his father. Why would Sylvanas be any different? No matter how hard the rock thrown
into a river is, it will always be worn smooth.”

“Sylvanas was more like a diamond than a rock.” It was hard to reconcile her now with the hate-
filled, bitter woman who’d found her way to the Horde’s door years ago. In many ways, when
Anduin was around, she was almost unrecognizable. The way they spoke. The way she looked at
him. It was clear that merely tolerating the young King wasn’t all that she was doing, even if that
wasn’t something the Banshee Queen wanted to admit.

Even to herself.

As a great swell of music went up around them and all nearby eyes turned to look Anduin adjusted
his grip, pulling her with him into a waltz.

“I certainly hope you’re more graceful in this than you were around the bonfire at Thunderbluff.”
She said, smirking. Anduin grinned. “What would your people say if they say their beloved
monarch stumbling about like a concussed Ettin?”

“I’m not certain, but luckily we’re not going to find out.” Though hindered by his leg, as he seemed
to be in almost everything, Anduin managed to keep to the three-step rhythm with ease. Clearly, he
knew it well. “I was raised on ballroom dancing.”

“Not bad.” She traced gentle fingertips along the ridge of his collarbone where it lay hidden
beneath the fine fabric of his shirt. “Though not the best I’ve seen.”

“Footwork.” Yet another of those crooked smiles as they continued to whirl around the floor. “The
similarity between my sword training and my dance training which I never could quite master. I’m
passable, at least, and that’s enough.”

She barely acknowledged this latest statement, continuing to fiddle with the fabric of his shirt. “The
Tauren isn’t wrong. You cut quite a figure in Horde colors.”

“Much could be said for you.” Anduin replied. “Stormwind colors suit you.”

A quiet scoff. “Let’s see about getting you into something purple next.”

“Undercity colors?” he said. “We’ll see: I wouldn’t be opposed but I think we’ve asked enough of
lovely Jayiah for the time being.”

“‘Lovely’ Jayiah?” she repeated. “Certain you want to continue insisting you don’t have a thing for
Elves?”
“There’s no need for jealousy, Sylvanas.”

“I am not jealous.”

“Yes, I definitely believe you.” He silenced her efforts to protest with a kiss, swift and with teeth and all without breaking step.

Sylvanas growled. “Forget this worthless party! There are much better things we could be doing upstairs. In the Royal Chambers and with much less on.”

Another chuckle, though it was clear from the huskiness of his voice when he spoke that he was equally affected. “Rather eager, Lady Windrunner.”

“Anduin!” She was tempted to take the grin off his face with her fist.

“We can’t simply run off upstairs to consummate the marriage. A King and Queen must at least do the very minimum to follow proper-.”

“I thought you promised we’d be through with your damned propriety once the vows had been spoken.”

“Regarding abstinence.”

An exasperated noise: Anduin had the feeling that, if one of her hands hadn’t been busy gripping a fistful of his shirt and the other hadn’t been in his grip, she’d have thrown both of them up in annoyance. “So now the truth comes out!”

“An hour, my Lady. No more. You have my word.” He pulled her closer, lips curling into a sly smirk against her ear as the song came to an end and countless other couples joined them on the floor. “I’ll admit you’re not the only one looking forward to our escape.”

“The truth comes out indeed.” Sylvanas said, though she seemed willing, if only barely, to tolerate that hour long wait. “But tell me, Wrynn, is entertaining your nobles really worth it?”

“It has nothing to do with entertaining the nobles.” He said. “But we still have gifts to open.”

“Oh, of course! The presents are what’s caught your attention.” She huffed. “I’d almost forgotten I’ve married a child!” He laughed, opened his mouth to either deny his childishness or fire back with something playful but something caught his eye before he could and pulled his attention away. His expression became one of confusion and disbelief, and then hardened into the same cold mask she’d seen at Light’s Hope. “Anduin-.”

“Come with me.” Grip on her wrist gentle but firm enough to make wrenching free something which required effort, Anduin began tugging her with him towards an open door which led out onto a dark balcony. “What in the Light…I didn’t think…best to determine why he’s here before I have the Guard informed.”

“What are you on about, Anduin?”

No reply. They stepped through the doorway onto the dark balcony and the shadow-shrouded figure which stood there turned to face them. Red eyes blinking through the night.

“Ah, my dear King. It’s been too long.”

Anduin allowed himself no reaction and when he spoke his voice was monotoned. “What are you
“Why, Anduin, you almost sound displeased to see me.”

“That would make two of us, Dragon.” Sylvanas hissed. “If he doesn’t have a good reason for being here I’ll have you know that I’m in need of a new pair of boots.”

If Wrathion expected the King to protest on his behalf he was sorely disappointed. “I’d have swept in with great dramatics to steal you away at the allotted time in Human tradition but Vancleef beat me to it so I’ve had to settle for this.” No reaction. The Dragon’s face fell. His hair had grown longer since Anduin had last seen him, as had his horns, and the turban was nowhere to be found. “Don’t think for a moment that I didn’t care about you.”

“Not enough.” The Priest’s tone was dry. “Clearly. There was never a chance between us either way.”

“I didn’t want things to end between us the way they did. You must believe that.”

“I believe,” he drawled, “that my father was right. Corrupt or not, you’re no less dangerous than the rest of your Flight and I want you nowhere near my people or my family. Get to your point and get out of my kingdom.”

“I didn’t want what happened at the Temple of the White Tiger to be the way things ended between us.”

“You’re too late, Wrathion.”

The Black Prince dropped his gaze. “I know.”

“You have ten minutes to leave Stormwind before I alert the Royal Guard to your presence.”

“Wait!” Anduin turned back reluctantly. Sylvanas glared, pleased to see that the young Dragon couldn’t entirely suppress a cringe beneath the heat of her gaze. “Is it not tradition for one to bring their friends tidings of good fortune, and a gift, on the eve of their wedding?” Wrathion produced an ornate box and opened it with dark, taloned fingers. “The Banshee Queen may be pleased to know you’re wearing them will assist in keeping proper track of you.”

Sitting atop a velvet cushion were a pair of ornate bangles, one each clearly meant to be worn by both of them. To Anduin they looked only vaguely familiar but Sylvanas recognized what they were immediately.

“Bloodstones!” Sylvanas ran him through with a demanding glare. “Where did you come by something so rare?”

Dark eyebrows rose in amusement. “I’m a Black Dragon, Dark Lady. Calling up stones from the earth, be they pebbles or gems, is child’s play for me.” Wrathion seemed terribly proud of the ability. “This is the same system I use with my Black Talons. As long as you’re within the same general region of the same continent determining where each other are and communicating between yourselves will be simple. I suggest you keep them on at all times, knowing the track record of my…of your dear King.” It seemed painful for him to say it as Anduin reluctantly stepped forward and took the bangles, passing one to Sylvanas and examining the other. The arms of the bangle were delicate and made of gold and seemed to hold the pattern of Dragonscale. After another moment further Anduin slipped it onto his wrist, Sylvanas doing much the same.
“You’ve five minutes left, Wrathion, and quite a ways to fly.” He turned away. “Were I you, I’d get going.”

“Anduin, be reasonable.”

“Five. Minutes.”

“My husband’s being really quite generous.” Sylvanas said. “I’ll give you one. Make note, Dragon, that I can shoot you dead at four hundred yards.”

That very serious threat seemed to get Wrathion’s attention, leading Anduin to wonder whether or not he’d brought Left and Right with him or even if they were still a part of the Black Talon organization at all. Closing the lid of the box he pulled himself up to his full height. “Well, it would seem that I have outstayed my welcome. Do keep in mind, Anduin, that should you ever reconsider or find yourself in need of my help you need only send for it. Word will find its way to me.”

The Black Prince shifted into his true form in a puff of smoke and lifted off from the balcony, on the cusp of Drakehood and with his scales glistening near violet in the moonlight, and quickly disappeared.

Anduin huffed and appeared to shake himself off before he turned back to her, already fiddling with the new addition to his wrist in clear discomfort. “Shall we head back inside, my Lady, so that we can sooner sojourn upstairs?”

“And here I’d thought this experience would have soured you on gifts for the night.” She closed the distance between them, the give of fabric much greater than the mail she normally wore. Anduin turned red as her lips found his ear, hand slipping down his chest and then lower. “Come, my King. Forget this pointless farce and allow me to take your mind off of things.”

There was a possessiveness to the way she said ‘my King’ that went straight through him and he could hardly saunter back out into the crowd given his newest concern which the determined pressure of her hand was only making more pronounced. Struggling to retain control Anduin exhaled. Pulling her against him. Gently nipping at her ear. “Very well, my Queen. But it would hardly be proper form for us to simply walk out through the ballroom door.” He said. “Lucky for us, your city isn’t the only one filled with secret passageways and I happen to know them all.”

Leaving the balcony behind Anduin led her along the ballroom’s wall and pushed aside a hanging tapestry, revealing the dusty passage beyond. They reemerged at the foot of the stairwell and swiftly climbed to the third floor, turning down the by now familiar passage leading to the Royal Chambers.

He moved before she could react and Sylvanas would never admit as much but when her feet left the floor as the young King swept her up into his arms she might have yelped in alarm. “Anduin!” She threw her arms around his neck in an effort to keep herself balanced and he laughed, smiling down at her in blinding amusement. “Put me down, you great Human brute!”

“Just as soon as we’re through the door.” He promised. “It’s tradition.”

“Well, get it done with quickly then!” Her arms loosened but remained around his shoulders, fingers playing with the short hairs at the nape of his neck. “I’ve had to wait long enough for the price I agreed to as it is. Don’t expect to be getting much sleep tonight: we’ve time to make up for.”
“At only twenty-one, I think I’ve quite a number of times in me.” Shouldeering open the door and then kicking it closed behind him, Anduin set her down on the floor again. “We ought to have at least a few hours ahead of us.”

The Banshee Queen leapt at him in response, pulling him into a ferocious kiss. Teeth. Tongue. The iron tang of blood. His cloak fell to the ground in a heap and her grip curled around the lip of his shirt, ripping it over his head with near enough force to tear the fabric. Her gloves joined them, hands splaying over the scar-latticed skin on his bare chest. Teeth clamping down on his shoulder and drawing blood. Growling low in his throat Anduin seized her and pinned her to the Chamber’s wall. Bodies pressing together down the line.

“Ferocious.” Purred against the curve of his jaw, sharp nips eliciting another near snarl. “Cease wasting time, Anduin, and show me what it’s like to mount a lion.” She slipped from his grasp with ease despite his efforts to keep her pinned, pushing him backwards with just enough force to topple him over onto the bed; recovering quickly the young King began to struggle with his last article of clothing, by now grown uncomfortably tight, and hissed in relief when it came free, tossing his pants to the flagstone floor with the rest.

Finding much less trouble with her own and perfectly comfortable with being without a stitch of cloth Sylvanas prowled towards him, basking in the hunger evident in his gaze even as his face progressively reddened. Another hiss as cold fingers found hot flesh and she crawled into his lap, engaging in another biting kiss as she stroked him through to full hardness. Sucking on his tongue as she slid down to the hilt. Anduin keened in pleased surprise, expression flashing with alarm as he nearly lost control of the urge to mindlessly rut upwards. Shuddering against the sudden onslaught of pain and pleasure, Sylvanas dragged her nails down along his chest raising red welts in their wake.

“Yes, it’s been far too long.” Sylvanas licked a trickle of blood from the corner of his lips, his breathing ragged against sloppy open-mouthed kisses. “Do your worst, little King.”

His control shattered when she canted her hips forwards, the Human beneath her surging upwards into another brutal kiss. Hands clamping down on her hips in a grip which would have left bruises on her skin if she’d been living. She clawed at him in return, raising more welts over the swell of his biceps as she slid her hands down his arms to pull his grip free. Easily keeping her balance despite the sudden lack of anchors and grinning down at him. His pupils were blown to the size of coins.

“No need to be shy, Anduin. This is no longer a matter of look but don’t touch and I know that you’ve been staring at them for quite a while.”

His hands were too-warm, more calloused than she’d expected out of someone so high bred. Blood had caught under his nails during the chaos from earlier. Sylvanas braced her own hands against his toned waist and sped her pace. Arching backwards as he attacked her shoulder with lips and teeth. The young King didn’t last long after that, spilling molten heat within her before sagging backwards against the sheets.

Purring in amusement Sylvanas drapped herself across his heaving chest, heart thudding heavy beneath her as she traced light patterns in his sweat soaked skin. “That was…I don’t even…by the Light.” Anduin blinked rapidly to bring his eyes back into focus. “Hopefully you can excuse my inexperience?”

“You’re far from a hopeless case, Anduin, and they do say practice makes perfect.” He gasped when she rocked back against him, beginning to harden again. “And you’ll be getting plenty of that tonight.”
Though far from enough to properly scratch the long embedded ‘itch’ it was a good start and the Human’s endurance was impressive. Late in the hours of the night with Anduin deeply asleep at her side and the last remaining sounds of revelry long faded from below, the Banshee Queen lay staring at the ceiling hounded by the almost haunted look he’d given the doors of the rooms forever doomed to remain empty. Of Vareesa’s teasing comment. Of Vancleef’s venomous snarl. The hand resting on her stomach, flat and cold, curled into a fist.

How she’d envied Alleria before her sister disappeared, in love and wed with a child of her own. Vareesa, too, while she’d been absent had started a family. Something which, though Sylvanas had been cornered and subsequently dragged along by Anduin, she herself would never have. Which she’d convinced herself, while she lived, she was too young for. Which she’d put off until it was too late.

‘He’d be a good father’. The Blood Elf had said while Anduin had entertained the children at Sen’jin Village. And it seemed he would have, if the way he was with his orphans or their nephews was any indication.

And then there was the matter of that brief flash of… want? wishful thinking? that had transformed the red headed twins into blondes; their sons rather than their nephews.

The Light knew that Anduin was insufferable enough as it was with his insistence of imprinting himself on her heart, which had been comfortably black until he’d decided to root himself in her life. He’d only have become worse than he already was, surely, had he learned she was with child. Though, admittedly, the thought of sending him off around his city on expeditions for random objects as if he were a pay for hire adventurer instead of the High King of the Alliance did strike her as amusing. And when the child-children? No! It was bad enough that she was even hung up on this doomed line of thought without considering doing it more than once!-was born what then? He’d coddle it, surely. Teach it to be soft and weak the way that he was.

Sylvanas threw herself out of bed without a care for the possibility of disturbing him, stalking across the royal chamber and stepping out onto the attached balcony. The cold, sea-tinged wind struck her bare skin but rather than blow the images away like she’d hoped they only intensified. Became more specific. A boy with his father’s striking blue eyes whom she’d teach to track and shoot. A girl with her father’s kindness who’d follow on his coattails through the halls of the cathedral. In some ways never having a chance to have that family was worse than losing them, and much to Sylvanas’ absolute mortification her eyes began to burn. No tears came, thankfully, but it was undoubtedly the closest that she’d come to crying since the day, the very moment, that Arthas had killed her.

Arthas. Her hands clenched convulsively against the stone railing as she sank to her knees, drawing even unnecessary breaths in an effort to calm herself and bring her emotions back under proper control. The former Prince of Lordaeron. The man-child who’d fashioned himself as the Lich King. There was so much he wouldn’t pay for. So much she hadn’t realized that he’d stolen from her before now, when it was already too late.

He was already dead.

At the soft click of the balcony door Sylvanas whipped around. Anduin had taken the time to retrieve a pair of loose sleeping pants before following her out and now stood blinking blearily at her with tired eyes. The Banshee Queen coiled down into a defensive posture, baring her teeth at him like a cornered wolf, but he was either unphased or too tired to notice. Sylvanas glared, flinching away, expecting him to let loose with another torrent of questions that weren’t his concern or offer meaningless platitudes meant as comfort. All he did was sit beside her, close but
not close enough to touch his shoulder to hers, and propped himself up against his arms. Off in the
distance, the harbor bell clanged.

It seemed that the Priest was capable of biding his silence when need be. Closing the distance
between them with a motion carefully made to appear accidental, the Dark Lady rested her head
against his shoulder and tucked her face into his neck. The warmth of his skin chased the ache
from behind her eyes. They sat together on that balcony until the sun rose above the city.
Neither of them had left the Royal Chambers often through the weekend which followed their wedding but now that the new week had begun the tail end of the celebrations were dying down and the revelers were returning to their respective homes the young King found himself back to work at his desk. And that meant he also found himself buried beneath another avalanche of paperwork which he’d been industriously scratching at with his feather quill. Not that that had led to any sort of noticeable dent.

Bad as his experience with alcohol had been in Ironforge Anduin could now sympathize with his father’s preference for the company of stiff scotch while repeatedly signing his name for hours on end. At least he had the repairs in Westfall, the first part of which would be starting today, to look forward to though in the wake of the Defias’ attack on the wedding and their near success at kidnapping him he knew he’d likely face a considerable fight in getting Shaw to agree to allow him to take part. With a peeved noise Anduin dropped the quill back into the open ink well and put his face in his hands, wishing he could fast forward time and make the ever-replenishing mountain in front of him disappear.

Sadly, he wasn’t a Bronze Dragon.

A stiff knock came on the door and he looked up, calling out a rather tired sounding “come in” while eyeing up the spirit’s cabinet in spite of the fact it wasn’t yet even noon. The door swung open, emitting not one of his own Agents but a Forsaken woman with a mask obscuring half her face. He’d expected a report on the effort to determine who was responsible for employing the Defias at some point but not nearly so soon, and was-perhaps foolishly as he’d been made aware they’d be working on the matter alongside SI: 7-surprised to be visited by a member of the Shattered Hand.

A member who, after a brief moment, he recognized.

Picking up his cane from where it lay against the side of his chair and removing the purring kitten gently from his lap Anduin rose to his feet.

“Shadowstalker Kiryn, wasn’t it?” he asked, smiling brightly when she seemed to pull up short. “I haven’t forgotten your choice to spare my life in the Jade Forest. Would have said something before now, had I seen you at Undercity.”

“Members of the Shattered Hand spend most of our time in Orgrimmar while not afield, much like the SI:7 do here.” She said. Though it was difficult to tell Anduin thought she might have grinned. “Vancleef’s adapted well to your men, but she wasn’t prepared for the Dark Lady’s Horde. You’ll be pleased to know that your Stockades boast a new screeching harpy.”

The Priest stilled. “You’ve caught her?”

The Rogue was definitely grinning now. “The Dark Lady is already outside her cell but thought you’d want to be there to assist in the…questioning. Your Spymaster is there as well.”

“Thank you, Kiryn. Sylvanas is correct: I do wish to be there.” Casting a last half-hopeless gaze at the pile of documents on his desk he said “the paperwork can wait another few hours” and stepped out from behind the desk. “Shall we?”
Ultimately it would have taken more time than was reasonable to retrieve Dreamer from the royal stables, so Anduin made his way through his city to Stormwind’s Stockades as fast as his feet could carry him. Dark and damp, the cold of the dingy halls sank into his joins. Anduin grit his teeth and bore it as he hobbled the rest of the way down the grim passage and into the cellblock.

“Highness.” Warden Thelwater greeted him gruffly as he stepped forward, flanked on either said by Stockade Guards. “We were told to expect you soon. Spymaster Shaw and the Queen are already outside the cell and everything is ready for you to begin the interrogation.”

“Thank you, Warden.” Anduin said, leaning heavily on his cane but doing all he could to make the move seem casual and hiding his wince. “Lead the way.”

Anduin was thought well of by his people, even by much of the criminal element, but that didn’t mean that the young King could walk through the halls of the Stockades without being jeered at and spat on. One of the other Defias they’d captured in the attack attempted to grab him and came out of it with a few less fingers.

“Keep your hands to yourself, Human, or you’ll find yourself with more than just one finger missing.” Kirsh wiped her blades and returned them to her belt.

“Thank you, Kiryn.” Though he’d have preferred the solution to be less violent he was under no illusion that the Stockade guards would have been any more gentle. Anduin sighed. “One of you… don’t let him bleed to death.”

One of the guards remained behind to see to the man and the rest continued on with him to a high security cell at the very pack of the prison.

Sylvanas and Mathias were standing outside of the heavy metal grate when he arrived; his Spymaster remained glaring through the bars but the Banshee Queen turned at the sound of their arrival, a thin grin spreading across her face.

“Oh, this should be interesting. I do hope you have another stunt in you like the one you pulled at Light’s Hope Chapel.”

“I might, if that’s what’s needed to get the information out of her that we need.” A brief flicker of something which bordered on amusement flashed across her face. “I just hope she doesn’t pull the same stunt on me that you did.”

“If she does, I’ll gut her.” Sylvanas’ red eyes darkened from scarlet to crimson. “You’re mine! We’re married, Wrynn; isn’t that a stipulation in your Human rituals?”

“I’ve no interest in Vancleef, Sylvanas, so you’ve no need to worry about me allowing her to pull anything like that.” Anduin said, returning the heat in her gaze with his own.

Mathias cleared his throat and turned towards them. “Even if the King would have allowed Vancleef to pull such a thing I wouldn’t have.”

“She’s disarmed and captive.” Anduin said. “And I’m surrounded by guards.”

“That doesn’t mean she isn’t still a danger to you.” Mathias looked over at Thelwater. “Open that door, Warden. It’s time that we had answers.”

Thelwater nodded gruffly and stepped forwards. A loud clink and the squeal of hinges as the door opened; Anduin was the first to step into the cell. Vanessa looked up at him sharply but didn’t move from where she sat on a narrow cot. He couldn’t help but think she appeared unreasonably
smug for someone under high security arrest.

“Trouble in Paradise, my Lord?”

“No trouble. Not really. Though I think she feels, perhaps, a bit threatened by you. By the fact that I’m near you and that, well, you’re a woman that isn’t her.” A small smile tugged at his lips. “It seems that after all the time she’s spent around Orcs their possessiveness has rubbed off on her. You’ve been enjoying your stay here? Thelwaters been a proper host?”

“Oh, he’s been marvelous.” Expectedly snide.

“Well, I won’t keep you terribly long Vanessa. I just have a few questions that I’d like you to answer. Well, one really.”

“Let me guess,” she sneered, “’who sent you’?”

“To say the least.” Anduin said calmly.

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“Really?” Anduin leaned languidly against the stone wall. “Because I think I can change that.”

“What are you going to do?” Cold. It reminded him in many ways of Sylvanas when their relationship had been at its worst. “Torture me?”

That was when it started, and Sylvanas would have had to admit—if asked—that looking in on the affair from outside rendered it a great deal more impressive as it came without the subsequent bitterness of knowing she was about to be expertly manipulated and that she was powerless to prevent it. His smile became edged at such an angle that it looked like something more at home on a creature with far sharper teeth and his expression tinted darker. “Torture you?” pushing himself off of the wall he started across the cell with a slow and measured pace. “I could. The saying ‘don’t upset the Healer’ comes from a place of truth, you know. And I’m sure that none of us would have to go anywhere to make it happen: Mathias here, I’m sure, already has everything I’d need on him.”

“That would depend,” the Spymaster said, “on what those things were.”

“A dagger and a vial of something caustic. It doesn’t matter what it is.” Wordlessly, Shaw drew a blade from his belt and handed it over with a small vial of opaque liquid Sylvanas didn’t recognize. “It really is surprising how little it would take for me to subject you to the worst pain a Human body can endure without instantly suffering fatal cardiac arrest. More than enough of my men are here to hold you down. A shallow cut to the back of your leg; a direct introduction of what’s in this vial to the largest nerve in your body. You’d tell me everything I wanted to know just to make it stop. Luckily for you, Vanessa,” he handed both back to their owner, the plains of his face softening once more, “I don’t believe in torture, because you’d also tell me anything I wanted to hear, and that wouldn’t get me anywhere.”

“Then it seems we’re done here.” She sneered.

“No. We’re not. I’ve other ways to get you to answer my questions.” Anduin said. “Warden, please take your men and leave. Mathias, you may remain.”

“King Wrynn?” the Warden questioned.

“I am a Priest of the Holy Light and will not have my image shredded in the eyes of any more of
“We won’t be far, Highness, should something happen.” Thelwater said, turning to his men.
“Alright boys, down the hall. King’s orders.”

“Loyal dogs you have, Wrynn.” Vanessa sneered. “I’m sure you’re proud of how well trained they
are. Do they piss on command too?”

“They’re good people; honorable and trustworthy to a man. And I’m deeply honored to have their
service.” Anduin resumed his former position leaned against the wall. “Let’s talk.”

“Going to use the Shadow on me?”

“Do I need to?” he asked. “What does it matter to you, Vanessa, if we learn who hired you?
There’s no personal connection, surely. No doubt you’ve already been paid, at least in part. Just
answer our questions.”

“It matters to me, Wrynn, that I’m not going to tell you or your dogs a damned thing. But you’re
right. I don’t care if their little gambit succeeds, if they get you or the Horde does, because your
head will end up mounted in the Deadmines eventually either way. But,” cold eyes fell on
Sylvanas, “I will tell her. I’ll tell your corpse bride everything.”

“In return,” Sylvanas demanded, eyes sharp, “for what?”

“Isn’t it obvious, ‘Warchief’?” Vanessa sneered. “I’ll tell you who hired me, the rate they paid and
where to find them. In return I walk out of here today, and none of your agents, especially not
that one,” she threw a sharp glare at Mathias, “will follow me.”

“So that you can return later and mount my husband’s head on your wall?” Sylvanas spat. “If
you’re not going to torture her, Anduin, then I will.”

“I don’t see why it matters to you if he’s dead or alive. You can keep the other head.” She sneered.
“That’s why you married him, isn’t it? His cock? How good of a fuck is he?”

“Keep talking, Human, and you’ll never leave this cell alive!”

Anduin seized her wrist as the Banshee Queen attempted to push passed him, restraining her
against his chest while blue eyes cast the other woman in a hard gaze. “Vulgarity will get you
nowhere, Vanessa. Come now.” His eyes took on a violet cast as his voice dropped into a lower
register, enticing and dangerously sweet with shadows coiling around every word. “Just make this
easy on yourself. Tell us who hired you.”

“Who hired me? Garrosh Hellscream. Oh no, wait. The Lich King, that’s a better answer. How
about Deathwing? Or maybe Sargeras? Pick your narrative, Wrynn, because they’ll all take you the
same place.” Her smile was triumphant. “Nowhere.” His face scrunched up in confusion and a
gleeful edge tilted her expression as those sharp eyes found Sylvanas again. “A Huntress never
allows her prey to keep an advantage.”

“She conditioned herself to resist you.” The Banshee Queen hissed. “Looks like you didn’t have
everyone around you fooled after all.”

“Confession won’t work either.” Vanessa helpfully informed him, clearly thrilled with the fact
she’d turned the tables and set him floundering. “Poor little Priest, powerless without his magic.
Reconsidering that torture?”
His expression became stone but she could plainly feel the tension coiled in his muscles.
“Mathias.”

“King Anduin?”

“Recall the Warden.”

“Of course.” With a stiff nod and a last glare of his own the Spymaster stepped out into the hall. A moment later Thelwater and his men filed back into the cell.

“Transfer her to the Vault forthwith. Highest security. We’ll see if she’ll be more willing to speak after a couple of days there. Or a couple of weeks.”

“Of course, Highness.” Thelwater said, then looked to one of his guards. “You there, chain her! And make sure that her bindings are secure!”

“I’ve another job for you, Mathias.” Anduin said as she was pulled out in heavy shackles. “Alert Gryan Stoutmantle that the bounty on the remaining members of the Defias Brotherhood is to be reinstated and raised from one gold to-.”

“Don’t leave this matter in the hands of adventurers, Anduin, or you’ll never root them out.” Sylvanas said. “My Dark Rangers will handle it. I’ve little doubt Nathanos will be pleased to have something to do.”

She glared at him, half challengingly, when he glanced down at her and stepped away. “Alright. I’ll leave the matter in your hands then, my Lady.”

“A rare display of intelligence.” It was almost with reluctance that Sylvanas stepped away as well. “Shall we head into Westfall, then?”

“You’d come with me?” he beamed, appearing unreasonably delighted.

“We’ve already discussed my faith in your guards. And clearly they don’t do a terrible amount to dissuade the mangy hounds!” She said. “A full cadre of Royal Dreadguards at your back ought to change that.”

Though Anduin didn’t doubt that, in time, such overbearing protection would come to be more than a bit of a bother for the time being he could only find himself amused. “Would you like to wait until the Kor’kron can join us as well? Perhaps borrow some of Baine’s braves or Tyrande’s sentinels?”

“Will an army be necessary to keep you out of trouble, King Anduin?” Mathias folded his arms across his chest.

Grinning, the young King only laughed as he turned and trotted from the cell. “I make no promises.” He said. “Let’s head along.”
To Catch a King

Chapter Notes

A brief return to Kul Tiras to see what Greymane and co are up to.

“How many times do I have to tell you, Ivar, that whatever you think you saw in Silverpine Forest can’t be trusted? He’s not of his own mind; that bitch has him bewitched!”

The Bloodfang alpha snarled, lips peeling back over sharp teeth and hackles raised. His inner Worgen responded in kind, growling and stirring, a tide of sharp heat simmering just beneath his skin, and it was a great tax on Genn’s long built control to keep his form from rippling between man and beast. “Oh, he’s bewitched! A traitorous little worm? No! A corpse fucker? No, of course not! He’s not of his right mind; the worthless whelp is bound by the Banshee bitch’s dark magic! Well, that’d be all well and fine as an explanation, Genn, if it weren’t for the fact that Sylvanas must have bewitched herself as well!”

“Watch your words, Bloodfang! And watch your tone!” He snarled. “I am still your King, and once we’ve rejoined the Alliance, Anduin will be as well!”

“We’re never going to rejoin the Alliance, Greymane! You weren’t there! You didn’t see it. And you don’t understand because you refuse to accept the fact that the only ‘bewitchment’ that’s taken place between them is the fact that they’re in love!”

Love? After everything she’d done, all the pain that she’d inflicted, all the damage that she’d caused Sylvanas didn’t deserve such a thing. Liam. Varian. The torture Anduin must even now be being put through, chained to her in law as well as magic in the wake of Vancleef’s failure. His purity taken as well as his freedom. Eyes tinting yellow and teeth too sharp in his mouth the aged King almost shifted then and there. “Sylvanas Windrunner isn’t capable of love! And I refuse to entertain this course of conversation any longer! What you think you saw in that forest is of no consequence!”

“You’re still intent on this, then? On insisting that in everything he’s an innocent party; a victim who needs to be saved?”

“Are you still intent on painting him some wicked deviant? A turncoat who cares nothing for the suffering she caused to the people his station put him in command of?” he spat. “You don’t know Anduin at all!”

A low growl. “He isn’t Liam.”

“You think that I don’t realize that?”

“If you bring him here, Genn,” Ivar snarled, “he won’t last long.”

The Gilnean King turned to face the other Worgen, his inner beast a hair’s breadth away from breaking its bonds and leaping on the other; darkening his pelt with blood in retribution for even the suggestion of bring harm to the young Priest he’d come to consider family. “Is that a threat, Bloodfang?”
The other Worgen bared his teeth in answer before stalking from the room, nearly bowling his daughter over as he went. Tess looked after him with lines of concern etched into her face.

“Is everything alright, father?” she asked carefully, almost probing. He quickly dismissed the thought as paranoia. “I heard yelling.”

“Ivar is being difficult. And there’s nothing but bad news.” He turned from her to face the window, looking out over the oxidized roofs of Boralus. “Vancleef failed.” A sigh of what almost sounded like relief issued from behind him. Under normal circumstances Genn would have been able to agree that it was a good thing the Defias Brotherhood hadn’t gotten their hands on Anduin. “Sylvanas is officially the Queen of Stormwind. And Jaina still hasn’t managed to convince Kul Tiras to lend us the aid of their fleet.”

“Will we be calling it in, then?” she asked. “Father, have you considered…that maybe there isn’t some great plot in all of this? That maybe Anduin is just doing what he thinks is best and that the Banshee Queen is just toying with him? A Human’s lifespan would be nothing to her, even if she wasn’t undead.”

“No great plot?” he snapped. “Of course there’s a ‘great plot’! Sylvanas wouldn’t have the slightest interest in him if there wasn’t! She knows that I care for the boy! This is retribution for Stormheim, I’m sure of it!”

“Father?” Half exasperated and half sympathetic, almost as if she thought him not of his right mind. Driven to irrationality by age and grudge. But he was perfectly sound. Acting perfectly reasonably. And once they’d all been made to realize how desperately their King had needed aid while in the witch’s clutches none of them would ever dare to doubt that again.

“If Kul Tiras won’t lend us the aid of their fleet than we’ll have to rescue him ourselves.” He said. “The Moonspray is perfectly sea worthy and a Night Elven vessel will serve us better if we’re seen. We’ll leave that monster with nothing to go on and grant us more time to get through to him. And with all of the urchins in Westfall a few coin is all it will cost to have him lured to the beach; Anduin would have no reason to distrust a child.”

“And what are you planning to do once you’ve lured him away? In his right mind or not, Anduin will fight back if he’s attacked. And what about Ivar? What if he ends up hurt or worse?”

“He won’t!” He said. “This is for his own good, Tess. And for the good of the Alliance. I refuse to stand by while he’s used for her…” sharp teeth ground together “pleasure.”

Tess sighed and nodded. “I trust your judgement, father.” She said. “Now I should be going. Lorna is expecting me.” All she received in reply was a grunt, gruff and half distracted, and Tess quickly left the house.

The scent of the sea on Boralus’ wind wasn’t quite the same as that of Stormwind, harsh with cold and the salt seeming somehow sharper. The streets were thinner, uneven and dirty with puddles of foul water swarming with flies resting in the divots and cracks. Entire districts were overwhelmed by the homeless and poor, rampant with crime and rife with public executions as the city crumbled around them beneath the onslaught of the ocean’s teeth. Tess had grown up in Gilneas and was no stranger to the wet and the cold but that wasn’t to say she didn’t miss Stormwind’s white stone and warm atmosphere and the gilded smiles of her friend. She’d have much preferred to be at his wedding than here, even as uncomfortable as it admittedly would have been to watch him marry the woman who had accidentally killed her brother while trying to kill her father. Better than that scheming behind her father’s back to get Anduin somehow safely back to Stormwind before his cockamamy plan to ‘rescue’ him could devolve into an all-out war which pitted Gilneas against
both the Alliance and the Horde and would drag Kul Tiras in as well.

Lorna was waiting for her outside of the house where she’d been staying with her father, face set and posture tense. She looked at her with a pointed question in her eyes and sagged slightly in relief when Tess shook her head. “Oh, thank the Light.”

“I wouldn’t get ahead of ourselves quite yet. It’s not all good news.” Tess said. “Is your father in?”

“Yes. Tobias is here as well.” Lorna turned and pushed open the door. “We were all waiting on news. Come in.”

Much like the rest of the District they’d been put up in, much like the manor her own family had been staying in, the once grand house had since fallen into disrepair but it had seen much less repairs. Darius and Tobias Mistmantle looked up at her arrival.

“He’s safe. Still in Stormwind.” She said. “But fathers not finished. He’s planning to set sail himself.”

“Light.” Lorna muttered.

“Genn expects to get through Stormwind’s Royal Guard and whatever measures the Banshee Queen has put in place around him? Even if she’s only toying with him there’s no way she’d simply stand by and allow Anduin to be taken away from her.” Darius shook his head. “I almost don’t recognize your father, Tess.”

Tess sighed heavily. “That would make two of us, Lord Crowley.” She said. “And from what I overheard father doesn’t simply think he can sail into Stormwind and make off with the High King. Consider for a moment where Anduin’s focus would be now that the war with the Horde is over.”

“Westfall.” Tobias said. “And knowing him he’s want to have a hand in the restoration efforts. The number of guards around him then would be much less.”

“And he’d be more easily lured away.” Lorna said. “Father, what are we going to do?”

“Nothing. For now.” Darius said. “We can’t afford for Genn, or Light forbid Ivar, catching onto our plans. When Anduin gets here we need to find some excuse to speak with him; before any decisions are made we need to know the truth.”

“You think there might be something to what the King is saying after all?” Lorna asked.

“I’m not certain I believe ‘bewitchment’, but I don’t trust Sylvanas. It may be true that she’s pulled something.” He said. “And we need to speak with him regardless. To negotiate the return of as much of Gilneas as is possible to the Alliance. Anduin is reasonable and we can have confidence that he won’t punish your father unjustly. Light willing, it may snap Genn out of this.”

“I hope you’re right, Lord Crowley.” Tess said.

She’d have to admit that she didn’t feel terribly reassured.
The Dark Moon Faire

Though not corrupted and defiled in the way that the Ghostlands were in the wake of Arthas’ march upon her homeland, given the comparative lushness of the surrounding areas of Elwynn Forest Redridge Mountains and Duskwood, Westfall was indeed quite ruined. The land was parched in much the same way she’d have expected to find in the harshest areas of the Barrens across the Great Sea on Kalimdor, but had lacked the towering foliage and diversity of wild life. Instead, there were sparse patches of scrubby grass barely tall enough to cover her boot and soil so dried out and windswept that it was left unable to support life. The rolling yellowed plains were littered with falling to pieces farm houses set atop tilled, lifeless land quite a bit of which had been turned into ashambled encampments for the poor and at any given time there were at least two cyclones tearing up the near horizon. Anduin reacted with the expected level of absolute horror-which led the Banshee Queen to wonder whether or not her new husband had ever actually been to the area before or if up until then his knowledge of their plight had come second hand-and their plan, no doubt much to the relief of the Stormwind guards who had accompanied them out there, changed. Rather than participate in scouting the area, as he’d originally intended, after a brief conference with Gryan Stoutmantle the young King had reverted into ‘Priest of the Holy Light’ mode and busied himself with tending to the homeless whom quickly overran the inn once royal orders to allow them into the settlement had come down.

In the end it had worked out better for Sylvanas: a good few of the Dark Rangers she’d dispatched to deal with rooting out the Defias had been nearby and were simply called to her side. A respectable amount was accomplished that day, at least on her end, though admittedly much of her time was spent watching him attend to the needy.

That had been a week ago and Sylvanas hadn’t seen the Priest since; between the documents requiring his attention, the logistics of the restoration efforts and the general stresses of running a kingdom Anduin had spent almost every moment of that time posted at his desk, eating sleeping and working in the royal study, and what brief glimpse she’d caught of him had been while he was disappearing into a meeting with the House of Nobles. She could guess at what they’d spoken about though, lacking real interest, she hadn’t attended herself and thus couldn’t be sure.

As it was she’d grown tired of this: she hadn’t agreed to his ridiculous little plan only to be ignored and Sylvanas Windrunner, Banshee Queen of the Forsaken and former Ranger General of Quel’thalas, refused to be ignored in favor of paperwork but wasn’t about to make a fool of herself attempting to lure him out herself. Not at a time of day where he’d doubtlessly refuse such ‘activities’ as improper, and so she’d called in something of a favor.

Vareesa’s want to be a family again had some uses to her, it seemed and Mage Portals were a commodity simply found in Dalaran. Within twenty minutes Sylvanas found herself left in the position of responsibility for her twin nephews, both of whom were observing her with varying degrees of wariness.

“Your Uncle is attending to some work in his study, upstairs. Why don’t the pair of you go up and get him?” attempting to be reassuring only seemed to make matters worse. Really, Sylvanas didn’t know why she’d bothered. “We’ll head into Goldshire as soon as he’s joined us.”

Whether it was the promise of being unleashed upon the Dark Moon Fair for a day or eagerness to get away from her, or perhaps simply a desire to see Anduin again, which motivated them into
immediately bolting for the stairs Sylvanas didn’t know and told herself she didn’t care. Expectedly her nephews had a near perfect ease in dragging the young King back out from within the labyrinth of paper towers and within ten minutes Anduin was clicking down the stairs towards her.

Sleeping upright at a sturdy desk was far from restful, a fact which was starkly clear in the deep shadows under his cornflower eyes and the tired smile on his face. He’d obviously taken the time to change into a fresh set of clothes and make himself presentable and now wore a long-sleeved button up over black slacks.

“Giramar and Galadin came barreling into my study out of the blue and informed me that they were ready to head down to Goldshire.” The small smile which never quite left his face made it obvious he wasn’t in the least upset; a bit confused, more than a little bit amused, but not upset. “I wasn’t aware that the Darkmoon Faire was on the day’s itinerary.” Raised brows and eyes expectant.

“I had to get you out of that damned office somehow. And it wasn’t quite late enough for you to bite on other means.” Once more with that attractive, pale dusting of pink along his cheeks. The twins watched the exchange in silence. Sylvanas turned and started towards the palace doors. “They know how to ride, Anduin, so let’s make our way to the royal stables. The ride into Goldshire is long enough on horseback that we’d better not waste time dallying here.”

Even if he’d have attempted to protest both her insistence and the urgings of his own inner child which was now no doubt already pressing at his mind, the immediate prompting of the twins through the means of each seizing one of his hands and beginning to drag him forward would have put an end to it. Laughing, smile only growing wider, the young King allowed himself to be towed along towards the stables. Dreamer greeted them with his usual snort and Anduin stopped briefly to pat his snout before helping the twins to saddle and mount their own horses and then mounting up himself.

Being cooped up so long inside he’d almost forgotten how fair the weather was. Summer had set in completely at last, the sun was high and the air was clear. The trees of Elwynn Forest shattered the light into a dappling of grey-gold shadows and the thick grasses which spanned the cobbled road to Goldshire gleamed a lush emerald. The gateway to Darkmoon Isle had been erected not far outside the busy town, and the closer to it they came the more excitable their nephews grew. Anduin, Sylvanas quickly noticed, wasn’t much better though his was a more sluggish sort of anticipation owing largely to his lack of meaningful sleep. The portal itself was a whirl of deep orange and as they passed through it the bright greenery of Elwynn abruptly disappeared.

Darkmoon Isle was, given its name, expectedly dark and eerie draped in shadows of black and violet. Citizens of all races, Alliance and Horde alike, were scattering down the winding path leading to the Fair itself. Off to one side and not far away a Gnome was advertising the free use of green and purple tallstriders as rides down for those not in possession of mounts of their own.

“Giramar, Galadin,” Anduin called, well aware both of his nephews were just seconds from taking off on their own, “stick close. Your mother’s trusting your Aunt and I to look after both of you and with how hectic the fair can be becoming lost in the crowd would be simply done.”

“Yes, Uncle.” Said by both, rather unenthusiastically, and Anduin smiled.

“No reason to keep the boys waiting, my Lady.” He said, prodding Dreamer forward down the gloomy path. “The Darkmoon Faire awaits.”

The pathway was short, admittedly, but not short enough to spare her the experience of becoming
stuck with two overexcited children and one overexcited Priest who still thought he was a child and by the time they got through the Fairground’s gates Sylvanas had in some ways begun to regret the success of her plan.

“Uncle Andy, Uncle Andy, can we do that?”

“Can we ride the cannon?”

“Petting zoo!”

“Oh look, the game booths. My father would... boys, have you ever played any of those games?”

“Hold the extensive planning of the route on which I’m to be dragged through this fairground until we’ve at least purchased the tickets needed to get onto any rides and play any games.” Why did she have to be the voice of reason? Why did she think this was a good idea? It had been a plan doomed to backfire from the start.

Seeming to realize his own lack of maturity and, to his credit, appearing somewhat embarrassed by the matter Anduin cleared his throat and nodded. “Yes, you’re right. Giramar, Galadin, the ticket vendors just this way.”

Wrenching himself up by his bootstraps in an effort to restore some semblance of his image of being a full-grown adult, Anduin placed a hand on each of their nephews’ shoulders and began to shepherd them in the proper direction. Much to Sylvanas’ relief, as they joined the line, the young King seemed to have come to the decision that he was going to do his utmost to act his age. Greeting the Pandaren woman standing behind the counter of a small stand with his usual smile, Anduin pulled a handful of coins from the purse on his belt and purchased two books of tickets.

“Let’s get on to those rides and games, shall we?” with the books held lightly in one hand and the twins bouncing excitedly about his feet the Priest led their party out of line. “Where to first?”

“I want to go on the cannon!” Giramar yelped, Galadin looking over at his twin with a mild horror which was briefly reflected on Anduin’s face before he ruffled his nephews red hair.

“About that, Giramar, I’ll make you a deal.” He said. “Ask your mother if the cannon is ok, and the next time we come to the Fair you can ride it as many times as you want.”

Giramar’s groan of disappointment was quickly interrupted by Galadin, looking quite relieved by Anduin’s refusal, reached out to tug on his twin’s arm. “Let’s go on the merry go round.”

Seeming to forget the cannon entirely for the time being Giramar quickly nodded and started bounding in the ride’s direction. Smiling softly, Anduin followed and Sylvanas trailed behind. “The merry go round should be a lot of fun and look, it only costs one ticket!” Green eyes turned onto him. “Will you ride too, Uncle Andy?”

“I don’t know,” he said lightly, “you boys are old enough to ride on your own.”

“Come on, please!”

Chuckling, Anduin looked over at her. “That would depend on whether or not your Aunt will be joining us. I could hardly leave her all alone.”

The Banshee Queen leveled him in a stern gaze. “I refuse to degrade myself by sitting on a wooden tiger attached to a glorified wheel, Anduin! I am, however, capable of entertaining myself for fifteen minutes.”
The young King looked over at the twins and smiled gently. “You two go on; have fun. We won’t be far.”

Though plainly disappointed the pair trotted through the gate and into the ride. From his place at the fence Anduin watched them each select their mounts and pull themselves up onto them.

“Why?”

He looked over, blue eyes confused. “Why?”

“Why didn’t you ride with them, Anduin? It’s obvious you wanted to.”

He sighed, reaching up a gloved hand to rub at the shadows under his eyes. “You went through great trouble to get me out of that office.” Anduin said. “It would be poor repayment to that not to spend time with you. You didn’t bring me here to stand around and watch me ride rides with our nephews.”

Sylvanas made a noncommittal noise, eyes roving the nearby game booths filled with pointless knickknacks. They weren’t terribly far from the merry go round and moving to any one of them would still leave the ride in full view. Not sparing the matter full thought, she wrapped both of her arms around his and rested her head on his shoulder. “Win me something.”

“Hm?” he looked over towards the booths as well; balloon darts and ring toss and water pistols. “You’d have better aim then I would, my Lady.”

“What happened to your damned sense of romance, Wrynn? Win me something, I don’t care what it is.”

Raising an eyebrow, clearly amused, he stepped away from the fence and gestured towards the nearest booth: balloon darts. “My chances, I think, will be best here. Shall we?”

Sylvanas didn’t;’ release her hold on him as they walked and, though he did smirk, the young King wisely didn’t mention it. Paying the cost of two tickets for ten darts and only needing to pop three balloons to win Anduin was turned loose on the game.

He missed spectacularly with the first three darts but the fourth met its mark with a pop. The fifth struck and bounced off. The sixth popped another.

“You spoke with the House of Nobles regarding your plan?”

Midway through taking aim Anduin looked down at her. “I did.” From the expression on his face and the heaviness of his voice Sylvanas knew what the result had been. “Unfortunately, expectedly, they blocked my proposal 25 to 1. I had no backing, and despite all the benefits which could come of it, the fact that Stormwind’s people as a whole would sooner side with me than them and that I’m the one actually sitting on the throne I was left powerless. It’s an archaic system in which prejudice runs deep: one that’s too deeply embedded to be rooted out over the course of one reign. ‘Stormwind is a Human kingdom and won’t suffer a King with Elven blood’.” Another miss. “I’m left without an Heir or even any prospects for one at least in the immediate future. Should something happen to me…” the third balloon exploded.

“I can’t offer you an Heir,” there was a bitterness to her tone, “but there may be an alternative solution which I can present.”

“An alternative solution?” his tone and expression made it clear he knew, or could guess, precisely what she meant. Sylvanas, for her part, hadn’t a clue why she’d even broached the subject to begin
with and yet, quite uncharacteristically, couldn’t stop herself from talking.

“What would your answer be, Anduin, if I offered you undeath?”

All trace of childlike glee had vanished from his face, replaced by the stoicism of someone many times his age. “I wouldn’t ask for it. As I’ve said before, I’m not afraid of death but I promised that I’d be here and if you were to ask me to return, to leave the Light and come back to you, I’d do so gladly. Because that’s part of what it means to love someone.”

“And what about your family? Your father? You’d give up being with them so easily?”

“Give up? No, I’d merely be putting it off.” He said. “No matter how hard we may fight, how desperately we resist, nothing lasts forever. Eventually Azeroth will cease to be and all of us with it, even if it’s at the hands of the inevitable entropic heat death of the universe. I’d see them again eventually. Though that does little to solve the matter: the dead cannot rule the living. Not directly. Not for sustained periods. I’d still need an Heir to replace me, if less urgently.”

“It wasn’t meant to solve your problem it was meant to be rhetorical.” The Banshee Queen retorted, perhaps a bit more sharply than she’d meant to. “It would take a highly specialized ritual to preserve your proper use to me and you’re not worth one of my Val’kyr.”

In truth, she couldn’t bring herself to subject him to the curse beneath which she’d suffered so much. Taking the Light from the Priest beside her would be like ripping the wings off of a bird yet she could count the number of undead able to wield it without their flesh melting like candlewax on one hand; the loss of it would all but certainly destroy him. Better to lose him than to watch him suffer; to shackle him like Arthas would have, caring only for her own desires.

Yet that didn’t stop her from seeing him, briefly, as he would have been. Cold and eternal like she was, lich fire backlighting his eyes.

Anduin’s response was a small smile as he handed her the stuffed plush he’d won. She didn’t care enough about it to even determine what it was and pushed it into the hands of one of the twins the moment they got off the merry go round.

They went through four books of tickets before departing the fairground on the cusp of evening, Giramar and Galadin laden with countless prizes which they took with them through the portal back to Dalaran after bidding the pair tired farewells. After both boys had disappeared through the glittering portal Sylvanas all but marched her near to dead on his feet husband back through his city and up to the Royal Chambers.

“Is this really necessary?” half buried in the fine bedclothes Anduin blinked up at her from where his head lay in her lap.

“Given that you’ve slept at that desk for over a week,” she buried her fingers in his golden hair, “I think so.”

“I need to catch up on my paperwork.”

“What you need to do is sleep, before you really do drop dead.”

The Priest huffed but relented, innate stubbornness buckling beneath exhaustion. He turned his head, nuzzling her hip and shutting his eyes. Within moments the tempo of his breathing deepened into sleep. The last of the day’s light vanished from outside, the moon rising up above the railing to peek in at them instead. Silver light pooling in gilded puddles on the flagstone floor. Against her will, despite her determination that in spite of her decision not to keep him with her even passed his
natural life span, her thoughts strayed into fantasy. The moonlight and his gentle breathing became the orange glare and crackle of wall sconces. Shadows danced riotously against the Undercity’s walls, the tucked away chamber otherwise quiet.

Anduin’s once blue clothing had been exchanged for a mix of violet and pale gold, his once sapphire eyes replaced with an even cobalt which fluoresced softly in the gloom. His hair was still long, still worn tied back, but was a few shades closer to white in color and his skin held a bloodless grey tint in the torchlight. He set aside the heavy goblet in his hand at her approach, smiling: that expression, at least, hadn’t lost the warmth it’d had in life.

“My Lady.” The peculiar metallic overtone of undeath overlaid his voice when he spoke, but beneath it he still sounded the same. His hands were cold when he pulled her closer, as were his lips when they descended on hers; at once soft and hungry. She brought both her hands to his unmoving chest, splaying her fingers over where his heart had once beat and feeling nothing but the solid press of muscle and bone.

Her fantasy shattered when a harsh tap, and an even harsher caw, sounded from the direction of the window. Looking up, Sylvanas was confronted with the sight of a glaring raven. Red eyes fell to Anduin’s still form, curled beside her and deeply asleep. Carefully, mindful not to wake him, the Banshee Queen extricated herself from beneath him and retrieved her bow and arrow before slipping out onto the balcony.

The bird had shifted positions and now perched upon the railing glowering at her from above a curved black beak. It cawed again before lifting off and fluttering towards the stables.

As expected, after retrieving Geryon from the stables, the raven led her along Elwynn’s winding roads and out across the parched plains of Westfall to one collapsing house among many before landing on the outstretched arm of one of her Dark Rangers.

“Kalira.”

“My Lady.” The Dark Ranger bowed her head when she spoke and in consequence didn’t catch the Banshee Queen’s expression twitch. Her thoughts snapping back to Anduin, sound asleep miles away, a timer hung above him ticking steadily towards its end with every beat of his heart.

She swiftly sought to redirect her attention. “What have you called me here for in the middle of the night?” Casting the run-down shack a caustic glare, Sylvanas finished with “surely my elite soldiers don’t need assistance with half-starved Human hounds?”

“No, my Lady. The Defias here have been done away with, but…we weren’t sure…” a hesitant glance back at the house. “It would be better, I think, if you saw for yourself.”

The question of ‘saw what for myself’ was poised on the tip of her tongue but she pushed away the urge to ask it, instead inclining her head in the direction of the barely standing structure. “Lead the way then, Kalira. I haven’t all night.”

The Dark Ranger wasted no time in entering the house and scaling the rotted stairs to the second floor. Turning off into one of the rooms which she found there, full of the rest of the team she’d dispatched who were all looking quite out of their depth and standing around what Sylvanas realized with a jolt was a crib.

And it was occupied.

For the span of what might once have been a heartbeat Sylvanas found herself at an equal loss for
what to do.

“We thought that the King wouldn’t want him ‘dealt with.’” Kalira said lightly, “but beyond that we weren’t sure what to do with the child. Leave him? Take him to the orphanage? Turn him wild?”

What to do with the child indeed. Carefully, Sylvanas approached the crib and peered over the edge. Curled up on a threadbare blanket, wrapped in dirty grey swaddling and left blissfully ignorant in sleep, was a boy. A baby boy not yet even old enough to begin to crawl with a vague dusting of gilt peach fuzz atop his disproportionately large head. Blonde. Not quite the same shade, but almost. When she reached down to delicately lift him he woke up, opening heather eyes and promptly sticking his tiny thumb into his mouth. If he’d even begun to form memories of his parents, they’d be quick to fade and the Banshee Queen knew exactly what to do with him.

“The child isn’t your concern. Continue hunting the so-called Brotherhood. I’ll deal with him.”

“Of course, my Lady.” Her Dark Rangers were quick to leave and within moments Sylvanas found herself alone holding the staring child awkwardly and not entirely certain how to handle the infant but she only had the last of a small handful of hours left before Anduin inevitably woke up at which point she could leave the boy in the King’s care.

At least summer’s proper arrival had left the night passably warm, even at so late an hour, because without body heat of her own there’d be nothing she could have done to keep the infant defended from the elements and the dirty rags he’d been clad in wouldn’t have proven particularly helpful either. Without need to follow the raven back Sylvanas was able to push Geryon to his full speed and the ride into Stormwind city was short.

As she mounted the palace steps, the infant having since fallen back to sleep in her arms, the Dark Lady found herself rapidly becoming overwhelmed with an anticipation which she didn’t entirely want to parse through. The damned cat he found in Silvermoon could bring him dead birds and mice and rabbits all it wanted but it would never outdo her, admittedly owed entirely to chance, ability to bring him a son.

Anduin hadn’t moved since she’d left, beyond rolling onto his front and splaying his limbs about in disarray as if seeking to find where she’d gone to. Lightly, taking great care not to wake him, she set the baby on the sheets beside him, positioned to be immediately visible upon opening his eyes and waited.

The daylight outside the window of the royal chamber steadily increased. The child woke up before his new father did and his happy burbling was what finally roused Anduin. The Priest opened his eyes, blinked in a half-daze and then sat bolt upright in alarm. The smug satisfaction curdled into annoyed confusion at the anger which flashed across his face.

“What did you do?” That was a sound she’d have expected much more readily from Varian and the startled infant instantly burst into tears. Anduin jumped as if scalded and quickly gathered him up in his arms, holding him to his chest and gently cooing to soften his sniffles.

“I don’t see why you’re so upset.” Sylvanas drawled; still lightly bouncing the child in his arms Anduin glared at her over the top of the boy’s head. “You wanted a family. Now you have one.”

“He’s a child, not a battle pet! You can’t just kidnap an infant, Sylvanas! What in the Light’s name will our people think if they learned their Queen had-.”

“It isn’t kidnapping when the blood parents were among the half-starved filth my Dark Rangers
slaughtered last night.” She snarled back, drawing herself up to her full height as her ears lay back. “I brought him to you instead of Stormwind’s orphanage because it was obvious every time you looked at our nephews, at those damned doors that line the hallway outside, that you wanted a child! Because no matter how much I may wish otherwise my ability to give you one through other means was stolen by that whelp bastard before you could even begin dreaming of your precious inter-faction peace! I thought that I’d receive appreciation, instead of ridicule, for having managed even in spite of that to procure you a-need I point out male-Heir but clearly, Anduin, I was mistaken. A mistake I’ll need to rectify; I’m sure the matrons won’t buckle beneath one more mouth to feed!”

She’d barely managed to wrench the boy from his arms and turn before he lunged, catching her wrist. “Wait!” Sylvanas rounded on him, teeth bared, only to be confronted with hung head and apologetic eyes. Though he possessed the same temper his warrior father had become famous for it clearly cooled much faster and the sight of the genuinely contrite expression, inexplicably, broke her own anger as well. “You’re right. I’m sorry. Accusing you like that…it was wrong of me and I desperately apologize.”

“Watch it, Anduin.” She grumbled, only half reluctant to pass the child back to him. Even then he didn’t step away from her, his warmth pressing up along her side; a silent apology to accompany the verbal one. “You’ll give yourself whiplash switching between emotions that quickly.” He purred when she kissed him, a low rumble made deep in his chest, and though he couldn’t conceal the flash of want in his eyes he held himself in check in their new son’s presence. “The child needs a name; a Prince can hardly grow up being called ‘boy’. I’d assume your line has some tradition in naming?”

“Wrynn tradition is to give our sons the first names of important figures, be they heroes or other notable family members, and the middle names of our father’s.” Anduin gently stroked the burbling baby’s cheek with his knuckles.

“So his middle name will be ‘Varian’, then?”

“If you’re not opposed.”

“I don’t particularly care.”

“You may about the surname I have in mind.”

“What is it?” Sylvanas demanded sourly. “If you’re about to attempt to name our son after Genn Greymane, so help me-!”

“Lirath.” She pulled up short and stared at him, eyes wide. “Lirath Varian Wrynn. That way he represents us both, in the important people whom we’ve lost if not in blood. And in helping us remember.”

Of all the foolish, sentimental dribble! And yet hearing it filled her with a sense of…of…something warm which she couldn’t place and didn’t really want to. “You’d give a Human child an Elven name?”

“Giramar and Galadin and Arator have Elven names.”

“And Elven blood. Elven mothers.”

“So does he.” With his free hand Anduin gently took hers, pulling her almost impossibly closer. “I see no difference.”
“You ‘see no difference’ anywhere, Anduin.” But it wasn’t sharply that she said it. The young King laughed, bent and kissed her again. Much more briefly this time.”

“It looks as if my paperwork will be being pushed back again in favor of something far more important.” He seemed equal parts relieved and discomfited by this fact. “Is there any chance that I might convince my beautiful Queen to assist me in preparing a room for our son?”

“And risk subjecting an innocent to your atrocious color coordination?” Sylvanas flashed a brief smirk before turning away again and starting towards the door. “I think not.”
The pacing here will seem a bit strange because there are a few things which go between here and the last chapter which aren’t quite long enough to be their own chapter so they’ll go into the shorts which I’ll be posting later. Once those are up the pacing should be a bit smoother.

The first thing Sylvanas Windrunner had ever truly learned about being a Ranger, being a Huntress of any sort, was that it was imperative to always trust her instincts. Because even if the message they were trying to get across wasn’t always clear they were never wrong.

And now they were urging her to keep her husband immediately in sight because, at any moment, something was going to happen. It had been too long. She’d been too happy. It was illogical that the same cruel Fate which had left her as an undead monstrosity would allow her to keep hold of anything even remotely good.

When she’d first died, after the pain had faded, Sylvanas had for a brief moment found herself adrift in an endless sea of comforting warmth and for that time she’d felt at peace. And then Arthas had ripped all that away from her, dragging her back into a world where she no longer belonged and leaving her mutilated soul in wracking agony. She’d been alone with that pain for a long time, because she’d feared giving Fate something else to take away from her, but Anduin had refused to be kept at bay. Had broken down her walls with more ease than a 7th Legion Siege-tower and made his home in her heart like a carrion bird pecking a nest into her chest. And now she stood poised on the cusp of watching him be torn away as well, and once again being left with nothing but the bitterness waiting eagerly to swallow her.

Cold fingers dug a white knuckled grip into the granite railing of the balcony, every muscle in her body pulled taut and quivering like a drawn bowstring. Glaring out over the gleaming city towards the rippling surface of the harbor, tinted black with the late hour, as if expecting the night to spit out an aggressor at any moment. It didn’t, which she’d logically expected, but that did nothing to soothe her agitation. Danger was near, breathing down their necks and prepared to pounce at any moment, and she didn’t know where Anduin was.

Well, she had a general idea-his office, probably, chipping away at the last of the built-up paperwork-and in all good sense she could expect that the combination of thick stone walls, his selectively incompetent army of guards and her Dark Rangers would keep him perfectly safe but instinct and good sense weren’t terribly agreeable. She needed eyes on him, not just the eyes of her most trusted but specifically her eyes, and they needed to stay on him until the sensation of impending doom saw fit to go away.

She’d tried other means of calming it, even going so embarrassingly far-while unobserved, true, but she still knew she’d done it-as to seek his scent from the pillow that he slept on but it had been for naught. Only the warmth of his arms, it seemed, could release the near unbearable tension as, so long as she had a hold of him, had the inarguable proof of physical contact that he hadn’t yet been stolen, that she didn’t yet have to rebuild once more from nothing, she could relax.
Damn you, Wrynn. With a final glare in the vague direction of the harbor, Sylvanas turned from the railing and left the balcony, exiting the Royal Chamber. What have you done to me?

The guards stationed outside the Prince’s Chamber nodded in acknowledgement but didn’t otherwise react. Though she doubted Anduin would be lingering in their son’s room so long after the boy had been put to bed she checked anyway. Owing to its change in hands the room where her husband had stayed growing up had been entirely redecorated, its former patterning of blue and gold replaced by an even mix of sapphire and violet. The dark stained wood of the crib gleamed in the low light and, curled up together atop the silken sheets, were Lirath and Snowball. The kitten raised its head and blinked up at her with amber eyes before yawning and returning to sleep. A plush lion had been discarded, upside down, in one corner of the crib; the same lion Anduin had held in nervous fingers just a few days before while explaining why he felt it best she had her Val’kyr with her during the presentation ceremony set to take place in a few more days.

She left the room quickly and headed for the study instead. Guards were stationed there as well, alerting her to the fact that the King was indeed inside though whether he was still currently awake Sylvanas couldn’t be sure. Another set of acknowledging nods but no other reaction as she opened the door and stepped inside. The gentle click of it closing behind her didn’t rouse him from the half-doze he’d fallen into, hand moving seemingly of its own accord; mechanically dipping the quill held between his fingers into the open inkwell, scratching out his signature on as many documents as it could before needing to return for more ink, repeating the cycle ad nauseum. His golden hair was half down and sticking up in all directions as if upset by fingers having been run repeatedly through it and his blue eyes stared straight through the desk top.

How he managed to blindly find the dotted line without fail, time and again, was a mystery of the universe.

She watched him for what felt like a small eternity before moving to draw his attention. “Anduin.”

He started lightly, as if awoken from a shallow sleep, and nearly knocked the inkwell over onto the pile of completed documents sitting beside him. “Sylvanas?” he blinked the haze of sleep from his eyes, closed the copper lid with a faint clink and set the eagle feather quill that he’d been using down. “What time is it?”

“Late.” Not terribly helpful; an evaluation of the matter which he seemed to share as the young King let out a most unkinglike snort. “Not night, not anymore, but no quite morning either. The living need their rest, Anduin.”

“And a King needs to finish his paperwork. Fulfil his duties to his people.” He reached up a hand to rub at the bridge of his nose in an effort to chase some of the exhaustion away. The delicate skin around his eyes was swollen. “Does the Warchief position carry this much documentation? I have a hard time envisioning Garrosh Hellscream as a paper pusher.”

Garrosh Hellscream, at least so far as she was concerned, couldn’t read and had possessed far too small a brain to carry through an activity as complex as paperwork. And no, thank the Light, because even while not needing to sleep having that much work to do would be a nightmare. “You’ve a duty to your Queen as well, Anduin. One which, since our wedding, you’ve been sorely neglecting.” She pulled his chair back and around from the desk, fixing him in a mild glare as she crawled into his lap. Each motion deliberate. She cupped his jawline, running a delicate touch of nails along the soft flesh below his chin; the beginnings of stubble scratched against her skin. “I hope you haven’t forgotten why I married you.”

She wouldn’t say it. She’d never, ever admit the truth that she desperately needed him to come with her so that she could hold inarguable certainty he was safe. Would never admit how she’d
come to feel about him, against all odds and better judgement, but he knew. Between that damned flower dead center of the bouquet and the fact that her words were soft instead of cold like she’d wanted them to be it was impossible he didn’t.

Anduin sighed, gentle hands running up along her spine before he brought one of her wrists to his mouth and pressed a soft kiss against cold skin. “You’re right. I apologize from leaving you unattended for so long. And, again, for losing my temper and assuming the worst.”

“See to matters and I might consider forgiving you.” Sylvanas told him, wrapping her arms around his neck. “And you’re to sleep after I’m satisfied with your apology. I don’t want to watch you fall off the roof of one of the homes you’re going to be assisting in rebuilding.”

“If such is the wish of my beautiful Queen then how could I deny her? Shall we?”

She met his half expectant gaze with an even one of her own. “I don’t feel like going through the trouble of getting off you. Carry me.”

Amused, no doubt recalling her indignation at having been lifted up without warning on the night of their wedding, Anduin shifted her in his lap before rising to his feet with mild trouble. “To our chambers, then?”

Sylvanas hummed, nipped at the strong curve of his jawline. “Unless you’d rather put on a show for your guardsmen?”

As expected a dark blush flooded his skin with heat though he didn’t verbally reply. The men stationed outside the study door didn’t acknowledge them this time, though her ears were able to pick up the clink of armor as they shifted positioning to the chamber’s door after it had swung shut behind them. Anduin sent her down lightly beside the bed, turning his head to claim her lips in a kiss which started hungry and vicious, as he’d been taught she preferred, but she forced to slow into something closer to the clumsy gentleness he’d first started out with. With a questioning noise, he pulled back to look at her but Sylvanas silenced him before he could speak.

“Don’t get used to this, Wrynn, but,” almost embarrassed, her eyes darted briefly away and then back again, “I want you above me tonight.”

A brief, bright smile came in answer before he pulled her into another kiss, this one soft and languid as they fumbled with each other’s clothes. Rapidly becoming lost in sensation; soft lips and sweet tongue as her fingers splayed across his chest. Warm skin and rippling muscle and the even ticking of his heartbeat. The callouses on his fingers leaving rough patches on his hands as they slid down along her sides before he lifted her again. Setting her down on the bed before climbing in after her and settling between her thighs. Blue eyes burning as that soft mouth moved down to her neck and then her chest. A quiet purr of satisfaction answering the moan she failed to fully stifle, wrapping her legs around his waist in an effort to draw him closer. Drive him deeper. Burying her hands in his long hair and tucking her face into the side of his neck. Allowing herself to simply drift in the pleasure, the radiant warmth of his skin, as the tension finally slipped away.

When they finished and parted the exhausted Human had soon plummeted into sleep leaving Sylvanas beside him, accompanied by his gentle presence and even breathing and the nagging certainty that this would be the last time. The last time he’d ever lay beside her, warm and alive. The last time she’d be left to just listen to him breathe.

Tension began to give way to paranoia.

The gentle shift of the sheets as the Priest rolled back towards her, one of his arms wrapping around
her waist and his mouth finding the back of her neck. “I can hear you thinking.” She felt his lips
twist into a smile as she shifted unconsciously closer, seeking further contact. The level of
affection in his voice was physically painful. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“Go to sleep, Wrynn.” There was no way in hell that she’d galvanize his already sanctimonious
behavior by informing him she’d suddenly become afflicted by the crippling terror that she’d turn
around and never see him again. “The only thing you’re ‘hearing’ is your pathetic living body
screaming for rest.”

Too far gone to reply with anything witty Anduin instead settled for a grunt which still managed to
sound infuriating and dropped back into sleep. And when he woke the next morning to find her
curled up on top of his chest in a good imitation of Snowball he wisely followed the advice of
glaring eyes and didn’t mention it.

“We’re headed to the Furlbrow Pumpkin Patch and the Jansen stead today. They’re fairly close
together and are among the most desperately in need of repair buildings which are far enough away
from Moonbrooke that Mathias is comfortable allowing me to participate in the restoration.”
Anduin said, pulling a tunic over his head; brown in color and rougher than what she was used to
seeing him in, over a matching set of pants and heavy boots. Had it not been for his manicured
nails and the fact he’d never in his life been left hurting for food Anduin could easily have passed,
in that moment, for a peasant himself.

“Is that an effort to blend in or a necessity in hopes of avoiding ruining any of your good clothes?”
Sylvanas asked. “Because if it’s the former your face ruins it.”

“More of an effort to spare my good court clothing the terrible fate which might befall them whilst
surrounded by dirt and sharp objects.” He said. “And I thought you liked my face.”

Sylvanas refused to dignify that comment with a response. Anduin, snickering, followed her out.
They retrieved their mounts from the stables, joined a small intermixed cadre of Dread Guards and
Royal Guards and then that group joined a larger group of workers and a number of ox-drawn carts
laden with supplies. Together they set off towards the dust choked plains of Westfall, trundling
along down the cobbled roads.

The Jansen Stead was rundown indeed and the Furlbrow Pumpkin patch, proceeded by a small
plot of dead soil which looked as if it had never been tilled, wasn’t much better. The roofs had
become riddled with multiple jagged holes, exposing the exterior to the elements, and the walls
were bowing inwards. The sea was visible from where they stood, the shore less than half a mile
away, and floating on the sparkling blue surface was what appeared to be a Night Elven vessel.

Kal’dorei ships from Kalimdor regularly sailed in and out of Stormwind’s ports, only a few miles
to the north, yet it still struck her as odd that it would be anchored off Westfall’s coast of all places.
At this distance she could see figures moving about on the wooden decks but it was impossible to
make out finer details.

Sylvanas’ attention was soon drawn back to Anduin whom, true to form, immediately went for the
most dangerous portion of the job and accompanied a small group of workmen up onto the roof of
the Jansen Stead. The overhang blocked her ability to simply look over and assure herself of his
position, the tension from the night prior flaring up with a vengeance, and the Banshee Queen
swiftly sought relief by taking up position on the other roof.

The sun rose steadily higher as morning rolled into afternoon, a glaring white-gold eye which
rapidly baked away the cold of morning. As she worked, keeping busy but paying little mind to
what she was doing, Sylvanas would periodically look back to assure herself that that tension
remained mere paranoia.

Anduin, sweat drenched and with his shirt draped over one shoulder, schlepping what loads his crippled leg would allow up the quivering ladder and onto the roof. Anduin laughing and joking with the workmen around him, swiftly adapting to the coarse vernacular. Anduin listening with great concern to a ragged street child fluttering about his feet. Anduin absolutely nowhere to be found.

Heart dropping in alarm the Banshee Queen rose to her full height and cast hurriedly around the area once more. Not on the roof. Not on the ground outside the building. Not around one of the wagons. She cast her gaze out across the dust plains and caught a brief glimpse of golden hair vanishing below the false horizon of the beach’s raised bank.

The ship was still there.

Instincts flaring violently, terror shooting through her veins, Sylvanas leapt from the roof without another moment’s hesitation and took off across the plains at the fastest pace that she could manage. The alarmed shouts rapidly falling away behind her, replaced by the hissing of the sea and the harsh snarls of Gilnean voices.

Even free of muscle strain and draining stamina she simply couldn’t make herself move fast enough. She could see the beach now; see the rowboat waiting in the sand; see the Worgen preparing to shove off; see her husband’s unconscious form being carried aboard, slung between them like cargo, but they were still out of reach.

No. No! Not fast enough. They were pushed the boat back into the water now, dropping the oars to begin to row back towards the larger ship where a figure stood at the rails, watching.

Greymane. She recognized him instantly by the way he stood there, glaring.

Sylvanas vaulted over the crumbling edge of the raised bank, landing on the beach below. Nearly loosing her feet but managing to stay upright and keep running. Feet sinking down into the earth. Dark grains and bits of shell and wood flung behind her in wide arcs. Reaching the water’s edge too late. Helpless to watch as the little rowboat docked beside the larger ship, his limp form passed up to the Gilnean King.

She fell to her knees in the sand and screamed, her form rippling briefly into something less solid as the sound of the Banshee wail tore outwards in a wave of sand and water. Greymane turned his head, glaring at her with his yellow tinted beast eyes, and had the gall to look as if he’d won some great triumph over a horrific monster as the anchor rose and the vessel began to sail away. In that moment, fingers curling harshly around fistfuls of sand, Sylvanas would have loved nothing more than to turn him into a new hunting cloak.

Unable to continue pursuit without a ship of her own, well aware that by the time word made it back to Stormwind Greymane would be long gone, Sylvanas was forced to watch the vessel carrying her husband vanish over the blue horizon leaving her alone with the rushing sea.
Sound and Silence

By the time the guards they’d brought with them had arrived at the beach, further alarmed by the shriek that she’d unleashed, all but the vaguest shadow of the ship had vanished over the horizon. Their return to Stormwind had been immediate and SI: 7 had swooped in like a horde of enraged Dragons, Mathias Shaw simultaneously subjecting her to what was at once an interrogation and a request for information weathering Nathanos’ understandably displeased response and conducting the process of organizing the rapid dispatching of a fleet of high speed Krakens in hopes of catching up with their captive King. They’d scoured the waters along the Eastern Kingdoms for hours but, as she’d known they would, as she’d dreaded that they would, had returned with nothing. No King. No trace. Nothing.

Anduin had, essentially, disappeared and the Spymaster, satisfied that he’d wrung the matter dry and tired of fending off her Champion with one hand, had abruptly lost interest in her. Taking command of the protocol which the Kingdom possessed for such an event instead. Sending word out to the Alliance’s other leaders; convening the House of Nobles to name a Regent Lord to operate in the King’s capacity while Anduin was missing and Lirath was too young. Her position as Warchief of the Horde knocked her off the list completely and for that much Sylvanas was glad.

It afforded her the opportunity to slip away and lick the emotional wounds she had no idea how to handle, which the Banshee Queen immediately seized upon. Had wandered without much thought until her feet had taken her to the second floor. To the room they’d decorated together. For the past two hours she’d sat against the wall, staring through the bars of the crib inside of which Lirath was sleeping. Outside the window, darkness had fallen. The bracelet was useless to her; Anduin by now being far beyond range.

If the Spymaster had any idea of where Greymane had gone he didn’t feel the need to tell her and if he didn’t the likelihood that it would take months or even years to find Anduin was very high. If they ever found him at all. That was too much time. Time that Ivar Bloodfang had to brutally maul him to death in revenge for the crime of daring to see her as something more than a monster. If he was killed, what would she do?

Lirath would grow up never knowing his father. Was too young now to have former memories of him that would last through the years. What would they do if she was forced to raise him alone. She didn’t know how to be a mother. Wasn’t good with children the way that he was; awkward at best and tear inducing at worst. And that was entirely discounting her most glaring concern.

Stormwind was a place for the living. A place where she didn’t belong and to which she’d only come for Anduin. With him gone she couldn’t stay there, but at that age she couldn’t bring Lirath to the Undercity either. She hated this. Being forced to sit there powerless to do anything. Clueless as to where he could possibly have been taken. Sylvanas had thought that the Old Wolf shattering Helya’s lantern in Stormheim had been the most horrific thing she’d ever be forced to watch but that had been before she’d watched him take her husband away.

Nothing she could do but sit there and wait. Sit there and wait and hope and…no! There was one thing which could still be done. One means through which she could learn where Anduin had been taken. A deal that could be made, though the Alliance wouldn’t be pleased with her actions.

Sylvanas didn’t like the thought of it either, of essentially trading one foe for another, but if that was the price she had to pay to get him back so be it.
Rising to her feet and casting one last glance at their sleeping son, Sylvanas retrieved her cloak and bow and slipped from the Keep and out into the night. Charting a patch for the high security prison dead center of the city.

The guards positioned astride the doors of the prison, positioned on the midst of the city’s canals, was simply done. The arts of a Dark Ranger rendering her entirely undetectable. She didn’t give up the cover of shadows until she was standing outside the door of the proper cell.

Vanessa smirked when the Banshee Queen materialized before her eyes, looking nothing less than vindictively triumphant. “I heard about what happened.” She simpered. “Reconsider?”

“I don’t care about the other information.” Sylvanas snarled. “Where has Greymane taken my husband?”

“The terms of my deal, ‘Dark Lady’, were that I’d tell you everything if and only if I was let go.” She drawled. “I don’t see that cell door open.”

“And how would we know, Vancleef, that you wouldn’t simply bolt and tell us nothing were we to open this door for you?” Much to the surprise of both Vanessa and Sylvanas, though she held it well in check, Nathanos emerged from the shadows of the grimy hall as well. In retrospect she should have suspected that her Champion had followed her. How long had he been doing it? Had he stood outside the room she’d held up in too?

Vancleef bared her teeth at him like a cornered wolf. “And how am I to know that you’re not simply going to leave me in here you walking corpse?”

The Dark Ranger Lord answered with a sneer, pulling a hearthstone from the folds of his cloak and tossing it through the bars. “I’m a quick draw, Rogue. Go for that before you’ve held up your end and I’ll put an arrow between your eyes.”

“Where does that stone go?”

“Away.” He grunted. “Speak!”

Her lip curled back further at his tone as she rose from the thin cot. Daring to take one step towards the hearthstone and then another before finally stopping when he drew down on her. “Greymane’s working with that Mage. Jaina Proudmoore. They’d have taken him back to her country: Kul Tiras.”

Kul Tiras, a sizeable island in the South Sea. A part of the original Alliance and possessed of the most powerful naval fleet on Azeroth. And the only way to reliably reach them, at least in large numbers, was by sea.

She knew, now, where Anduin was but Sylvanas had to wonder whether or not that knowledge put them in any better place than they’d been before. “Go.” She snarled at the caged Rogue. “Do be aware, Human, that when you return for my Husband you’ll be met with a hail of arrows from my bow. No one will take him from me. Not the Old Wolf. Not Proudmoore. Not you.”

“We’ll see about that, Banshee Queen.” Vancleef picked up the hearthstone, turned it in her hands and vanished in a flash of blue light.

“You followed me.” Half an accusation. Her Champion’s response was an even stare. “Where did that send her?”

“Gadgetzan.” Tanaris? At least it would be a fair bit of time before Vancleef could cause trouble
again, though a part of her had to wonder why he’d had a hearthstone there on hand. “Your command, my Lady?” When her response was not immediate red eyes narrowed. “If I may suggest?”

“Speak then.” Sylvanas was aware of how tired she sounded. Of how tired she felt, if not physically. She could guess what he’d say. Urge her to leave Anduin to whatever fate he might meet with the Worgen and rally the Horde to crush the Alliance. To leverage their failings as she once would have with no thought spared. And she’d be forced, then, to admit her own weakness not only to herself but to him.

“Leave the Alliance Dogs to slog through conference and propriety and the Horde to prey on the resultant chaos if they see so fit. The Forsaken stand ready to go to war with Kul Tiras; they should be made to suffer for daring to take our King.” ‘Our King’. Sylvanas knew her Champion hated Anduin, disapproved of her choice in many ways, and to hear him address him by that title came as something of a surprise. “Kul Tiras may have the greatest naval fleet on Azeroth but we have Azerite. Let an example be made of them.”

For daring to shelter those who had taken something which had become so precious to her Sylvanas would gladly see them reduced to ash and rubble. The betrayal the Alliance would no doubt leap to the conclusion her sudden disappearance amounted to didn’t bother her either. Aside, perhaps, from one detail.

“My sisters-.”

“Sanguinar has made herself useful in sending word.” Nathanos informed her. “Vareesa and Alleria will likely reach Undercity not long after we do.”

There was nothing apologetic in the way he said it but she could read his readiness to accept reprimand for presumption in his stance. After so long spent at her side, her Champion knew her much too well; if it were anyone else, except perhaps Anduin, she’d have been much more than merely unhappy they’d dared to take such steps without first consulting her. Now, she simply nodded. “You’ve transport prearranged as well, I take it?”

Nathanos nodded. “A portal is waiting for us in the Mage Tower, my Lady.”

“Let’s go, then.” She said, turning at last to really look at him and noticing the object strapped to his back; neither his bow or quiver, it was oddly shaped and wrapped in what appeared to be a curtain taken from the Keep. “What do you have there, Nathanos?”

“That imbecile didn’t take his sword with him when you headed into Westfall. He’ll need it, once we find him, to pull his proper weight. King or not.”

Shalamayne. She could make out the outline of the legendary weapon more clearly now, even hidden beneath the thick cloth. The legacy of the Wrynn line in many ways, passed from Varian to his son, and in that moment all she had of Anduin.

Sylvanas forced herself to bite down on the urge to demand that she be the one to carry it, having revealed more than enough of how much the Priest had softened her already.

Together, the two Dark Rangers slipped back into the shadows and made their way swiftly up the Mage District’s tower. None of the Mages who inhabited the area were visible but the portal Nathanos had commandeered still stood open, the familiar images of the ruins of Lordaeron visible on the other side.
The last time she’d seen such a portal he’d been beside her, sat nervously atop that infuriating Palomino and looking as if he expected the sky to fall at any moment. Hissing, Sylvanas pushed the memories away and all but flung herself through the portal. The pale lights of the lost souls inhabiting the ruins scattered at her arrival but the Banshee Queen paid them no mind as she rushed passed, towards the elevator and down into the city below.

Lyana and Vorel met her there, armed and in full battle gear already. Clearly, Nathanos had sent them ahead.

“Dark Lady.” Lyana said as they fell into step behind them. “The Forsaken war machine grinds to life; the Dread Guards mobilize even as we speak, the Apothecaries turn out new abominations and have rigged the hulls of the ships with the most current iteration of the Blight and a respectable supply of the Azerite munitions we’ve managed to develop. The Banshee and Val’kyr are prepared to set out at a moment’s notice and the bat riders have readied their mounts. We’re ready to retrieve the King at your word, through whatever necessary means, and only need word on where to sail.”

“Kul Tiras.” She spat the Kingdom’s name venomously as they exited the hall and stepped out into the city at large; a hive of activity. “Greymane’s working with Proudmoore, and the former Alliance Kingdom has seen fit to shelter them. An act of war! The Alliance will eventually come around to realize as much and set out to extract retribution but we’re not going to wait for that, or for the Horde to decide what it wants to do! The Forsaken will show them that we don’t tolerate the kidnapping of our own.”

“Of course, my Lady.”

Gilt hair and laughing blue eyes. Sylvanas turned and set about a swift retreat towards the War Quarter, but not before snarling “I want word the moment everything is already in place!” This time, Nathanos didn’t follow her.

Sylvanas’ intention had been to set about personally overseeing matters but that plan was quickly shot down by her memory and emotion conspiring against her. War Quarter. Mage Quarter. Rogue Quarter. Apothecarium. Royal Quarter, where that empty second throne stood beside hers. There was nowhere even in her own city where she could go that echoes of him hadn’t tainted. Running was pointless. There must surely be better uses of her time.

Sylvanas still wasn’t entirely certain how she’d ended up face down on his bed, but the faint dregs of his smell still clinging to the sheets beside the dry tang of dust seemed to keep the ever-mounting unreasonable panic somewhat at bay.

Her ear twitched at the shriek of the door opening but didn’t otherwise react, even after footsteps drew closer and the mattress depressed to either side of where she lay.

“Sylvanas.” Vareesa’s voice, heavy with empathy. Empathy, not pity. Pity would have been bad enough but at least then she could pick up the pieces of her pride and pull them around her like a cloak. But empathy? That suggested that she understood. Knew what she was going through. But she didn’t. She refused to believe that their situation was the same. Not until she had Anduin’s corpse at her feet and no hope left she hadn’t lost him in the way Vareesa had her husband. “I’m sorry.”

Eyes flashing scarlet Sylvanas bolted upright and rounded on her, the younger elf recoiling in alarm. “I’ll get him back! No matter what I have to do I’ll get him back, even if it means sending the entire island of Kul Tiras to the bottom of the great sea!” She snarled. “That rabid mutt has taken enough from me! I won’t let him take Anduin too!” All at once the anger fled her, plunging
her down into the urge to curl in on herself as her vision threatened tears. “I love him. And I can’t lose that.”

“You won’t.” It was Alleria, this time, who spoke. Her green eyes set into a determined gaze. “We won’t let you. Regardless of how long it takes the Alliance to react, or what the Horde does, we’re with you.”

Still clearly nervous of setting off another explosion, Vareesa flashed a brief smile at her older siblings. “Just like old times.”

With luck and hope, this time, the ending wouldn’t be the same.
The child had been thin and dirty, the very definition of ragamuffin, and looked truly panicked though Anduin had felt it odd that he was clutching something in his fists; the glint of copper visible between his fingers.

“Please, Mister. Can you help me? It’s my sister. We were playing on the beach and she got hurt! Please!”

Something in him had been suspicious, urging him not to go, but the duty of a Priest was to aid the needy; the duty of a King was to aid his people and so he’d pushed the caution aside and told the boy to lead the way. Had hurried after him as quickly as his crippled leg would allow when the child had bolted back across the dusty plains.

Negotiating the steep bank had been difficult but he’d managed it, somehow. What he found there hadn’t been an injured child but a row boat staffed by Worgen; before what that meant could slot into place in his mind a powerful blow to the back of his head had taken his vision.

How long Anduin had been unconscious he didn’t know, but there was a dull tender pain radiating from the point of contact with whatever had been used by his accosters to knock him cold and the young King knew better than to immediately open his eyes and alert whomever may or may not have been there with him to the fact that he was awake.

Given that it was Worgen who’d taken him and he hadn’t yet been ripped apart Anduin felt fairly certain of whom was responsible for his kidnapping but they weren’t, at current, on what could be called friendly terms and he didn’t want to face the inevitable confrontation quite yet. Instead he focused on what he could learn about his surroundings without sight.

The herbal echo drying his tongue made it clear that, on top of being knocked unconscious, he’d been drugged to make certain he stayed that way and though the effects of the potion had since left him his limbs still felt heavy. Sunlight was tainting his eyelids red and wherever he was it smelled old. Like mildew and rotting wood and the harsh salty tang of the sea. He wasn’t shackled and he was lying on his back on something soft, fabric lying across his bare chest. When he moved his hand to his legs it was to discover he was still wearing the rough work trousers as well. The bangle and his mother’s golden locket were still on his person; a relief. Only half aware of what he was doing the young King followed an age faded explanation Wrathion had once given on how the Bloodstones worked and reached out through the connection.

There was nothing on the other side.

Cursing internally Anduin pulled his attention away from the connection and instead sought his connection with the Light. Threading warm fingers of healing magic through his veins in search of injuries; a brief coalescing over the knot on his head and the old damage to his joints and bones but nothing new was revealed. Now that he was more focused and slightly more awake he could feel the rough scratch of gauze around his brow.

Bandages.

Having learned all that he could from touch and smell and taste and with sight still a potentially dangerous option Anduin turned at last to what his ears could tell him, briefly wishing that he had stronger senses than his race could afford him, and listened. The only thing he could hear, beyond muted sounds of life from the other side of the walls which held him, was his own breathing and
the slightly hastened beating of his heart.

Finally satisfied that he wasn’t being observed Anduin opened his eyes. Above him was a wooden ceiling, old and worn; the boards fraying with splinters and with thick grey cobwebs clotting in the shadowed corners. Sunlight, red tinted and slanted at a low angle, invaded the room through grimy windows from the West. It had been late noon when he’d been taken and now, it appeared, the time had shifted over to early evening but something told him he was looking at pieces of different days.

How far apart those pieces were, though, the Priest had no way of knowing.

What had happened in his absence? Had Lirath’s presentation already taken place? Had it been delayed? The Accord, surely, couldn’t have been dissolved. The Alliance, if not the Horde, must have been on his trail by now; Sylvanas, potentially, on a war path. Did they know where he was? By the Light, he didn’t even know where he was. That was probably something he should see about fixing, as much as was possible without having someone present to answer his questions.

Well aware of the potential, for head trauma to have come from the strike that he’d suffered, Anduin sat up slowly. Cautiously easing his hands beneath himself and pushing his body painstakingly forwards until he was a semblance of, if not fully, upright. Blood rushed immediately to his head and he was swamped by an almost overwhelming urge to purge the contents of his already empty stomach onto the floor, but the shock thankfully was quick to pass. Inhaling deep breaths through his nose and waiting for his vision to refocus from the blur of color it had become.

A wooden floor, dusty and worn but not as frayed as the ceiling overhead. The walls had once been painted grey, as evidenced by the chips of paint still stubbornly clinging to the lattice boards, but had since worn away to expose yet more ragged wood. Aside from the bed, dressed in faded tones of blue which didn’t quite meet the necessary criteria to be truly considered Stormwind colors, the space was furnished with a desk and a chiffonier crowned with a tarnished lead glass mirror. Both had no doubt once been handsome, clad in matching stains of dark mahogany which latticed them in shades of black and cherry like darkened Tiger’s Eye, but age had since left them with the impression of having been salvaged from amid a pile of partly broken furniture. The crowning on the walls had long since peeled away, the coloring beneath it reminding him of the skin revealed when feathers were knocked from the bodies of Griffins; a grey-black line which pulled his gaze to the window concealed behind a heavy set of soft curtains so heavy with dust he could no longer tell what color they’d once been. Against the leftmost wall stood a heavy wooden door, shut tight.

Locked, no doubt, or guarded. Or both. Slowly, cautious not to illicit the shriek of springs or draw noises from the ancient looking floorboards, Anduin rose from the bed and crept towards it. Laying one ear against the wood and all but halting his own breathing; holding the position until he heard it. The shift of weight against the floorboards; the clank of armored shoes.

Yes. Definitely guarded. Not that it really made a difference; attempting to run off and find his way back to Stormwind without first knowing at least where he was was not a wise decision. He hadn’t brought his cane with him to Westfall. Now, he wished he had.

Wincing, hip and knee both snarling at having been held in the same position for the time he’d been unconscious, Anduin made his way back across the room which served currently as his prison to the window that he’d seen. Pushing the curtains aside.

Much to his displeasure the view relieved none of his confusion. The narrow dirty cobble streets and close grown, corroded copper roofs of buildings with lines for clothing slung haphazardly between them, were nothing that he recognized though the architecture and the dress of the few
people he saw seemed almost Gilnean. Eventually, his eyes found the silhouette of a massive hold on the far side of the city and then climbed to the flag which crowned it: green and gold and baring the anchor of Kul Tiras.

‘Beware the Anchor’s sea.’ Velen’s cryptic warning flooding back to him, filling his mouth with the acrid taste of bile, Anduin dropped the heavy curtain and stumbled back, vertigo swamping him once more as the urge to vomit returned, his heart beginning to race as if hoping to cram an entire lifetime’s worth of beats into only a few moments. ‘The wolves at your door, Little Lion.’ The warning. His vision. The way Velen had looked at him. Anduin had never lied when he’d said he wasn’t afraid of death but that didn’t mean that he wanted to die. Or that he was ready to. There was too much he hadn’t yet done. Too much he’d be leaving behind. And yet there was a real chance he’d lose his life here. His chest was starting to ache, his vision to spin, and his legs almost buckled beneath him. The glowing eyes. The ashen skin. It all made sense now. His vision at the Sunwell was an omen of death!

Get a hold of yourself! You’re being irrational! Catching his weight against the windowsill Anduin gripped the wood hard, knuckles going white. It was difficult but slowly, through practiced focus, the young King forced his breathing back into a normal pattern. They’ll come for you. And you can still stand to get yourself out of this even before then. Kul Tiras has been outside of the Alliance for years and have no one back to them; all you need to do is remind the Lord Admiral that a war with one of Azeroth’s most powerful Faction isn’t something she wants. You’ll be on a boat back to Stormwind within the hour, with Genn-regrettably-locked up in the brig. Maybe Jaina too.

He didn’t like the thought of putting two of the last remaining people on Azeroth whom he considered family under arrest and tossing them into the Stockades, potentially even the Vault, for the Light only knew how long-Anduin wasn’t certain if he could ever trust them again-but at this point he didn’t know what else could be done. He’d warned Jaina, when she’d shown up in Darnassus, that he wasn’t going to allow anyone to interfere with the peace he’d spent almost his entire life suing for and he’d damn well meant it.

It was time he put his foot down. He’d been kidnapped far too many times in his life already and refused to yet again be reduced to the King in the tower waiting for a knight in shining armor, an utterly infuriated over protective warrior or, in this case, an outwardly frigid Dark Ranger to save him. It was time that he, Anduin Wrynn, bloody well saved himself from the fire breathing Dragon!

Scratch that, it was time he became the fire breathing Dragon.

Though it might be a wise course of action to put some clothes on first; attempting to do anything shirtless would only draw undue attention. As would admittedly his golden hair and southern accent. In Kul Tiras he’d certainly stand out like a sore thumb, and that was discounting the fact that he’d be drawing attention simply by being entirely lost on the city streets and stumbling along like a drunkard. And then there were the guards he was certain to be unable to shake.

He needed to cooperate with his captors until he could gain an audience with Katherine Proudmoore and petition her better sense for aid and, if that failed, long enough to lull them into a deep enough sense of security to allow him free reign to learn the workings of the city. The patrol patterns of the guards. Get his hands on the necessary tools to survive for the short term away from civilization and then book it into the wilderness. He also needed to be cautious in his movements to avoid Ivar and his pack whom, purportedly, had a vested interest in ripping out his heart for the crime of marrying Sylvanas.

But before all of that he had to confront Genn and Jaina. And it didn’t look like he’d have to wait
terribly long in order to do so. He’d only barely reached the chiffonier which he’d assumed contained clothing for him when the sound of footsteps from outside drew his attention and the door to his room swung open.

Genn came first, then Jaina, the concern which had cut deep lines into his features lightening as he caught sight of Anduin up and on his feet. The door swung shut behind them with a quiet click.

“You’re awake, my boy.”

The only thing the Wrynn line at large had in common with Deathwing’s Black Dragonflight was the fact that they were known for their legendary tempers. Bolvar used to say that he had fire in his blood. Anduin, in contrast with his father, was slow to anger and quick to calm—owing largely to the serenity bred from his connection with the Light—but when he blew it was with the force and fury of a volcano and the incinerating heat of a solar flare and at hearing the Gilnean King refer to him in that way, as if everything were normal, as if he hadn’t ripped him away from his people and the family he’d formed with the woman he loved whom Genn refused to see as a soulless monster out to get him, he lost it.

His Smite struck the wall above their heads with such power that it left an ashen scorch mark behind. “What,” he snarled, lips drawn back over clenched teeth, “in the name of the Light do you think you’re doing? Do you…have you any idea…? This is…! I…!” Suddenly unable to breathe he stumbled back, ramming into the chest of draws with a large clatter and almost hitting the floor.

When his father would get into one of his igneous rages, when his face would turn beet red and the veins in his neck and temple would stand exposed, Anduin had often found himself in genuine fear that the man would fall to a stroke or aneurism and yet now it seemed like that might instead be his fate. He felt like his heart was going to explode.

“Anduin!” Jaina rushed forward and he reeled back, flinging another Smite on reflex and missing yet again as he toppled backwards.

“Stay away!” Somehow his ankles became tangled together and he fell to the wooden floor with a heavy thud. Tried to scramble back up and scoot away but wasn’t fast enough, familiar hands dragging him into her lap and clasping over his pounding temples. “No!”

But it was pointless. Frost magic radiating from her fingertips and into his body, cooling his blood and forcing his heart rate to slow. Anduin let out a broken whine, kicking uselessly about and pawing ineffectually at the Mage in an effort to push her away.

Distantly the Priest was aware that such a violent reaction merely to seeing them wouldn’t go far in convincing either of them that he retained his sanity but at the moment in time he didn’t particularly care.

A large, warm, calloused hand gently rested on his back. Shaking lightly as it traced the near to faded marks Sylvanas’ nails had cut into his skin. “Look at what she’s done to him.” He could hear the Worgen in his voice; protective rage lying close to the surface. “Enslaving his mind wasn’t enough; she’s violated him too!”

He wanted desperately to turn on him, then. To yell and scream and defend Sylvanas from the unfair uncalled-for assault on her intent and character but the Frost magic held him back. His limbs sluggish and heavy, making it simple for Jaina to hold him in place when he squirmed.

Tears of frustration spilled form his eyes. “Why are you doing this?”

“To keep you safe.” Jaina spoke to him as if he were something wounded and small set to bolt at any moment. Keeping one hand where it was on his temple she used the other to stroke his hair.
“Sylvanas isn’t good for you, Anduin. She’s using you and once she’s tired of it she’ll dispose of you and the Alliance.”

“You’re wrong.” The pity in her eyes when she looked at him, then, filled him with a new surge of molten rage but yet again he was held back. New tears spilled down his cheeks. He felt wretched and desperately wanted to go home to Stormwind. To Lirath and Snowball. To Sylvanas. “I love her.”

“You don’t.” Genn told him, struggling to keep his voice gentle. “That’s the enchantment she has you caught in talking. I know it doesn’t seem like it now, my boy, but Jaina and I only want what’s best for you.”

“You’re wrong!” At this point he no longer wanted to speak to either of them. The renewed insistence only seemed to cement their belief he’d been reduced to some sort of mind slave.

Genn sighed heavily. Anduin heard the soft scrape of clothing as he shifted. “I promised your father, before he died, that I’d look after you. I’m not going to fail him. Not again.” Going so far as to kidnap him, Anduin thought, was something even the former King would have considered a few steps too far. “Sylvanas has stolen enough from me. I won’t let her have you too.”

‘I promised’. ‘I won’t fail him.’ ‘Taken enough from me.’ For someone who claimed to be doing it for his good, the true focus of the matter seemed suspiciously centered on Genn. “Get out.”

“My boy-.”

“Get out!” Finally, that anger boiled over again and the magic couldn’t contain him. Anduin whirled around and lunged at the other man and…wound up face down on the wooden floor but the young King, by that point, was too furious to care. The artless flailing effort to claw at his eyes had done a workable job of intimidating the older man, though, as Genn had leapt to his feet and retreated; looking at him as if he were something wild and frothing at the mouth. Crouched on all fours against the ground Anduin felt like he thought Kichalo surely must have in the final moments of the lion’s life: truly, genuinely, threatened by those he’d formerly believed incapable of harming him. “Get! Out!”

“Genn.” Jaina said quietly, as if taking pains not to startle him further. “We need to go. To let him calm down. If we press the matter too quickly he’ll only become more violent, never mind the fact it might cause damage.”

“I…yes. I think you’re right.” Genn drew himself back up into a more dignified posture and nodded, gaze return to Anduin’s own maddened one; pupils reduced to narrow pinpricks against frigid blue. “This truly is for your own good, my boy. In time, you’ll see that.”

Anger reduced his third attempt to yell ‘get out’ to a wordless yowl and the pair quickly retreated after that, securing the door tightly behind them. Anduin’s fists slammed against the wood a moment later. His shoulders straining against the pressure of his weight as he scrabbled at the ragged surface with his nails, splinters lodging in his fingertips and drawing blood. By the time the fit of madness passed the young King found himself lying once more on his back, on the floor this time, staring up at the ceiling overhead. His eyes swollen red and feeling well and truly dead inside.

He’d been kidnapped before, had been left stranded before, but this was different. This was him languishing at the hands of those who cared about him, who believed he was suffering from a compromised mind and could not be convinced otherwise, and Anduin didn’t know what to do. There was no manipulation to turn to. No logic to be found. And faced with that fact he’d simply
lost it; it wasn’t an elegant, or perhaps even a responsible, response but he couldn’t help himself. He’d never encountered such a thing and didn’t have any of his usual recourses at hand. He was terrified. Truly.

But now, with that outburst of emotion out of the way, Anduin could devote his full focus-and full force-to getting himself out of the situation that he’d found himself in.

The Young Lion of Stormwind wasn’t about to take what had been done to him lying down.
“Not even eight hours since the King went missing! That’s how long it took the Warchief to betray us!” Tyrande snarled. “Assured as our destruction at their hands seemed, I knew we should never have trusted the Horde: they destroy everything they touch!”

Uproar was the only word that Mathias Shaw could think of to describe what was going on in the throne room around him and it was doing absolutely nothing for the headache that he’d developed within moments of being told that Genn Greymane had kidnapped Anduin off the beach of Westfall. He had the sneaking suspicion that he knew where Anduin had been taken, where Genn had been hiding since Gilneas had departed the Alliance in a huff-the pieces of the Defias’ brotherhood’s involvement, their first fortuitous appearance at Teldrassil during the narrow time frame the King had been there and Jaina Proudmoore’s conspicuous interest in her all but adopted ‘nephew’s’ whereabouts and doings all slotting into place within the Spymaster’s mind-and already knew that, regardless of whether Anduin was being held in Kul Tiras or not, attempting to glean that information without setting off an international incident, potentially to the point of igniting a war, wouldn’t be something easily done. If the Proudmoore Admiralty was knowingly sheltering Genn then any agents sent in, if caught, could be imprisoned or worse. If they didn’t know, or if his assumption was entirely off and Anduin wasn’t on Kul Tiras, those same spies potentially being caught wouldn’t be something which could easily be apologized for explained and forgotten. Nations, after all, tended not to take terribly kindly to spying and espionage when they found it, even when it was done by former friends, and with all that Katherine Proudmoore had lost to the Horde Mathias doubted Stormwind’s current stance in treating with them would put their respective nations on anything close to what could be considered good standing.

On top of that, things in Stormwind had rapidly begun falling to pieces as well, and with his attention stretched thin by so much going wrong at once there was only so much focus and concern that he could spare to each thing in turn, divided in size by order of magnitude with Anduin’s kidnapping at the top of the list and Sylvanas Windrunner’s vanishing act and what it possibly could mean a close second. Every available member of SI:7, himself included, were working frantic overtime and running on a collective day of sleep with no relief in sight from the Shattered Hand and though Sylvanas had seemed genuinely distraught by the King’s disappearance that didn’t mean he was about to drop his guard. And with the matter of vanishing undead aside, there was the fact that Vancleef had somehow ‘escaped’ from high security containment within Stormwind’s Vault.

And then there was this mess; the answer to the question anyone with the slightest ounce of sense would have known better than to ever ask: what happens when you throw a handful of screaming children whom possessed the bodies of adults into a room and allowed them to erupt into a verbal deathmatch while the only present voices of reason were either content to let matters play out, not quite sure what to do with themselves in the face of screaming madness, or unable to spare the necessary energy to intervene before the very Keep itself was in danger of crashing down around their heads.

Sometimes he really hated his job; Mathias knew damn well he was getting too old for this.

“We can’t afford ta jump ta premature conclusions about tha Warchief’s motivations.” Moira snapped back, patience worn through to its last thread and eyes flashing. “Sylvanas has run off and left no word on where but why would she? I doubt she’d have said anything ta tha Horde either. An it doesn’t mean she’s gone an run ta Orgrimmar or tha she’s marshallin her forces ta attack us.”
“What else would she be doing?” the High Priestess snarled, lips pulled back into such a ferocious sneer that it left her pointed canines on full display. The Dark Iron regent looked about ready to reach for her hammer, and the other two members of the Council didn’t appear too far behind. Mekkatorque, perhaps wisely, had retreated to the side of the room where the Prophet stood calmly watching and Aysa, not far away, had tensed in preparation to intervene in a physical fight. Rogues, by their general nature, weren’t terribly devout but right about now was probably the time where he should start the long process of praying to the Light for sanity and patience. “Sylvanas Windrunner and all of her people are unnatural abominations; they do not belong in this world and will never be anything short of dangerous! Anduin’s plan to contain her and the Horde might have worked while he was here but now he’s not and his choice not to even attempt to match their command of Azerite has left us defenseless!”

“Then don’t ya think a better use of our time than yelling at each other is trying ta rescue Anduin?” Muradin grunted. Moira had drawn her weapon now and was glaring at the Night Elf, an expression which was returned full force by the taller woman, and Light damn it all he was going to have to get involved in breaking up a duel between the two of them any moment now.

Thankfully, before either one of them could say more or act on the tension and strike first Velen stepped forward and spoke at last, his level voice cutting the madness like a hot knife.

“We are remiss, Tyrande, to assume the worst of the matter quite so soon.” His hooves clicked an offbeat staccato with the foot of his staff across the throne room’s tiled floors. “Sylvanas and her Champion, as well as the Dark Rangers who accompanied them, are not the only ones who have vanished. There is one other.”

“Yes, I noticed that too.” Aysa said, clearly relieved by the change of subject; a correcting of the meeting’s course away from running aground on the rocks. “Valeera was her name, wasn’t it? Valeera Sanguinar? They were very close, thought of each other as siblings, and she was close with his father too. Surely, she’d be here, if she hadn’t gone after him already.”

“A Blood Elf.” Both her tone and the look on her fierce, fennec face made Tyrande’s distaste for them quite plain. “Yes, they are close and yes she was close with Varian as well but I would count the keeping of her company as yet another in a long line of dangerous choices that the House of Wrynn has made. Not just to themselves but to others around them. Our King’s crippling injuries simply go to show that the Sin’dorei cannot be trusted either: they, after all, are Horde as well!”

“The Sunreavers,” Mathias snarled, unable to take the pounding trapped behind his eyes a moment longer, “were framed for the incident with the Divine Bell. But arguing about the Queen’s whereabouts or the Horde isn’t why we’re here. I’d advise you to remember that much.”

Glowing white eyes turned on him, then, in a harsh glare. “Don’t you dare suggest, Shaw, that I’ve no care for the fact that Anduin is missing! My people do bear some responsibility for the matter, having provided Greymane and his people with the ship he used to do it. But that does nothing to excuse SI:7’s failures. You should have been tracking him! And you should be considering the reality of the fact that those green skinned savages are not our friends. You’re losing your edge, Spymaster!”

Briefly the urge to demonstrate just how much of his edge he retained burned through him and his hand twitched towards the blades of his daggers. He reigned himself in a moment later, curling his hands into fists instead. “I am not ignorant to the potential for the Horde to attempt to take advantage of our weakness. And if it should please you, Lady Whisperwind, then you may handle the brunt of the precautions taken but I’ll have you know I’ve by no means been idle and that I have on good confidence the place he was taken.” Spoken through clenched teeth. “And I’ll warn
you once to never insinuate such a thing again.”

“An where would tha be, Mathias?” Moira demanded, turning on him as well. “What in tha Light ‘ave ya been doin lettin us scream at each other if ya knew where Greymane’s taken im?”

It was difficult for the Rogue to contain the twitching of one of the smallest muscles in his face. “As much as I’m sure we all wish it weren’t the case this isn’t a matter of a forceful rush to retrieve the High King.” Mathias said. “Too much has fallen into line to make what’s happened any sort of coincidence. Genn isn’t working alone. After leaving the Alliance he made contact with Jaina Proudmoore.”

A hiss of conversation filtered through the room as that information set in.

“Kul Tiras.” Velen’s voice was heavy, thick eyebrows drawing together.

“Yes.” Mathias said, a creeping suspicion that the Draeni leader might have seen something-know something-briefly overcoming him before he pushed it away. For all the stock that Anduin put in his mentor and the idea of visions sent by the Light the Spymaster didn’t consider such things to be terribly valuable and with so much on the line questioning the matter wasn’t worth pursuing. “Kul Tiras. As I’m sure many of us remember they were once a part of the Alliance but left after Jaina’s actions at Theramore lead to the destruction of their fleet. Where they don’t have other allies to fall back on now, the ability of their naval fleet alone makes them a force not to be idly toyed with. And given Anduin’s recent actions in treating with the Horde I’d expect Katherine Proudmoore wouldn’t be sympathetic to the Alliance.” He said. “If the Proudmoore Admiralty is sheltering Genn simply sailing into Boralus’ Harbor and attempting a diplomatic negotiation wouldn’t be wise. And if they don’t know the High King is present in the city and we alert them he could be imprisoned or worse, executed.”

What he’d heard of Tol Dagor were only rumors, but Wrynn blood did not belong in a cage beside criminals and pirates. And he certainly wouldn’t stand for prospects of his Regent being slaughtered like a brigand.

“What do you suggest we do, then?” Mekkatorque asked.

“We need to know what we’re running into before we make any moves. Who’s aware of King Wrynn’s presence. Where he’s being held. If he’s even being held in Kul Tiras at all.” Mathias said. “We’ll need to prepare an Alliance naval fleet with air support for the retrieval. In the meanwhile, we’ll need eyes in the field and as good as my agents are even the slightest risk that they might be caught is too great. So we’ll play Genn’s game against him and hire privateers to have a look around Boralus. Renzik should reach Freehold within the hour.”

The thick pall of choking clouds which never quite seemed to leave the cursed glade reduced what should have been the bright light of the full moon to an eerie silver veil which hung like thick smoke over the purple tinted grass and danced like flecks of mercury across the surface of the Great Sea. Shadows flickered and twitched across the dry planks of The Banshee’s Wail, the great ship-raised from a watery grave of its own at some point in the recent past and sea worthy only at the behest of dark magic-moaning beneath her feet as it pitched gently with the tide. And her sister, Lady Moon as she’d once been known and still sometimes was, stood at the prow staring out at the far horizon beyond which lay their destination. And Anduin. The argent glow highlighted the blue tones of her skin and washed out her mane of golden hair in tones of silver. Curving shadows along the graceful arms of the jagged black bow slung across her back and reflecting off the sharpened edge of the blade strapped to her hip.
Shalamayne, the flame bracketed within the metal tongues flickered out in the absence of a Wrynn’s touch.

Alleria took another step forward and the planks creaked in protest beneath her feet. Sylvanas’ only reaction was to turn her head just far enough to look at her, the slightest glint of scarlet eyes detectable through the gloom. “Your people work fast, even factoring in…everything.” No response. The Banshee Queen turned away again. “Everything’s in place, now? We’ll be drawing up anchor soon?”

“There will be no delays in retrieving my Husband from the clutches of that rabid mutt.” There was a dry brittle quality to her sister’s voice that Alleria had never heard before. One of Sylvanas’ hands was distractedly fiddling with the bangle worn on the opposite wrist. “A few last-minute preparations are being done. But after that we’ll be sailing for Kul Tiras. It will take us the remainder of the week to reach the island.” Her other hand clutched convulsively on the wooden railing, the material shrieking in protest against the force. “We’ve more than enough Azerite on this ship alone to reduce Boralus to a smoldering crater in the ground, and I’d love nothing more than to do so the moment that we get to that damned island. But Anduin’s being held in their capital, almost certainly, and he’d be caught up in the blast as well. Not to mention that the soft-hearted fool would never forgive me for wantonly slaughtering civilians.”

She wouldn’t have hesitated before, a realization equal parts touching and chilling. Yet another example of how Anduin had already managed to change her sister.

“Sailing into their harbor would be a fool’s errand, so we’ll make a beach head elsewhere and advance over land. Regardless of whether the Alliance and Horde come to join us or not—Sanguinar’s been sent to Orgrimmar with the news before returning to Stormwind to look after Lirath and I suspect the Alliance will be able to work out what’s happened sooner or later as Mathias knows more than he’s saying—the Proudmoore will return him! Tirigarde Sound would be the best place but the likelihood we’d be seen prematurely is too great. We’re headed instead to Drustvar.”

The Kul Tirans and Forsaken were about evenly matched when it came to numbers, though the presence of the Gilneans tipped that balance against them, and their opponents would possess the homefield advantage. Even with a cadre of Rangers on their side and Banshees capable of possessing soldiers Alleria wasn’t certain of their odds. Even still, she wouldn’t abandon her sister. Not again. “You know that it’s alright to cry? It wouldn’t make you weak.”

“I’m not going to cry!” She snarled, baring her teeth and still fingering the bangle. “Not while there’s any chance left I haven’t lost him. My tears are worth more than that.”

In the weighted silence which fell between them the ship creaked again. Green eyes fell to the bangle. “What is that?”

“A wedding gift from Anduin’s dragon.” Though the bitterness remained in her voice it had softened somewhat. Sylvanas’ gaze falling on the dark red stone. “It’s part of a pair and he has the other one. Supposedly, at close enough distance, we can find each other. Speak.” Her nails clattered against the scaled pattern embossed into the metal. “I could feel him. I didn’t realize until he was out of range and the feeling disappeared but…it’s still warm so I know Ivar hasn’t gotten to him yet. And I’ll know when that changes.” Her grip on the rail tightened further, carving thin curls from the wood. “And if it does, damn it all, I’ll do worse than kill that Worgen! Much worse!”

Alleria stepped forward and spun her sister around, paying her disgruntled grunt of alarm no mind, and pulled her into her arms. “I’m so sorry.” She said. “I left you. Both of you. I should have been
there and I wasn’t; I was so concerned with what you’d become and your Faction that I didn’t allow myself to confront the fact that I’ve failed you as your older sister. If I hadn’t gone through the Dark Portal after Turalyon, if I’d been there when the Scourge-.”

“Spare me the moralizing, Alleria. If Turalyon’s anything like Anduin he’d have accomplished absolutely nothing in the Twisting Nether if you’d left him to his own devices. And had you been in Quel’thalas when that man child came rampaging through we’d both be abominations instead of just me.” Sylvanas took pains to sound annoyed by the fact that her older sister was clinging to her but the Banshee Queen allowed herself to lean into the touch. “And there are only so many Humans who can tolerate such a thing: Anduin’s a rare breed.”

A breed with the real potential for becoming extinct if their timing, or their luck, proved even slightly off. Shoving the though viciously aside Sylvanas stepped back from her sister and turned away. “Call Vareesa and make certain she knows to be on this ship by the tolling of the next hour. We’re pulling up anchor and setting sail for Drustvar.”
A Bit of Fresh Air

Over the course of the next two days Genn and Jaina made a handful more efforts to ‘get through to him’ about the fact that he was ‘not himself’ and that ‘they were only trying to help him’ for ‘the good of the Alliance’. Having excised most of his betrayal and hurt feelings in his first igneous outburst and had simply proceeded to treat them to the same process he put certain nobles through when they attempted to win their way through merit of chipping away his patience: retreating into himself and dropping into a deafened meditative trance until they gave the matter up for lost and retreated. With his captors it seemed to have worked as well, though Anduin had little doubt that that would prove more than merely a brief reprise.

For now, it seemed, they’d moved on to the subject of getting him out and about around Boralus for ‘some fresh air’ to aid in his ‘recovery’. Genn had even taken it upon himself to provide him a new cane, dyed blue and leafed in gold and topped with a griffin. Anduin would rather still have had the sleek black walking aid Sylvanas had commissioned for him as a gift at the start of their relationship, but he supposed it was better that he hadn’t brought it out with him to Westfall. Doubtlessly, the Worgen King would have broken it if he could and thrown the remains into a fire. If what he had been given was what he had to work with in kicking off his plan than he would. Really, it could have been worse.

But it wasn’t all good news, of course. It never was. And this time that ‘not all good news’ came in the form of the bloody Grey Guard. It seemed that Genn wasn’t entirely as oblivious to how ‘in his right mind’ Anduin was as he claimed to be; that, or his reputation for bolting for trouble whenever it arose had become so ingrained within the semi-character the world knew as Anduin Wrynn, son of Varian Wrynn and High King of the Alliance that his doing so was simply a subconscious expectation.

Either way, regardless, the young Priest had found himself shackled to yet another set of guards. The guards who’d been standing watch outside his door. They’d have some use, at least, in fending off the Bloodfang which might by lying in wait for him around any one of the city’s narrow corners and, should he need to, he doubted that the Gilneans would be any more difficult to slip than his own Royal Guard back home in Stormwind.

Not that he would do so, unless given no other recourse. It was important, after all, to gain their trust. Lull them into a false security by behaving, though perhaps not enough to be suspicious, so that when the time came he could slip them for good and buckle down until help arrived. And though, with any luck, logic and his silver tongue would triumph against the Lord Admiral’s will to keep him captive there it wouldn’t do him anything but good to already have set other options in motion.

He knew that there were risks involved with doing what he planned to do. Kul Tiras, he knew, had left the Alliance because of the horrific losses they’d suffered to Thrall’s forces during the Third War. The Proudmoore Admiralty, including Jaina now it seemed, held no love for the Horde. And, likely, had no love for the Alliance or Stormwind or him in the wake of what he’d done in tying himself to Sylvanas. And though he’d never be made to say that he regretted it, because he didn’t, he never would, Anduin knew that his decision to save his people and those who’d allied with them at any cost had in turn made them an enemy to those like Kul Tiras. Despite what they’d done, their misguided beliefs and baseless hatred, Genn and Jaina were safe. He knew their intention. Knew what they planned and what they wanted. But Katherine Proudmoore? He was putting a great deal of trust into the fact that the current Lord Admiral of Kul Tiras was aware, already, that he was there.
If he was right, the worst that could happen was a denial; a refusal to see evident reason and save her people from a war which, no matter which way one sliced it, would prove far more damaging to Kul Tiras than it would to the Alliance and Horde. If the Horde was even coming—and, damn it, it was better he checked that doubt immediately—of which he couldn’t be certain and hated to admit he didn’t have full confidence in; Sylvanas and the Forsaken definitely, but would the rest? And then, at worst, there was the other option for what could happen.

Incarceration, at best, within one of the most brutal high security prisons on the face of Azeroth. And at worst? A public execution on the gallows as a traitor to everything it meant to be Human. Again, his vision and its nature came to mind, making his belly writhe like a nest of snakes, but he didn’t have another choice. Not really.

Clad in the faded Kul Tiran style clothing dug from the chiffonier and braced against the new cane the young Priest tottered over towards the door. And though he’d have liked to have claimed that he was only doing so to engender sympathy and lead those around him to further lower their guard the reality was that the sea side mountain air was cold enough to genuinely agitate his joints and brittle bones even in the height of summer. His three-tap step alerted his guards to his approach well before he’d opened the door and by the time he emerged out into the hallway they’d turned to look at him.

Stoic faced and unfriendly, they were nothing like his own Royal Guard who were glad, to varying degrees, to joke and laugh with him and together and only became fully serious when the true need to defend him arose. Brea Wyther, a regal looking woman with sorrel eyes and a mane of hair the color of mulled wine and Terrence Smith, who had a face that looked as if it had been roughly chiseled from a block of stone by a concussed ogre. Did they believe Greymane’s madness? Sometimes he wondered but he had no way of knowing. They wouldn’t speak to him unless directly spoken too, and sometimes not even then.

Huffing out a sigh, the ache of homesickness burrowing itself deeper between his ribs, Anduin continued passed them and began the process of thudding down the stairs. Cane, then foot, then foot again. Hanging onto the railing all the while which itself was desperately clinging to the moldering wall. Mindful of every place he put his feet lest he accidentally step wrong and plummet through them. The metallic tapping of the Grey Guard’s footsteps fell in behind him not long after.

This would be the first time that he’d be setting foot outside of the old manor he’d been put-read locked up-in. The first time he’d be setting foot outside on the streets of Boralus, a place where he wouldn’t be recognized on sight by most. Where he’d stand out while simultaneously blending in to the foreign blur of merchants from all corners of the world selling their wares at market. It was a prospect that was, strangely, daunting especially in conjunction with the potential for things to go terribly wrong. Wavering a moment, Anduin took a deep breath—scented with sea salt and the too sweet stench of rotting wood—to steel himself before closing his fingers around the doorknob and turning it. Pushing it open. Stepping out onto the lopsided porch.

The District in which the building where he’d been staying was, clearly, not well traveled. The wide, once well-tended cobbled road was broken apart by tenacious woody roots and vines and lined on either side by more manors, once large luxurious and enviable but long since fallen to ruin. At the far end stood a fountain of pitted stone, run dry and overgrown with moss and lichens. Beyond the crumbling manors sprawled Boralus, a stretch of crooked buildings and oxidized copper roofs, and beyond that the Great Sea: a flat expanse of deep sapphire, calm in the windless cloudless sunny day, which was the same as what he saw beyond Stormwind and yet somehow persisted in looking different. Passed the outskirts of the city in the other direction rose the ridged snow-blind peaks of a striking mountain range, rearing upward into the heavens and encircled by misted fractals of reflected sunlight.
The beauty of the place should have been the fabled silver lining of the situation yet it only seemed to hollow the pit which had formed in his belly further. Under different circumstances, he might have been able to enjoy his stay there. How different would it have been had this been a state visit rather than the forced ‘vacation’ is really was? Lirath would have been uproariously amused by the gulls which flitted about constantly overhead and likely would have attempted to form his babbles into some vague imitation of their high-pitched squeaking. The bed he’d sulked in would have been one that he shared with Sylvanas whom, despite not needing to sleep and denying even the slightest mention of such, he always found curled beside him when he woke.

Damn it! He’d promised that he’d be there, yet he’d failed to keep it. Even if it wasn’t by his own will and wasn’t something he’d had any cooperation in, the realization of as much still made him feel terrible. Would she blame him for it? Would it matter if she did if the likelihood he’d live through this was next to zero, if his interpretation of his vision was to be believed?

Probably not.

Pulling back his shoulders and lifting his chin, projecting for all he was worth the image one would expect from a man who held incredible power and knew it. Judging by the looks he was sent by the civilians whom he passed and the guards who stood watch throughout the city-leery and alert yet cautiously admiring; as if sizing him up for themselves and balancing that in measure with what he might stand to be able to get them—he’d succeeded well enough.

Though Proudmoore Hold was inarguably the largest, tallest building in the city, possibly in all of Tirigard Sound, and Anduin could see it plainly from where he was having grown up in Stormwind in the shadows of the Keep he knew well enough that seeing a building and being able to actually find his way there were two very different things.

Having made it into what looked to be a Market District the young Priest looked around, scanning the area for a source from which he could get directions which weren’t holding a pike while well aware the Grey Guard assigned to him were in turn watching him like hawks. Most of those his eyes fell on were guards, clad in an odd-looking ensemble of plate and the green and golden tabard of Kul Tiras. A few others were dock workers: big burly men with barrels full of Light only knew what balanced on their shoulders and arms as thick around as he was, grumbling some song the like of which Anduin didn’t recognize under their breaths. The wisest choice was a mustached man with auburn hair who leaned calmly against a nearby wall, clad in a long somewhat tatty brown coat and clearly teetering on the edge of drunk.

What was the worst that could happen?

“What was the worst that could happen?” Anduin called for his attention as he approached, the set-in-place ‘I’m important’ aura still going full blast. “I was wondering if you might be able to assist me with directions? It shouldn’t take but a moment.”

Grey green eyes displaying a startling level of awareness for how strong the scent of rum which hung around him was focused on him and pale lips curled into a bandit’s smile. “Sure, I’ll help you out.” He wobbled slightly as he pushed off from the wall yet somehow managed to remain fully upright. “Interesting accent you have there, mate. I’ve heard it before but can’t place it; it’s been a while since I’ve been that far asea. Where ya from?”

“Stormwind.” He said, bemused. “Could you point the way to Proudmoore Hold?”

“You blind, Stormwind?” Amused and good natured, though he couldn’t quite tell if it was the type of charisma which was dangerous or not. “It’s only the biggest bloody building in the entire city.”
“I’d rather have a clear route than be left to wander about like a fool all day.” He said.

The other man shrugged. “Fair enough.” He said. “Just head East and down a level into the Scrimshaw District. From there head South. You’ll end up at Proudmoore Hold eventually though it isn’t a part of the city the guard usually lets visitors into.”

“Do I need to attain permission from someone?” if so, unfortunate, because it would only further delay his plans to get home one way or another.

Even if it meant having to do so in a pine box.

“Probably but I’ve never been much of one for that kind of thing.” He waved a hand dismissively. “You want in to somewhere you’re not technically supposed to be, Stormwind? My advice: just walk in like you own the place and no one will give you a second glance. It doesn’t seem like you’ll have much of a problem doing that.”

Well, he wasn’t wrong. Still, why did he end up feeling insulted by that last little comment? “Thank you.” Anduin turned and left him standing there, quickly charting the outlined course towards Proudmoore Hold.

Unlike Stormwind’s gleaming white spires and sapphire roofs the headquarters of the Proudmoore Admiralty was a heavy intimidating structure built of dark stone and copper plating. The highest spire was plated down the middle in a massive pane of thick glass, lit from within by a warm orange light. Surrounding it on all sides were four squat square ramparts bristling with a mantle of short muzzled cannons.

Why there were cannons pointing towards the city as well as away from it Anduin supposed he probably didn’t want to know. The small platoon of guards who were stationed on watch outside treated him to a judgmental gaze but the strange man’s advice paid its dues and simply strolling passed as if he had every right to be there led to no care spared for his presence.

He trotted up the outer steps as quickly as the cane in his hands would allow, pausing only to again inquire of a young man in a uniform about the Lord Admiral’s location assuring him-falsely-that he most certainly had an appointment and was absolutely under no uncertain terms expected.

“The Lord Admiral should be in a meeting with Lady Ashvane at the moment.” He said. “You’re certain that you’re expected, sir?”

“Oh,” Anduin purred, slipping into the dulcet tones of Shadow, “absolutely. Please take me to her immediately. It’s important.”

“Oh, of course. My apologies, Sir.” The Grey Guard behind him shifted, discomfited by the sudden agreement, but made no other move. “Right this way.”

Down a hall and up a flight of stairs, then another, and then a third. The door he was led to was made of sturdy wood and embossed with the anchor of Kul Tiras. His escort extended a hand to knock and then said “Lord Admiral, Mr…” casting a half befuddled look at him which was fairly typical of those under the influence of the darker powers of the Priesthood he asked “who did you say you were again?”

Anduin stepped up to the door to make sure the occupants of the room would hear him. “The High King of the Alliance.”

A beat of silence before sharp footsteps approached the door, a harsh looking woman opening it a moment later. Tall and heavy set and busty past the point of his taste she wore a short coat with a
fur lined collar and a sizeable medallion flashing a blue-gold tone which looked strangely familiar. Her dark hair was pulled up into a tight bun atop her head and her eyes were small and unfriendly. “You?” She scoffed. “You are nothing but a boy, and a weak willed one to have sold out to the Horde!”

Weak willed? Sold out? A boy? By the Light he was nearly twenty-two at this point! Anduin felt a small muscle in his face start to jump but ignored it, allowing his face to shift into a smug sneer. “And you, clearly, aren’t the Lord Admiral though you seem quite content to prance about as if you were. Now if you’d be so kind as to step aside for your betters Lady Ashvane—I assumed you’re Lady Ashvane—I’ve a need to speak to Katherine Proudmoore.”

Without waiting for her to move out of the way Anduin strode forwards, pushing passed her with ease despite her size forcing the woman to stumble back and splutter furiously. Perhaps he’d overstepped a bit with that, and it certainly wasn’t ideal to have the Grey Guard there for this—naturally they’d insisted on following him in; rude—but he supposed that this was a predictable move on his part which would be more suspicious for him not to make so he allowed it.

Katherine Proudmoore was instantly recognizable for her relation to Jaina, tall and regal with hair whitened by age rather than exposure to mana radiation. Her expression was at once both hostile and closed off and the sight of it was almost enough to make him falter.

Damn. He knew nothing about this woman and her face seemed set to give just about as much away. Masks were worthless to him if he didn’t know which one was best to use; choose wrong and he risked putting himself at a dire disadvantage and he needed to keep every card in his deck as close as possible for as long as possible if he was going to survive. Every weapon at his disposal needed to be kept primed and ready. No punches could be pulled, and he’d bite kick and claw at anything he had to to make it count.

“Your presumption alone, Anduin Wrynn, is offensive.” She snapped. “You’ve walked into something which didn’t concern you, have come here without request or even permission, disrespected—.”

“With all due respect to your position, Lord Admiral, this is a fairly urgent matter I thought you’d appreciate being made aware immediately.” Brute force tactics weren’t what he preferred, much like the Dragonflight he’d learned from, but in this case, it was his best option. Raised chin. Set jaw. Chest puffed up and shoulders drawn back. Eyes flashing gunmetal blue in the orange light as he channeled all the regal menace which had always surrounded his father in a temper as best he could. Expression assured and darkly charming, though taking distinct care not to step too close to what might rattle the woman’s cage. “From your reaction, or rather lack of it, I take it you know what Genn and Jaina planned. I am the High King of the Alliance, Husband to the Warchief of the Horde, and quite possibly the most powerful man currently alive on Azeroth. You don’t want to make an enemy of me. Kul Tiras does not want to make an enemy of Stormwind.” He said. “But there’s something more important, and far more dangerous, you need to consider.”

“And what,” she drawled, “would that be?”

“ Heard the term ‘Azerite’ before?” Anduin’s lips twitched briefly into a smirk. “A rare, volatile, magically powerful ore welling up from the wound dealt to our planet by Sargeras. Capable of incredible things: boosting mental processes, thought and reason; awakening latent power in objects, leveling cities. In a word: destruction. And the Horde has cornered the known market.” He said. “I warned Genn what would happen if the wrong move was made. He didn’t listen. And even if what he believes is true and I’m nothing but a toy the Dark Lady doesn’t take well to her things being fiddled with. The best recourse is to send me back to Stormwind immediately; I’ll see to it
that Kul Tiras is seen as an ally in this rather than an antagonist. Your other option, though I hate to admit it, as I’m not there to prevent her from reverting to her most destructive instincts, is to keep me here. To go along with what’s been done. Though I’ll warn you that that decision will likely lead to Kul Tiras—the entire island not just Boralus-ending up in ruins at the bottom of the Great Sea. Weigh that and the safety of your people against this.” A calculated risk but a necessary one to potentially push the matter over the line and into his favor. “Hasn’t Kul Tiras lost enough to the Horde?”

“My Husband. My son. My daughter. All the men in our fleet. Yes, we’ve lost more than enough to the Horde. And I think it’s time we took something of importance from them.” Though no less unreadable than before her expression had noticeably chilled. Anduin felt his stomach drop. “Let them come. ‘Azerite’ or not the abomination you saw fit to bring into your bed will find nothing but cold steel should she attempt to find you here! Go back to where Greymane has been keeping you, Wrynn, or you’ll find yourself in much less pleasant lodgings.”

“Less pleasant lodgings?” he repeated, eyes narrowing. “Are you threatening me Lord Admiral?”

“You should do more than just threaten him, Katherine!” Ashvane snarled from where she was still standing by the door. “Just throw him into Tol Dagor!”

This, most certainly, had not gone to plan and pushing matters would likely only end up in him being tossed into a brutal klink. Affording the Lord Admiral a stiff nod which tred the line of disrespect he turned and left, the two Grey Guard following him out. Plan one: backfired. Not entirely unexpected. That was fine. He had other options. Everyone around him was potentially useful. The Grey Guard set in charge of him. The man from whom he’d asked directions. Every passer by in the street. Even Genn and Jaina if he could bend his pride and tolerance that far. All of them potential pawns. Tools to be used to assure his own survival.

Grey skin and glowing eyes. Fear and adrenaline flooding his system. Hands shaking. Chest tight. What was happening to him? Use people? He was raised to be a politician among many things and it wasn’t a principle which was terribly new, but it was the scale he’d suddenly snapped to that made it so much darker. A blatant desperate measure; the masks he’d grown so used to using scattered about in the mud. A cornered animal. Shadow threatening to boil through his skin.

I’m not afraid of death. No. He hadn’t lied when he’d told her that. Not to her. Not to himself. But there was one thing he hadn’t thought to consider when he’d been faced with the question. I’m afraid of dying.

The tempo of his footsteps sped to a swift staccato, pushing the boundaries of what his leg could take, the bone deep ache grounding him from losing control completely. Heartbeat; breathing: too fast. He needed to calm down. His mind was his best weapon and he needed to keep a clear head.

Find somewhere quiet and calm down. One of the removed, short docks; secluded and out of the way. Close your eyes, listen to the sea and pretend you’re still in Stormwind.

Getting to that little dock wasn’t difficult: the harbor side of Boralus was riddled with them. Anduin picked one at random and bolted down it, collapsing at the edge with enough momentum to nearly tip him forward into the cold water of the Tirigard Sound. Stormwind. Stormwind. White granite, shining and clean. Roofs colored according to district. Sound and smiles. His family. The gentle rush and sigh of the waves as they lapped around the barnacle encrusted beams and the skreeskraw of the gulls were familiar. The sound of the city was not, nor were the light footsteps currently headed towards him.

Anduin spun around, eyes wide and wild; landing on a Gilnean woman with long dark hair whom,
after a moment of panic, he recognized. “Lorna.” Darius Crowley’s daughter, former Commander of the Gilneas Liberation Front and a close friend of Tess.

She afforded him a rather stiff looking bow, the situation lending an insurmountable awkwardness to their interaction and no doubt picking up on his lingering feelings of being threatened. “King Anduin.” She said. “I…wish this could have been under different circumstances but regardless, my father would appreciate your presence at dinner tonight.”

“I mean no offense, Lorna,” Anduin said, returning his attention to the water, “but I’ve no interest in subjecting myself to dinner with Genn Greymane. Where in the past I’d have thought Sylvanas’ view of him a bit harsh given all that’s happened I’ve begun to wonder whether or not my wife was right. I’d rather be left be.”

“King Greymane won’t be present.” Lorna glanced back at where the two guards stood at the other end of the short dock and then dropped her voice. “Not everyone agrees with the direction that he’s taken; it would be worth your time to come.”

Wincing at the ache settled deep into his bones, Anduin clambered back onto his feet and straightened up. “What are you saying, Lady Crowley? And be warned, I’m in no mood to be led along.”

“I’m saying, King Wrynn, that we’ve a vested interest in getting you out of here.” She allowed her voice to return to normal volume levels, no doubt aware of the suspicious eyes on her back. “My father’s pack will be present and perfectly capable of keeping Ivar and the Bloodfang at bay should they decide to act rashly so the guards will not be necessary. I do hope that we’ll see you this evening. Excuse me.”

With another short bow Lorna turned again and swiftly trotted away, leaving Anduin stood where he was at the end of the small floating dock as an unfamiliar harbor bell clanged in the distance.
Worth my while? Anduin turned back to face the rippling green-grey water if the harbor, bracing his weight against the cane in his hand and taking panes to look as if he was interested in the small school of fish circling nearby in an effort to settle the guards whom he’d been shackled with. Blue eyes staring blankly passed the fanged fish while he turned the matter over in his mind. *I suppose that it could be. Though the real question is whether or not I could trust them not to be reporting to Genn.*

It was a real dilemma: having allies in Kul Tiras would be an incredible benefit, though, he was under no illusion that he’d ever find an ally on the island capable of putting him immediately on a boat which the could then make use of to sail unmolested back to Stormwind-his only hope of that had flown the coop when he’d shot in the dark with Katherine Proudmoore and missed-as they could only supplement his efforts to escape with further chances of success, even if he didn’t include them directly in his own machinations to save himself. The downside, however, was the very present possibility that their approaching him at all might all have been at the behest of the Gilnean King, or even their own initiative to better aid Genn in keeping a collar on him. The worth of his going all hinged on how low he could estimate the likelihood of betrayal being.

What did he know of Darius Crowley?

Not much, admittedly, and not personally. He was Lorna’s father, of course, and had been an outspoken voice against Genn’s decision to secede from the Alliance of Lordaeron. So much so that he’d started something of a civil war over the matter and had ultimately been jailed for going against his King before being freed to help beat back the Worgen. He, like many others, had fallen victim to the Curse and had gone on to lead the Gilneas Liberation Front. He’d lost, or surrendered at the very least, which explained why the Forsaken still had a firm hold of the former Kingdom’s lands, and that was about where the extent of his knowledge ended.

It wouldn’t hurt to go, at least, and scout the matter out. Measure them in person. No matter how trustworthy or untrustworthy they proved he’d be keeping his own plans to slip his chains to himself, but a backup plan-and a bit of backup-could only prove to be of aid.

Nodding to himself and feeling decidedly more calm now that he’d been given something of a chance to order his thoughts, the young King of Stormwind turned his back on the gentle harbor waves and made his way over to where his guards were standing.

“I don’t mean to bother either of you, but would you happen to have a guess at the time?” Anduin had taken pains to be polite about the matter, but was met with silence and stony faces. He blinked and averted his eyes, the show of discomfort only mostly false. “Well…I don’t quite feel like going back yet so I’m going to spend another hour or so, I think, exploring. The Market District alone is huge and there must be countless things to see!”

And any one of them could potentially be the thing which would afford him the advantage he needed.

No answer, once again. Two pairs of harsh glaring eyes-one tawny and the other a washed out brown-boring into him with a strong enough suspicion to strike an Elekk dead. Feeling quite uncomfortable but keeping all signs of the fact well under wraps, Anduin clopped the last few feet which separated them and maneuvered the mildly delicate process of sidling passed them without toppling over the edge of the dry dock and into the water.
Somehow, he doubted either of them would bother attempting to fish him out again and Anduin didn’t feel particularly inclined in that moment to go for a swim.

The young King hadn’t been lying when he’d said that he found Trade Wind Market enormous; it was somewhere around twice the size of Stormwind’s Trade District. Boralus as a whole was huge, even considering that the vast majority of it was currently standing empty, and yet again Anduin felt a pang of longing shoot through his chest. For all that she’d never missed a chance to act incredibly put upon by his desires to ‘stick his head into any hole which has bees’ Sylvanas had almost always gone along with him. He wished that she was there with him now, listening with long suffering tolerance to him prattle on about everything he knew about the city, the Kingdom, its rulers and the nations from which the boats adorned with multicolored sails had come.

Light, he missed her. Missed her almost as much as he missed his father, the hole left behind nearly as deep but the pain dulled somewhat by the possibility, however small, that he’d be able to return to the little family that he’d managed, at times seemingly against all odds, to build. The memories of their last night together still burned in his blood. The softness of her voice which betrayed the truth of how she felt. The cold touch of her hands against his chest. Red eyes glowing faintly in the dark. Waking up to find her curled up on top of him and how on edge she’d been both that day and the night before, as if expecting something terrible would happen.

Anduin shook off his thoughts and refocused on his surroundings, blue eyes scanning the area in search of anything which might prove to be of use at one point or another. Winding his way between stalls and open profession buildings and the people who crowded the wide stone roads of the vibrant district; sailors and dock workers schlepping boxes too and fro, their clothing crusted with salt; civilians in both peasant’s garb and noble’s dress; guards clad in the strange assembly of plate which passed in Kul Tiras as a standard uniform. Winding his way around to a raised walkway which overlooked the docks though he was unable to get any closer as Brea’s gauntleted hand caught a fistful of the back of his shirt and all but hauled him back from the stairs.

The last time he’d been manhandled in such a way had been when his guard had dragged him out of range of a very angry raptor.

“’I’m not going down there.’” Anduin informed them lightly, pulling himself free of her group with a margin of sharpness and straightening his clothing. Making a point of brushing imaginary dust from the front of his shirt. “I only want to look.”

Brea didn’t say anything in return. The glare she sent him said more than enough.

Anduin scanned the selection of boats anchored within Boralus’ Harbor, their varied sails fluttering in the salted wind and the towering form of the great Harbor Gate in the distance. Green sails baring the anchor of Kul Tiras. Unadorned white sails. Striped red sails. Merchants did business with one another and the harbor staff on the decks of their vessels from far flung lands. A small group of freebooters, likely hired as bodyguards by one of the merchants to defend them from pirates on their travels, stood gathered on one of the docks discussing something in hushed voices: Hozen and Saurok and a diminutive fox like creature the like of which he’d never seen all acting civilly together. The Goblin at their center looked strangely familiar though at that distance Anduin couldn’t pinpoint why.

All he knew was that he was staring at him.

“You’ve been out for long enough.” Terrance growled, prodding him none too gently forward with the pommel of his sword. Tripping forward and catching himself against his cane Anduin threw a reproachful glare over his shoulder at the man, weighing the worth of complaining about his treatment before discarding the matter. He didn’t appreciate being handled so roughly, that was
true, but this was a time where it was important to pick his battles and now wasn’t the time to be butting into a fight.

Not when it would only serve to put him under tighter lockdown.

“It does seem to be getting somewhat late.” Anduin tilted his head up and considered the position of the sun in the sky; it appeared to him to be just passed this evening. I’ve been invited to attend dinner, after all, and even while stripped of his crown and taken from his kingdom a King must still be observant of proper manners.”

A grunt in reply. Taking that as acquiescence to allow him to attend that night’s event, Anduin began the slow process of making his way back towards the manor house where he’d been staying. It wasn’t the most assured period of travel the young King had ever spent, Boralus still far too unfamiliar to him to make avoiding getting turned around at least once or twice an impossibility, but he made it back to the manor eventually.

For all their grumbling about matters, the Grey Guard he’d been saddled with hadn’t been any help at all.

At this point, the cold having settled quite firmly into the half-healed crevices of his bones, Anduin would have loved nothing more than to curl up in his bed and wait until the warmth of the blanket eased his pain somewhat before going to the Crowley’s dinner but it seemed that that wasn’t in the cards for him that day.

Jaina was standing on the sagging wooden porch, dressed this time in white and blue and with her staff as always in hand. Anduin didn’t pay her acknowledgement but left the door open for her, knowing the Mage would be liable to simply walk in anyway if he didn’t. Without looking either at her or the guards he’d been assigned the Priest began the painful process of hauling himself back up the flight of stairs to the room in which he spent most of his time, Jaina’s eyes never leaving his back as she followed a few steps behind.

Once in his room, Anduin made his way over to the chiffonier and pulled it open. Beginning to sort through the contents in order to determine which combination he wanted to wear that night.

“The weather here is probably hard on your bones.” A somewhat shaky attempt at starting a conversation. Jaina was trying to be delicate, no doubt hoping to prevent him from either blocking her out or blowing up again. “I’ll put an order in with Elric Whalgrene for something to help with the pain.”

Anduin glanced back at her briefly but didn’t otherwise respond, matching a periwinkle shirt with a set of grey pants and considering them before setting the pair aside and diving back into the drawer.

“Mother isn’t pleased with what you did; I’ll admit that I’m rather disappointed as well.” Disappointed but not surprised. So, she had been expecting him to pull that card? Anduin wasn’t surprised. “Antagonizing Ashvane isn’t wise and you toed the line with mother today.”

“I was simply making the Proudmoore Admiralty aware that their choice to shelter this little farce of yours will have dire consequences. It’s only fair the Lord Admiral be made fully aware that the Anchor will soon find itself the subject of a tug of war between lions and wolves.” Pairing another shirt with a separate set of pants Anduin set that ensemble aside as well. “I refuse to apologize for it and I do not need to justify myself to my kidnappers. No matter who they may once have been to me.”
Turned away as she was if she flinched he didn’t see it. “I don’t want you to apologize, Anduin, I want to make certain you’re fully aware of the line that you’re balanced on. At the moment you’re a guest of the Admiralty,” his scoff went ignored, “but if you push at things you’ll become a prisoner instead. Trust me when I say you don’t want to see the inside of Tol Dagor.”

“Trust you? I think I’ve paid enough for doing that as it is and I refuse to ever make that mistake again.”

A drawn-out moment of uncomfortable silence. Anduin remained glaring into the open drawer, continuing to fiddle with the remaining clothing that it housed solely for the sake of something to do with his hands. The floorboards creaked as Jaina shifted her weight.

“I never lied when I said that I considered you family, Anduin.”

“Yes,” he drawled, “the fact that you betrayed me makes it rather clear that you do.”

A sharp intake of breath. Perhaps that blow had been a margin too low but at this point the resultant flood of guilt was so dampened that the urge to turn around and hug the woman he’d grown up calling ‘Aunt’ was buried beneath the roiling soup of ill feeling bubbling within him.

Rather than pursue the matter further, to his surprise, Jaina changed the subject. “What are you doing?”

“I’ve been asked to attend a dinner with the Crowley’s tonight.” He told her shortly. “I’m trying to determine what to wear.”

Jaina took a few steps forward, peering over his shoulder at the chosen sets. “The blue and grey, I’d say.”

Anduin huffed, the drawer trundling closed with a snap. “Why are you here, Jaina?”

“Because I’d like to ask permission to take a proper look at you. To find whatever enchantment she has you under and undo it.”

“There is no enchantment, Jaina. How many times must I say as much?” he growled, turning away from the chiffonier and stalking back to the bed. “All you’ll find is that Genn has lost his bloody mind. Tell me what I have to do.” A beat of silence. Finally, Anduin looked at her; hawkish as he perched on the side of the bed. “You seem surprised that I’m cooperating.”

The former Arch Mage blinked at him in mild alarm. “In honesty I’d expect to have to pin you down.”

“Why would I fight against something that will exonerate the woman I love of the crimes you’ve accused her of committing?” half a simper. Jaina’s lips thinned. “Instructions?”

“This would work best on the floor but with your bones the way they are I can manage on the bed.” Rumming through the small pack at her side and pulling out a handful of smooth stones etched with runes she stepped forwards. “Lay back and close your eyes. Deep breaths.”

Anduin did as he was told, stretching out on the creaky bed and closing his eyes. Taking deep breaths and waiting. Jaina’s cold fingers found his temples again, the soft glow of the Arcane threw a pale light across his face as the Mage muttered a spell he didn’t recognize. An odd, static sensation spread across his skin; a ringing sound beginning to echo in his ears. He wasn’t certain how long he lay there but eventually Jaina stepped back.
“Finished?” he opened his eyes and sat up, watching Jaina gather up the stones again. “Results? I take it that you didn’t find anything?”

“Anduin.”

“When should I expect the fireworks show when you break the truth to Genn? Surely he can’t accuse you of being ‘bewitched’ as well?” he snorted. “When should I expect a portal back to Stormwind?”

“You’re not going back to Stormwind.”

Anduin’s shoulders tensed. “What?”

“If it had been what Genn suspected and you were under some spell you could have gone home; you’d have been cured of this madness and could have gone back to acting as the High King of the Alliance is meant to. All this has revealed is that you’re compromised and allowing you to return would be wholly irresponsible of us.

“And it’s not wholly irresponsible of you to leave my Kingdom headless?”

“They’ll select a new King. One who will be willing to deal with the Horde properly.” Jaina said. “Besides, you always told me when you were younger that you didn’t want to be King; that you’d rather be free to explore Azeroth.”

“I was a child then! I’m an adult now, Jaina, and a father! I have responsibilities to my people and my family and a Wrynn must always rule in Stormwind! Or have you lost all loyalty to my father?”

“Don’t speak to me, Anduin, of lacking loyalty to your father. If you were you’d never have married the monster that murdered him!”

Anduin glared after her as she swept from the room, slamming the door behind her, but kept a firm grip on his temper this time. Forcing the boiling anger down and reaching for the Light to reinforce his control. Turning back to the Chiffonier instead and busying himself with finding further permutations of clothing which he could possibly wear that night before finally settling for the one Jaina had suggested and picking up his cane.

He was met once again with silence from the Grey Guard and was shadowed once more out of the manor. The manor in which the Greymanes had been staying was directly across the street from Anduin’s own where he lived alone but for his two guards-and Light help him, he’d make damn sure they regretted giving him so much freedom-and the manor where the Crowley’s lived, as far as he knew, wasn’t terribly far down the street. A couple hundred paces and one right turn were all that separated him from his destination and it shouldn’t have been enough time exposed to run into trouble. For anyone else that probably would have been the case. For him, it was just enough time to run face first into Ivar Bloodfang.

Nearly jumping out of his skin when he caught sight of the Worgen Alpha, he heard the scratch of swords being drawn behind him over growling laughter.

“Well well well, if it isn’t the little corpse fucker. Out for a stroll?” he rumbled. Anduin didn’t offer a response, attempting to move around Ivar; first to the left and then to the right before ducking beneath the Worgen’s arm. His leg nearly buckled beneath the stress. The Blood Fang Alpha turned to leer after him, snarling at the Grey Guard as they passed. “I know you’ll try to run, Wrynn. And when you do I’ll be waiting. I’ll enjoy hunting you down, ‘Little Lion’. Give that neutered mutt Crowley my regards.”
Despite the pain in his bones Anduin sped his pace, taking the steps of the manor two at a time and barreling through the door the instant that it was opened for him.

“K-King Wrynn?” the grey furred Worgen whom Anduin had nearly bowled over and thought might have been named Tobias looked thoroughly confused by his reaction.

“I apologize for barging in but I had a bit of an unfortunate encounter walking over here.”

The Worgen peered out the door passed the Grey Guard, caught sight of Ivar still standing in the street, and swiftly closed the door. “Did Ivar do anything to you, your majesty?”

“Nothing physical.” Anduin said. “Where’s your Alpha? I’d appreciate the chance to speak with my host.”

“Lord Crowley is in the dining room, King Anduin.” Tess was walking down the hall towards them with her eyes set on the guards. “Thank you for seeing him here but he’ll be fine from this point. If father raises an issue with it remind him that I’m here as well and Darius’ men are more than able to keep the High King safe on his walk back later this evening.” Neither Brea or Terence looked particularly pleased to be doing so but they followed the firm request with only a marginal amount of grumbling. Once the door had swung shut behind them Tess slung her arms around his shoulders with enough suddenness to make him jump. “I’m sorry I missed your wedding. Awkward as it would have been to watch my friend marry the woman who killed my brother, it’d have still been better than being stuck here.”

Anduin sighed, wrapping his arms around her in return. “There’ll be great celebrations for our anniversaries, I’m sure. I can expect you there?”

“Definitely.” She stepped back, a small smile on her face. “You’re alright?”

“Physically.” He said. “And I’ll be alright mentally as well once I’m back with my family.”

“The others are all waiting for you in the dining room, King Wrynn.” Tobias said. “Follow me.”

This manor was one of the ones in better shape Anduin was quick to notice as he was led down the hallway and into a large dining room warmed by a fire crackling in the hearth. Food and drink littered the long table freshly prepared and with steam still rising from it, and Worgen crowding nearly every chair. Darius Crowley rose from his seat in the entry and bowed.

“King Anduin,” he said, bowing, “thank you for coming.”

The young King tapped the foot of his cane against the ground. “Yes, Lord Crowley, I came. Despite misgivings.” He said. “I’d advise you not to pull the lion’s tail.”

“I’ve no want to, your majesty.” The Gilnean nobleman said. “Please, sit down and eat. Have a drink and relax a bit before we speak. You’re among friends here.”

Anduin’s gaze shifted to the high back chair positioned at the seat of honor, considering his options a moment before stiffly making his way over to the chair and lowering himself into it. Selecting a range of foots from the nearest platters without paying much mind to what it was and pouring a dark wine into his cup. Keeping silent unless directly spoken to and simply listening; taking every word spoken and turning them over and over again in his hands like polished stones in case a few might prove to be weapons. Spine ram rod straight and blue eyes never staying long in one place, darting from faces to cutlery to the exits of the room, the tension never once leaving his shoulders.
The conversation began to burn low before the fire did, and an increasing number of eyes shifted to where Anduin sat hunched forward in a half-defensive crouch. Finally, Darius Crowley spoke again. “Genn believes you were bewitched by Sylvanas. Where I doubt that’s the case with the Banshee Queen’s track record being what it is it’s fully possibly there’s something more going on here. We want to help you, Anduin, but first we need to know the truth. How did you end up married to Sylvanas?”

“The same way any King ends up married. Political maneuvering. I’m not a warrior. I can’t lead the way my father did. War would have destroyed the Alliance, now more than ever going up against the Azerite held by the Horde. So I bargained myself as an amusement for her, to at least put off that destruction for the span of my life in the event I failed to reach her. To convince her that peace is an option.” The baleful glare he flung across the table was a clear challenge to attempt to disagree. “I sent Valeera into Orgrimmar with a sharply worded letter designed to make it clear what I knew and to get her attention. I asked her to meet me, alone and unarmed, at Light’s Hope where I, as a Light wielder, would fully retain the advantage. I presented myself in a manner which was designed myself in a manner which was designed to throw her off guard and when she arrived I laid out everything for consideration. All in all, it went off almost entirely without a hitch.” Pulling his bottom lip between his teeth stretched the small silver scar and smirked. “She didn’t like losing control of matters, so she kissed me and bit me and refused to give a straight forward answer at the time but I ultimately gained the agreement that I wanted.”

He poured himself another glass of wine.

“You…manipulated her?”

Anduin’s smirk grew more pronounced. “And at last someone realizes the truth of things. I’m not going to go into the full extent of things because that would mean leaving myself weaponless but I will say this. I’ve learned from two members of the Black Flight.” He took a sip of wine and then set the heavy goblet down beside his plate. “Betray me, Worgen, and I will eat you alive.”

An extended beat of silence, filled by the soft crackling of the fire, before Lorna cleared her throat somewhat awkwardly and said “well, they do say you find commonalities in relationships.”

“So you’ve…a relationship of benefits?” the delicacy with which Darius said it was almost amusing.

“It started out that way, on her end; the undead still have desires, after all.” He said. “I like to think that’s changed, now. Though I doubt I’ll ever hear her say it, there are other ways she’s let me know.”

“And you’re in love with her.” Tess sounded only half surprised. “I can tell by the way that you look when you talk about her.”

“I am.” He said.

“Are you happy, Anduin?” Darius asked him.

Anduin nodded. “Happier than I’ve been in a long time, if ever. And the Forsaken…they’re not as bad as they’re made out to be.” He sighed, reached up and massaged his temples. “Name your price, Lord Crowley. I just want to go home.”

“The vast majority of Gilneas can sympathize, King Anduin. We’ve been fighting more than long enough.”
“When we met with the Horde in Dalaran to draw up the treaty the Forsaken were willing to return Gilneas at least partially to Worgen hands. But in the wake of what Genns done I’m not certain if that’s changed.” He said. “I can advocate for your behalf, should I make it out of this, but the choice would ultimately fall to Sylvanas. They’re Horde lands by name now, after all.”

“You will make it out of this.” Tess reassured him, sounding far more certain of the matter than Anduin could ever bring himself to be with the vision still weighing heavily on his mind. “You have to believe that. We’re going to help you.”

“How do you intend to do that?” blue eyes focused once again on Darius.

“Sylvanas and her forces, and no doubt those of the Alliance and the Horde as well, should be arriving on Kul Tiras soon I’d imagine. When they do we’re going to make contact with them, and do all we can to aid them in getting through Boralus’ defenses.” Darius said. “Where it’s regrettable that we can’t do anything sooner to get you home, King Anduin, there’d be no way he could manage to smuggling you onto a ship and get you out of the harbor in time. And even if we somehow managed to pull it off their fleet would run us down long before we made it to the Eastern Kingdoms.”

They seemed sincere enough, at least so far as he could measure. And it was a reasonable plan at least as far as backup went. Something he could be laisse fair with, so that if he was caught in his own schemes all wouldn’t be lost. The question was could he trust them enough to hand over what might well be his only lifeline? Anduin fiddled with the bangle on his arm, weighing his options. “Who would you be sending? To alert my wife to the fact that you’ll be working with her in springing me?”

“I’ll be going.” Tess said. “I’ll have the easiest time sneaking around and avoiding suspicion, being both a Greymane and a Rogue.”

Anduin considered the newest information as well, turning the matter over in his mind a few times before coming to a decision and heaving a sigh. “Rogue or not you won’t be able to sneak up on Sylvanas. Won’t be able to make it passed Nathanos or any of her Dark Rangers. Or her sisters if they’re there. If you’re going to live long enough to talk to her you’ll need a means to get into contact with her before you’re in range of anyone’s arrows.” Pulling the bangle from his wrist at last, Anduin handed it over to her. “Here. Put it on. Don’t take it off. And once you’ve spoken with her I’d like it returned.”

Tess took the bangle, examining it closely before looking back at him in confusion. “What is it?”

“A wedding gift from Wrathion.” He said. “It’s a part of a pair and allows the wearers to communicate over short distances. A weaker version of what’s used by his Black Talons to keep in contact with one another.” Anduin sighed. “Sylvanas has the other one.”

“Thank you, King Anduin.” She slid the bangle onto her own wrist. “I’ll return it to you as soon as we’ve established contact. You should be back in Stormwind not long after that, and my father…I hope that he can get some help.”

“I hope to find some for him too, Tess.” Anduin said. “Though I can’t promise he won’t be imprisoned for at least a short duration. He has committed an egregious crime.”

“I understand.” She said, inclining her head. “Thank you.”

Lifting his cane from where it leaned against his chair, Anduin pushed himself up onto his feet. “Thank you, Lord Crowley, for the dinner and your help. I should be heading back; it’s getting late
and I shouldn’t give the Grey Guard grounds to be suspicious.”

“Of course, King Anduin. Thank you for coming.” Darius said. “Tobias and some of the others will escort you back to the manor where you’ve been staying. In case Ivar is still lurking around.”

Nodding once Anduin turned and exited the room, Tobias and four other Worgen whom he didn’t recognize following him out.
The Crimson Forest

The pale light of the moon only barely managed to wedge its way between a chink in the thick cloud cover which choked the sky above them, reflecting flashes of silver off the black water as the prow of The Banshee’s Wail cut through them. The decks of the rotting vessel listed gently beneath his feet as he made his way across them to join Sylvanas where she stood posted at the prow.

“You called for me, My Lady?” neither of them turned their heads to look at the other, their red eyes fixed on the water before them and, in the near distance, Kul Tiras. The tattered sails above rippled gently in the wind.

“We’ll be sailing within reach of the entrance to Tirigarde Sound in another few moments; not close enough to be seen in this darkness or risk coming across one of their accursed ships on patrol, but close enough to reach Boralus with fair ease on the back of a bat.

Fly into enemy territory alone in the middle of the night in the hopes of plucking Anduin away whilst the mutt and the Mage remained unaware? If things were to be that simple they’d never have bothered with bringing whole of their armies and filling the bellies of their ships with highly volatile munitions. No, Nathanos knew better. But the Dark Ranger Lord had never had a habit of questioning his Queen where it wasn’t his place. “At your word, My Lady, I’ll set off.”

Sylvanas nodded, gaze set on the mouth of the Sound as if trying to see clear through to the Kul Tiran’s capital from where they stood. A feat even Elven vision wasn’t capable of. Out of the corner of his eye Nathanos caught the set of longing on her face. “Your loyalty and ready service are welcome, Nathanos.” The Banshee Queen’s words were almost drowned beneath the gushing of the waves as they broke against their vessel. “Were I to order you to bring him back to me by dawn I know you’d sooner meet your second death than fail. And I wish I could. But I know better than to think that Proudmoore is that stupid. She’d be well aware of his tendencies and by now would have put some manor of tracking spell on him.” Her red eyes narrowed, long ears pinning back. “That Mage can level cities. The only way we can face her without the risk of losses would be to corner her in Boralus and insure the presence of her people will keep her spell work in check.”

“Then what am I to do, My Lady?”

“Be my eyes.” Finally, Sylvanas turned to look at him. Her expression had once more closed off but Nathanos could still plainly see the pain etched in the set of her features. Little as he admittedly thought of the King of Stormwind hateful resentment against his kidnappers for daring to leave his Queen like this, so uncharacteristically morose, sparked up within him and made his fingers itch for his bow. “As my Champion I can trust you with this job more readily than any other. I cannot go myself, regrettably, as I must oversee the establishment of the beachhead in Drustvar. Examine Boralus’ defenses and catalog them so that, when the time comes, we can make use of their weaknesses. Once you’ve done so, find my husband. Locate where he’s being held, in what condition, and confirm his safety. Do not be seen. We must maintain the element of surprise, and the advantage it affords us, for as long as possible.”

Nathanos nodded. “I’ll return with the information by dawn.” He said. “With your leave?”

The Banshee Queen’s gaze had returned to the water and she didn’t answer. After a long moment of silence, broken only by the creak of wood and swinging mariner’s ropes, the Dark Ranger Lord chose to take the quiet as dismissal. Bowing to his Queen before leaving her where she stood, Nathanos made his way quickly up to the highest deck where Bloodwing was being kept along
with a cadre of other bats. The familiar red eyes of his longtime companion observed him in an almost bored fashion as he checked over his supplies once, then once more. Spreading its wings to either side and beginning to groom them delicately with a mouth full of needle like fangs. Refusing to be made to wait to fulfill Sylvanas’ orders by his mount Nathanos interrupted it halfway through and called it down from its perch. With only a small amount of noticeable reluctance Bloodwing obeyed and allowed him up onto its back.

The bat parted from the deck of The Banshee’s Wail with a powerful, downward sweep of its wings, the cold salt scented air rushing past him with a low moaning sound. The moonlight continued reflecting innocently back at him from below, growing steadily father away as Bloodwing climbed higher still. Land rushing up beneath him before curving out and away again as open water transformed into the Sound. On account of the late hour the waters of Tirigarde were almost entirely empty but what few ships he did spot were flying the green and gold anchor of Kul Tiras. On patrol, no doubt. Pity the idiots and advantage to him, didn’t think to look up.

Boralus blazed on the far bank, hundreds of thousands of tiny windows burning orange against the night sky behind the hulking form of the Harbor Gate. Nathanos’ red eyes traced the dark form of the comparatively smaller but no less sturdy wall which ringed in the rest of the city. Taking note of the cannons, gates and patrolling guards whom made their way along their ramparts. Proudmoore Hold was a hefty structure no doubt capable of weathering a siege for quite a while though how removed it stood from the rest of the city made cutting it off from the rest of Boralus fairly simply done; starving them out if need be. More guards moved in sets of twos and threes throughout the streets on horseback, though a lower lying area near the inner docks was noticeably less defended and less patrolled. Anything coming over the water would surely be seen, but the Undead’s lack of need to breathe afforded them the ability to take advantage of the fact that something coming from under the water would over run what little defense they did have with ease.

Arial forces coming over the wall, ground forces marching across the floor of the Sound and up onto land and their ships coming through from the harbor-no doubt after having to blow the gate clear off its hinges with Azerite-would likely be enough to give them the necessary advantage to win against the Proudmoore Admiralty and the mutts they’d chosen to adopt. Though their ultimate plan, in the end, lay in Sylvanas’ hands.

With the first portion of the job he’d been assigned done Nathanos shifted his attention to the second part: finding where Anduin was being kept and determining whether or not the Young Lion remained in good health. Already knowing he’d have to dismount from Bloodwing in order to find Anduin, he directed the bat over towards what looked to have once been a Noble’s District but had since fallen to near ruin. Dismounting on a dark side street, Nathanos swiftly scaled the side of the nearest manor and onto the roof. Crouching atop the lip like a gargoyle and scanning his surroundings to catch his bearings. Cobble stones overgrown with roots and vines. A dry pockmarked fountain. Gnarled remnants of what had once been topiaries grown mad with the absence of oversight. Half a block to his left two manors, one on each side of the wide street, had lit candles sitting in the windows.

With practiced silence the Blightcaller moved forward across the roofs. Clearing the distance between them without much need for strain or effort. Mindful of loose shingles which might break off and fall to the street below, potentially giving his position away to anyone that might be watching. Cautious, Nathanos tipped himself forward over the lip of the roof of the first house and peered into the window.

Greymane, standing with his back to him as he leaned against the heavy desk, and Jaina Proudmoore pacing the room in front of him. It was immediately apparent that he’d arrived in the
midst of an agitated conversation and the chance to catch wind of something which might be of aid to Sylvanas in the near future was hardly something he could pass up, even weighed against the chance of being caught sight of all but sitting on their windowsill.

"-didn’t think the bitch was capable of bearing children anymore.” Greymane grunted. “Either way, it’s surely a ploy to further secure her grip on Stormwind. It changes nothing."

“It changes a lot, Genn! Everything, in fact! Don’t deny it when we both know it isn’t true!” Even with a pane of glass separating them the Mage’s agitation could still easily be felt. “And I doubt their child is such by blood; it’s unreasonable as a dead body, even reanimated, couldn’t support another life. Either way it bodes ill for the Alliance as, even if we can prevent her from taking him back, she’ll still retain control. Unless we can sway Anduin.”

"'Sway’ him?” gold tinted eyes had taken on a glint of what almost appeared to be suspicion. “I take it you meant to say ‘cure’ him, Jaina?”

“No, I’m afraid not. I examined him, as we agreed, and he’s…tightly bound. Curing him will take too long if we’re to stand a chance at saving the Alliance as a whole. We may be forced to play her game.”

‘Her game’? Nathanos knew full well from the contents of their conversation that they were discussing his Queen, and Greymane’s crackpot theory that she’d cast some dark magic on Anduin in order to enslave him to her will. Indignation roared to life within him as the hairs along his neck and arms raised as the knowledge that the lying bitch was actually suggesting using the Arcane to alter his mind. And Greymane, the worthless mutt, seemed to realize this as well and didn’t seem to take it well.

His golden eyes flashed vibrantly and he stepped forward, form rippling though he didn’t quite lose control of himself enough to shift. “I enlisted your aid to help him; to give him back his free will, not to bind him to mine!” He snarled. “What you’re suggesting would make us no better than that monster!”

“I’m not suggesting it be permanent, Genn. But sometimes, with deep damage, you have to inflict a bit more harm before you can repair what’s been broken and there’s more on the line in this than just Anduin; I want to keep him safe as much as you do, but we can’t allow ourselves to forget that.” Despite being face to face with a snarling, if untransformed, Worgen the former Arch Mage stood calmly before him, blue eyes cold. “We may not have a choice but to temporarily…convince him through more forceful means in order to uproot and rebuff the Horde. Once that’s been done, we can free him and heal the damage left behind.”

“No.”

“Genn-.”

“No, Jaina. It isn’t right! Being forced to do to him what we have already is bad enough, I won’t be complicate in anymore!”

Jaina’s eyes narrowed. “Perhaps your view of what’s ‘right’, Genn, isn’t flexible enough to be of help in this matter. Consider-.”

“No, you consider this, Jaina! If you dare to do such a thing to him I’ll rip you apart, I don’t care how powerful you are or who tries to protect you! Anduin has been through more than enough for one lifetime already!”
Well, maybe the rabid dog wasn’t completely useless.

“Well, maybe the rabid dog wasn’t completely useless."

“Are you threatening me, King Greymane?” The former Archmage hissed, expression frosting over into a glare which rivaled Sylvanas’.

“Threatening a woman is hardly good form, Lady Proudmoore.” He growled. “Consider it a promise. I failed my own son. I won’t fail Varian’s as well. I promised to protect him and I intend to do so, even if that means having to do so from you. Even if that means being forced to pick up and move again.”

“Oh?” a thin veil of frost had begun to form across the glass. The aura in the room could now only be described as hostile. “And where would you go?”

The Gilnean King set his jaw. “I’d find somewhere.”

The former Archmage scoffed and turned away. “Fine. Have it your way and try to reach him; best of luck. Just keep in mind that you’re not the only one who cares enough about Anduin to want to protect him from her. I’m not going to stand by and watch him be used up and disposed of by the Banshee Queen the way I almost was by just the memory of Arthas and I’m sure as hell not going to let him go the same way as his father. But I’m don’t think I’m threatening you, Genn. I’m just making a promise.”

Not only was Anduin in danger of being torn apart by the Bloodfang, it seemed, he was also in danger of being mentally hijacked and turned against them and that was something the Dark Lady didn’t need to know. Where it wasn’t often that Nathanos made such decisions, in no small part because it felt like a betrayal of the deepest order against his Queen, he knew that their chances of success in this endeavor were higher if she wasn’t pushed into the sort of rage he hadn’t seen since prior to the Lich King’s fall. Lip curling into a sneer, he pulled himself upright and retreated back up the roof, taking a well-timed leap off the edge and sailing across the street onto the opposite roof. Freezing instantly when, after the brief delay easily explainable by being bound to a cane, the sound of a window unlatching and sliding open reached his ears. Cautiously, he looked down.

Wary blue eyes scanned the edge of the roof overhead, seemingly aware that something was there but Anduin was unable to see him through the shadows that he’d wrapped around himself. All things considered the King appeared to be in good health, though his face appeared older and, in some ways, gaunter. On edge. No doubt he expected the source of the noise to be one of Ivar Bloodfang’s brutes.

After a long drawn out moment the Priest retreated back into the ruined manor, the thud and click of the window being closed and locked following behind. Bracing himself against the roof, feeling oxidized copper bite into his palms, he leaned forward and peered inside. The room was shabby, but not near as bad as it admittedly could have been considering the state of the building around it. Anduin, clad in ill fitted nightclothes, had eased himself back into the bed and now lay on his back atop the covers. Nathanos could tell, from the faint gleam of candle light against his open eyes, that the Priest wasn’t asleep.

Alive and unharmed and in a respectable enough state for the time being. His Lady would be expecting him back soon, and he couldn’t risk lingering for too long lest he be discovered by a walking fleabag.

Returning to where he’d left Bloodwing to find the massive bat hanging from the eaves of a nearby house, the Champion of the Banshee Queen mounted up and left the capital behind, flying back across the Sound and out over water. Banking east and gliding off in the direction he knew the Forsaken Fleet had gone. Towards Durstvar.
The moon had only just disappeared when Nathanos caught sight of the familiar tattered sails just off the coast of a beach of black and grey rock stretched from the foot of a towering set of cliffs. Though the sun had yet to appear the pale light of incredibly early morning had already begun to filter shades of washed out grey across the sky, illuminating the command tents which their forces were just finishing up the process of erecting.

Leaving Bloodwing to its own devices upon dismounting Nathanos made his way quickly across the loose gravel and ducked into the largest tent which he knew would contain Sylvanas. He found the Banshee Queen standing beside her sisters, pouring over a list of parameters. At the sound of the sea smoothed stones crunching underneath his mail boots she turned her head, gaze conveying a silent demand for news.

“Boralus is built for defense from attacks coming from the sea; pirates and the naval forces of other nations. They’re not quite so prepared for ground or aerial forces and we can turn that to our advantage. Though the Hold is built to withstand a siege, much like Stormwind’s Keep, unlike Stormwind’s Keep it’ll be simple to cut them off from aid and supplies.” He said. “I suggest a three-pronged approach, My Lady.”

“I’ll consider our options once we reach Tirisfall. For now, getting through Drustvar is our foremost concern.” She said. “What of Anduin?”

“He’s alive and unhurt, though he seems to be beginning to suffer from sustained stress. He looked older when I saw him.”

One set each of green and blue eyes looked on in silence as Sylvanas sighed, no doubt wrestling for a moment with the urge to storm into Boralus alone that very minute. “Thank you, Nathanos. Knowing that I’ve not been lied to by this bracelet is a relief. As for stress, I doubt that Wrynn is any sort of stranger too it. He’ll bounce back.” She said. “I’ve more to ask of my Champion.”

“Whatever my Queen desires.”

“When we arrived on this beach we found this.” Sylvanas produced a strange looking fetish the like of which Nathanos had never seen, built of wicker and bone. “Whatever magic this is, it’s Necromantic in nature but I don’t recognize it. It’s not of Scourge origin but that’s all that I can glean; not what it does or why it was left here. A claim of territory? A warning? Either way, I want whatever is responsible found and evaluated. Where I’d prefer not to be delayed in retrieving my husband we cannot risk turning our backs on a serpent, and if it proves to be a threat we’ll have to deal with it. While you’re afield gather the lay of the land: we weren’t able to procure proper maps of Kul Tiras prior to setting off and we need more knowledge than we have to be able to be affective in this campaign. Take Arielle and a few others with you; should diplomacy with whatever is responsible for this travesty of an object prove possible you’ve my full permission.”

“Of course.”

Vareesa’s ears pinned back. “You’d really want to work with something responsible for that?” she demanded. “I don’t know near as much about Necromancy as you, sister, but just from the way it feels to be around whatever that is…”

“I’m afraid that I have to agree with our Little Moon, Sylvanas.” Alleria said, brows drawn together in discomfort as she observed the fetish in a way which suggested an expectation it would attempt to pounce at any moment. “Just being near it…the Void is never this agitated.”

“I’ve no intent or interest in a long-term partnership with the practitioners of this.” Sylvanas said, her tone cold and brokering no argument in spite of the fact that Alleria was the elder sibling. “But
the enemy of our enemy is an ally of convenience and I doubt Humans of any Kingdom look on Necromancy of any stripe with fondness. If they can take distracting the Proudmoore Admiralty out of my hands then I can get my husband to safety all the sooner. And then I can turn around and kill two birds with one Azerite munition.”

“I still don’t like this,” the eldest Windrunner said with a sigh, “but I trust your judgement.”

“I’ll collect Arielle and the others and leave immediately, Dark Lady.” Nathanos promised. “We’ll scout and map the surrounding area and attempt to contact whatever indigenous creature or creatures is responsible for the creation of that fetish. We’ll return as quickly as we’re able to ensure the effort to retrieve the King moves forward.”

“See to it that you do.”

Bowing crisply at the waist, the Dark Ranger Lord turned and exited the command tent. Making his way back to where he’d caught a brief sight of the other Dark Rangers.

Vorel was seated out front restringing her bow and looked up at him when he approached, her long silver hair spilling down her back. “Blightcaller, you’ve returned.”

“But not for long; as per the Dark Lady’s order. Collect Arielle and Lyana and join me out here. We’re to scout the area and attempt to contact the locals.”

“The Kul Tirans?” she tilted her head. “I thought we were working off surprise.”

“But the Kul Tirans, no. Rather what’s responsible for that idol that was found when we made landfall here.” Nathanos said. “Smartly, Vorel. We go on foot.”

Nodding, the undead High Elf disappeared into the tent and reemerged with Lyana and Arielle behind her. Neither questioned what they were doing or why and simply fell into step as he headed away down the beach. Eyes on the cliff face as it rose above them. There had to be someway up it, surely. Whatever had left that fetish behind hadn’t fallen down the cliff—he very much doubted anything that did would survive—and the steepness of the incline made climbing down impossible and climbing up nearly so. Finally, after a solid twenty minutes of walking they located a steep pathway and proceeded up it.

They were confronted almost immediately with a towering wall of a tree line, the trunks clad in black bark and crowned with a blood red canopy. After a stretch of what he quickly estimated to be about fifteen to twenty miles rose another cliff adorned with a statue of a man with a falcon on his arm and the snow-covered roofs of a town, and further still beyond that was a towering range of mountains.

“There’s a town on top of that cliff.” Arielle said, giving voice to his thoughts. “We’re lucky that this forest was here. Had the Kul Tirans built any closer to the beach they’d have seen us long before we knew they were here and any surprise would be gone.”

“We’ll have to move our forces through here by night when we push inland.” Vorel said. “At least until we can take that town. From there it’ll be a race to push as far inland as possible before anyone in Boralus realizes they’ve lost contact and come to investigate.”

“It would be wisest to move through the mountains rather than around them.” Nathanos said. “The living would struggle to manage such, especially in large numbers, which would mean that the defenders of Kul Tiras wouldn’t think to add addition defenses. That will be their downfall.”

Noticing that their number had decreased by one, the Banshee Queen’s Champion swiftly looked
around. “Lyana!”

“I’m here.” Crouched over something a few yards ahead of them just within the tree line. “I don’t recognize these tracks. Can’t think of anything that could possibly be this large. It must be six times the size of Abomination.”

Exchanging glances, the other three Dark Rangers moved forward to join their fellow. Looking down at the six-foot print driven almost a foot deep into the loamy soil. Hairs rising along the back of his neck Nathanos swiftly looked around, searching for more but finding none; not only large but tall. Not quite as tall as the surrounding trees but only just. It could have been bipedal or confined to all fours for all he knew but he wasn’t about to make the mistake of assuming something capable of dwarfing most full-grown Dragons was friendly. They’d have to be careful moving through this forest, because with how thick it was there was no guarantee even something that size would be seen coming.

“Dark Lady watch over us.” Vorel’s voice almost seemed to quiver, red eyes taking in the gnarled misshapen indent in the earth. “What sort of monster has feet that large?”

“Feet?” Arielle repeated. “Those don’t look like feet, Vorel, they look like-.”

“Roots.” Nathanos pulled an arrow from his quiver and set it on the string of his bow but didn’t draw it back. “There are no Night Elves in this area and even their Ancients don’t reach quite this size. We’ve a job to do and it’s best we not keep our Queen waiting.”

“Or give this beast the time to turn around.” Lyana straightened up, joining the other two in pulling down their weapons as well. “Come on.”

With some reluctance the four Dark Rangers pressed on into the hissing forest. Between the towering close grown trees it was cold and darker than it should have been. With astounding regularity, always off in the distance, they could hear the howling of wolves. The bark of a raven was enough to send all four whirling around, the bird absconding in a whirl of black feathers cackling all the while. Arielle cursed under her breath after it. Nathanos hissed and they continued forwards.”

Though the undead didn’t require sleep the consensus was made that it was best to take shelter through the hours of darkness. Securing themselves in the back of a shallow cave, all four posted with their bows pointed towards the month and in the direction of the moaning and crashing of something towering and wooden moving in the darkness beyond their vision. Nathanos Blightcaller was not prey, and there was nothing he disliked more than being made to feel like he was yet there was something about that forest, hell that whole area of land, which simply felt…wrong. Wrong even to the undead like them to a degree he hadn’t felt since Icecrown Glacier. How any Humans could live in such a place was beyond him. It was very clear the land was cursed.

The moment that the sun rose they were moving again. Aside from another few false alarms their travel passed without fanfare. At around midday, they stumbled across another idol. This one was much larger than the one Sylvanas had showed him before they’d left, standing approximately as tall as he was and crowned with the fetid skull of a deer, the blue-black glow of the strange repugnant sorcery flickering across its surface and in its eyes. They moved steadily forward into the clearing, inching along with painful caution until they were nearly close enough to the twisted effigy to touch it.

The undergrowth exploded and a mad eyed stag-coat stained jet black and flickering with that same blue glow—came sailing out at them with a sound that a deer simply shouldn’t have been able to produce. All four fired, their arrows driving deep into curse tainted flesh, and the crazed beast
reared back with another scream before falling dead with a muted thud.

“Bandal!” Lyana snarled a curse. “What is this forest?”

“I don’t know. And I don’t care to.” Arielle said. “But that idol seems to be the source of whatever taint afflicted that stag. The wildlife might calm if we destroy—Blightcaller, behind you!”

Reacting as much on instinct as alarm Nathanos flung himself backwards just in the nick of time to avoid being crushed by the massive arm which punched a crater in the soil where he’d just been standing. The thing that it belonged to wailed, its body moaning and groaning as it straightened to its full height. Nearly thirty feet tall from the bottom of its trunk like legs to the tips of its sharpened antlers what stood before them was a twisted amalgam of wicker fur and bone with razor sharp branches in place of fingers. For its size the thing was fast and it came at them again, all four scattering in different directions to avoid it.

“What is that thing?” Vorel shouted.

“I don’t know!” Nathanos snarled, watching their arrows bounce off it while barely leaving scratches behind. “Shooting at it isn’t going to do any good!”

“And what do you suggest we do?” Arielle asked.

“It’s made almost entirely of wood.” He rolled beneath another swipe, the monstrous golem’s massive limb whizzing by overhead with a low whoom! “Fire!”

“We don’t have—.”

“Then light one!” He roared. “Arielle, Vorel and I will keep its attention. Be quick about it, damn it all!”

He didn’t dare to look away from the beast long enough to know whether or not Lyana did as she was told, firing another arrow into the central body mass of the thing. The arrow vanished into the dark tangle of moss and woody vines and the thing kept coming. Creaking and groaning as it bore down on them, a cacophony of voices shrieking within it producing an unintelligible cacophony of torment. A horrifying realization settled into place: the thing in front of them was an abomination on par with the hell beasts churned out by Arthas in the height of the war in Northrend.

A wooden Thaddius, powered by souls which had been trapped inside the mass of wicker and bone. The very darkest sort of Necromancy which Sylvanas had banned upon the Forsaken’s founding and on which she’d never wavered. Gritting his teeth, Nathanos snarled.

“Lyana!”

“I’ve got it!” Something bright flash through the gloom of the forest; a burning arrow which embedded itself in one of the more solid portions of the wicker horror’s chest and catching light. A small fire, but enough. Pulling a glass orb filled with viscous fuel used for fire traps the Dark Ranger Lord lobbed it at the golem like a grenade. It burst against its wooden frame, the flames roaring as they exploded into a proper blaze showering the forest floor with sparks and bits of glass. The golem roared, turned tail and thundered into the forest.

A throaty cackle from off to their right made all four of them spin around, catching sight of a hunched backed figure leering at them from a few paces away. Grey skinned and scrawny armed, the ancient looking woman with scrawny knobbled arms, oily hair and a hooked warty nose. Clutched in one taloned hand was a notched and splintered walking stick.
“My my my, what do we have here? Did quite a number on the Soul Goliath, didn’t you?” the woman’s voice was high and brittle. Her nails clicked against the stick in her hand. “Not Kul Tiran, no no no. Not living either, though they do a good job of faking it. If not in defense of Drustvar, then why are you here in the Crimson Forest? This is the territory of the Heartsbane Coven.”

Though Nathanos didn’t lower his bow before he spoke. “We-.”

The woman hissed at him, revealing a mouth filled with yellow shark like teeth. “I did not ask you!” she snarled, then turned an expectant gaze on Arielle, Lyana and Vorel.

After a moment of stunned silence in which Nathanos fumed and the other three simply stood there shocked, Arielle stepped forward. “The Kul Tiras are sheltering someone whom means a great deal to our Queen.” She said, not thinking it the best idea to inform the hag that that someone was their King given her reaction to Nathanos. “All we want is their return. And we’ll pose no threat to whatever it is that you and yours are doing here unless you give us reason to.”

“You say you’re led by a Queen?” more cackling, though another glare was aimed at Nathanos. “It seems that you, little dead ones, make wise choices in your leadership. Though I find no wisdom in the choice to allow that one to run about uncollared.”

Uncollared? Nathanos sneered.

“The Mother will want to speak with her, yes yes. She’ll want to speak with someone who knows so much of Necromancy. It seems there’s a limit to what Gorak Tul can teach us.” It was difficult to tell if that comment was directed at them, but the next comment certainly was. “Come to Waycrest Manor, to the North West along the coast. The Mother will see your Queen; perhaps we can come to an agreement.” With a last harsh point in Nathanos’ direction and a demand to “keep him on a leash” the hag turned and hobbled away.

“Well,” Vorel relaxed her drawn string but didn’t remove her arrow from it, “one thing’s for certain: the Heartsbane, as they call themselves, don’t like men. Perhaps courting their aid isn’t wise. There’s no telling what would be done to Anduin if one mistake is made and they get their claws on him? At least with Greymane we can trust that he’s being held in a misguided attempt to keep him safe. But that thing was made of-.“

“Souls.” Shoving his arrow roughly back into the quiver slung over his shoulders Nathanos turned his back on where the witch had vanished. “This decision is not ours to make. We finish scouting the area and return to the beach head. Where I’ll admit to sharing your concerns, we deliver the information that we have to the Dark Lady and carry out her ruling. As we always have.” The Banshee Queen’s Champion scaled a root snarl and started away into the shadows. “With any luck that hag will spread word of our presence and we won’t have to concern ourselves with encounters with any of those things.”

With one final glance exchanged between them, the three Dark Rangers lowered their bows and followed him away into the gloom.
A Cutter Fleet

Stormwind hadn’t seen such a joint effort between civilians and soldiers to outfit and prepare a fleet in living memory; the closest that they’d come had been when the Legion had arrived and the forces of the Alliance had been preparing to set off for what all but surely amounted to a suicide mission which had ensued had made it so that he’d only personally witnessed the earliest stages, but even that had only amounted to around two thirds of the effort that the past three days had seen. And that had been motivated by the well-founded fear that not donating wears or labor to the cause would have real potential to doom their world and everyone on it. Now, however, it was motivated entirely by their own free will; out of love for their King and a desire to have him back with them as soon as possible. The House of Nobles, of course, were dragging their feet in an effort to draw out matters and keep power in their hands that little bit longer but that was far from unexpected. As had occurred when Anduin had been abroad on his wedding tour flowers had been left on his throne, only this time rather than a single neat bouquet the Lion Seat overflowed with blooms of all colors brought there from all four corners of the young King’s lands; Elwynn, Duskwood, Redridge and Westfall.

The gathered fleet floated in the cerulean waters of Stormwind Harbor; iron sided Krakens with the curve beaked heads of griffins carved into their prows, towering flag ships with deep blue sails and wide wooden bellies etched in filigrees of gold, their decks laden with the combined weight of Dwarven Tanks and the clockwork siege engines of the Gnomes. Further out along the edges of the Harbor, poised for defense from anything which might attempt to strike at the Alliance while their King wasn’t present, the triangular lavender sails of Kal’dorei vessels could only just be seen when the wind blew in the correct direction off the rolling waves of the Great Sea. Far above, circling the city over even the patrolling V-formations of the mounted Griffin riders who patrolled the separate districts, the low drone of two airships could be heard.

For no small number of reasons, chief among them the fact that having done so took the Night Elven leader out of his hair, Spymaster Mathias Shaw was intensely grateful for having made the decision to give the matter of defending Alliance holdings from the potential of opportune attacks by the Horde or other parties which might seek to take advantage of the absence of the majority of their forces over into Tyrande’s hands. It gave the woman something to do which didn’t have the potential to burn their treaty with the Horde without due cause and land them in an even worse position than they were now.

In many ways, though he was a man whom was no stranger to death and killing and war, Mathias was glad that Anduin had made the choice he did. He’d held Azerite, if only in a small quantity. Had seen what it was capable of even on a minute scale. Knew of the true size of the stockpile, through a series of reports, that Sylvanas had amassed. Perhaps they could have stood for a while if they’d chosen to follow Genn’s path and gone to war. Perhaps they might even have won had they sought out a source of their own to stockpile, but at what cost? Mutually assured destruction was only a deterrent when destruction wasn’t what was desired. And with the sheer destructive power of the forces that they’d been dealing with, even if they had somehow managed both to emerge victorious and survive, would there be anything left of Azeroth to live on? That Genn couldn’t see that, that Tyrande was so easily pulled back onto the path of war by mistrust, and how swiftly Sylvanas had vanished without a trace or any word though if Valeera was to be believed the Banshee Queen was already leaps and bounds ahead of them in the effort of retrieving Anduin from those who’d stolen them—though information beyond that much the other Rogue hadn’t divulged—left him thoroughly concerned.

It reminded him far too much of the night when Anduin had first run off to meet with Sylvanas at
After sparing one last look over the harbor and the docks to ensure that his brief absence wouldn’t be missed, Mathias turned and made his way back towards Stormwind Keep. All of the guards were still in their places, despite having no King to guard. He caught sight of Ames and Gideon each to the left and right of the Lion Seat, petals scattered about their feet in shades of pink and white and yellow. Making his way through the halls and around to the back where the green stretched beneath the bright sun and summer air.

Giramar and Galadin were being distracted by their older cousin; though Arator was genuinely trying it was instantly clear that he didn’t hold a candle to Anduin’s innate ability to enchant and hold the attention of any child that he came across, regardless of their race or age, and their attention kept shifting. Looking around as if expecting their Uncle, or their mother, or one of their Aunts to step out from behind a tree or pillow and come to greet them. Turalyon and Valeera were looking on from not far off with well hidden grimness on their faces, the young Prince-still yet to be presented, in the absence of both the King and Queen and with the House of Nobles in no rush to shift the power Anduin’s absence had given them over onto someone else-was cradled gently in the Paladin’s large hands.

Golden eyes caught sight of him as he approached across the green and Turalyon looked over, shifting the infant—not quite awake but not asleep either and making a concerted effort to eat his own fingers though the success he’d have with that endeavor without teeth to speak of was debatable—in his arms. “Mathias.” He said, Valeera turning to look as well. “Has something happened?”

“No. Nothing has happened, Turalyon. Our preparations are going well; Tyande seems satisfied for the time being and Renzik’s information has confirmed our suspicions that the King is being held captive in Boralus. We should be able to set sail for Kul Tiras by nightfall.”

“Nightfall?” Valeera repeated, looking up into the sky above them: bright blue and cloudless with the lateness of summer day. “That’s in just about an hour. How long will it take for the fleet to reach Kul Tiras? Three days?”

“Just about.”

“I have to stay here and watch Lirath, Shaw, so you’d better make sure someone kicks Proudmoore’s ass on my behalf. Preferably before Sylvanas gets to her because I doubt there’ll be much left of her afterwards.” The Blood Elf said. “Did you need something?”

“Information.” He growled. “Don’t think you’ll get away with the same crap you gave me the night he went to Light’s Hope either, Sanguinar.”

Valeera sighed. “She went to save him. Took the whole population of Undercity with her, and her sisters, and Azerite too I think.” She said. “I don’t agree with their relationship, Mathias. I still don’t. But its impossible to deny that she really does care about him now.”

“And she found out that he was in Kul Tiras through what means? I don’t believe for a moment that it was a random guess. Greymane used a Night Elven vessel. There were no signs to point to it.”

A blank, fel green stare.

“Valeera.” He prompted, stern.
“Sylvanas made the trade with that bitch Vancleef. Blightcaller gave her a hearthstone that sent her to Tanaris; she won’t be a problem again for a while.” She admitted after another moment’s hesitance. “I wasn’t with her at the time so there was nothing I could do. And even if there were, I probably wouldn’t have; Vancleef is a known enemy and we can protect Anduin here. So can Undercity. Light, I’d love to see her go up against Gory; doubt that Abomination would take kindly to someone threatening his ‘pretty King’.” A harsh bark of a laugh. “Would serve her right.”

Admittedly, the image of the leader of the Defias Brotherhood being punted by an enraged Abomination was more than mildly amusing. Still… “Known threat or not, and ability to protect the King aside, Vanessa Vancleef is still a threat and should be considered such. We’ll have to hunt her down and capture her again once we’ve the manpower to spare. Until then-.”

The clank of standard Stormwind plate drew the attention of both Rogues, the conversation between them coming to an end as they turned. Hammond Clay, High Commander of Stormwind Defense, was walking towards them with a stony expression on his face.

“Hammond?”

“Mathias,” the taller man said, “there’s an Orcish Cutter in the Harbor. They’re flying a white flag but we’re not taking any chances; Tyrande’s ships have halted them out of the reach of the city. From what we’ve been told Thrall, Saurfang and Bloodhoof are onboard.”

“If they’re flying the white flag its unlikely they wish to fight.” Turalyon pointed out evenly. “In fact, they may want to help us.”

“I think assuming that is irresponsible.” Hammond said. “What are you basing it off of, High Exarch? The flag they’re flying could merely be a ploy to coax us into lowering our guard.”

“We signed a treaty, Clay. And our King finds ease with making friends.” Mathias said, stepping around and past the other man. “I’ll go to see them.”

“I’ll go with you, Mathias.” Valeera said. “I know why they’re here. I carried the same message to them as I did to you.”

“Help, then?”

“Help, yes. But no need to go see them alone.” Valeera said. “There’s only so much I can do to help with this, after all, short of bringing Lirath with me to the front lines. And I don’t think either of his parents would be pleased by that decision.”

Valeera turned to follow him back towards the Keep, but barely made it a few steps before a small hand caught her sleeve. Looking down, she was confronted with worried blue eyes. “Galadin?”

“When is Uncle Andy coming back?” he asked, ignoring his brother as he trotted up beside him. “He is coming back, isn’t he? Mom ran off after what happened to Dad too. After he…” Galadin was cut off by a sniffle, tears welling in his eyes.

Giramar was quick to pull his twin close and wrap his arms around him. “Uncle Andy isn’t going to die, and Mom isn’t going to leave us again. Aunt Sylvanas won’t let the bad wolf keep him because she loves him more than the bad wolf does.”

“Galadin,” Arator knelt down beside his younger cousins, “your brother is right. Our mothers and the Warchief are cunning and powerful, Kul Tiras will not expect them and our armies will soon be lending aid. And Anduin is strong in the Light, the same force which protected my mother and father while they fought the Burning Legion. Genn Greymane and Jaina Proudmoore couldn’t hope
“He’ll be back before you know it. And he’ll be fine.” Valeera said, smiling and reaching out to ruffle his hair. “You’ll see.”

“If you’re serious about coming with me, Sanguinar, then come along.” Though Mathias found himself struggling to keep his tone firm. Damn it all, when had he gone so soft?

Valeera sighed and nodded, pulling both of the twins into a swift hug before trotting off after him. Retrieving Bristlefur and Nereus from the city’s aerie, the pair headed out across the harbor towards the commotion in the middle of the harbor. The Orcish Cutter stood out against the water in a splash of dark iron and red sails, the three Night Elven vessels circling like hungry sharks at a near distance. Three towering figures-two Orcs and a Tauren—could be plainly seen standing on the decks waiting for them. As they descended and circled about to land it became clear that those figures were Saurfang, Baine and Thrall.

“It took us a bit longer than we’d have liked to get everything together after Valeera delivered Sylvanas’ message, but with the elements’ aid we made good time across the Great Sea.” Thrall said once they were within hearing range. “We’d have brought more along with us but didn’t want to risk being mistaken for a hostile force. Given our reception on our way into the harbor that seems to have been a wise choice.”

“The High Priestess of Elune,” Valeera said around a smirk, “either forgot our two Factions signed a treatise of non-aggression or doesn’t believe your Horde will adhere to it. Mathias let her handle ‘protection detail’ in order to prevent the pressure from making his head explode.”

The other Rogue hissed “Valeera!”

Baine sighed, the sound nearly identical to the snort of a horse. “Knowing what I do of Tyrande,” he said, “I’m not surprised.”

Varok grunted and folded his thick arms across the breast plate strapped to his wide chest. “Evidently she also doesn’t trust your King’s capability to befriend those around him even with a mere passing contact.”

Still looking somewhat annoyed over her last little comment the Spymaster said “you said that there were more with you, Thrall? How many?”

“A full fleet, airships and all. We had to at least match the Alliance’s contribution to the rescue effort.” The Shaman’s expression twitched with amusement. “We’re all worried, Mathias. But we’ll get him back. Our Factions together have overcome far greater threats than a crumbling Kingdom in the middle of the sea, even if they do possess ‘the greatest naval fleet on Azeroth’.”

“I know we’ll get him back.” Mathias said. “But I fear that he may not be alive when we do. A lot can happen to a prisoner in war, especially when they’re of such importance.”

“Don’t say that!” Valeera snapped, turning her head to glare at him. “My brother will be fine!”

“Earthmother willing.” Baine said, voice low. “The sooner we get to him the better his chances of survival will be. And, consequently, the better Kul Tiras’ chances of remaining above sea level.”

“The Alliance fleet will be ready to set sail within the hour.” Mathias said. “Remain anchored in the harbor until then, and then lead us to where the rest of your fleet is waiting. ‘Greatest fleet’ or not, our combined numbers will be enough to overwhelm them. Once there, we’ll join forces with the Windrunners and the Forsaken whom they’ve taken with them and move on Boralus where
Anduin is being held. Genn, Jaina and the Proudmoore Admiralty need to meet with consequences for what’s been done.”

“The Alliance may not get the chance to mete out those consequences, if Sylvanas has her way.” Varok said. “I’ll be surprised if the Banshee Queen doesn’t use the island as a weapons test once Anduin’s been returned.”

Baine shook his head. “Prior to their marriage I’d be agreeing with you, Saurfang, but Sylvanas won’t blow even the Capital city to hell unless her husband is killed.” He said. “She’d still be warranted to murder any of the three of them she happens to come across, I’ve no doubt, but innocent civilians are in no danger.”

“I hope you’re right.” Thrall said. “We’ll wait here, Mathias. When Stormwind’s fleet is ready, we’ll lead them to where the other ships are anchored.”

Nodding, the Spymaster returned to where the black griffin he’d rode in on was standing. Valeera not far behind, swinging herself up onto the Wyvern’s back. Lifting off from the deck of the ship and flying back towards the white gleaming walls of Stormwind Keep she couldn’t help but think that the coming battle would be one for the ages. And with the Light’s will and all speed, Anduin’s return would be a safe one.
Darius Crowley and his pack could work on an effort of their own to get him out, Sylvanas and the Forsaken could come after him themselves, the Alliance and the Horde both could launch their own rescue missions for him but no matter who might be coming for him or what plan they might have been going off of Anduin refused to simply sit by and wait until he was rescued from imprisonment. He was no longer simply the Prince of Stormwind, no longer the uncertain future of his people and the Alliance. That had ended the terrible day that his father had been slaughtered on the Broken Shore by Gul’dan. Now, he was the King of Stormwind. The High King of the Alliance. A leader to whom people across his Faction could look to for council, guidance and protection. And as leader he needed, at long last, to finally prove that he was capable of getting himself out of such compromising positions. Not only to those around him, but to himself.

Anduin hadn’t slept more than a handful of hours the night before and even that had been fitful. After the brief period of strange certainty he’d heard of something, even though there hadn’t been the faintest trace of anything that might have caused it when he’d gone to look. Though admittedly, impeded as he was by his leg, by the time he’d gotten across the room and opened the window whatever had been responsible for what was, in his view, a rather loud landing on the roof could easily have made itself scarce. And where admittedly Anduin didn’t know much about the sorts of wildlife which lived around Kul Tiras the young King would have placed a sizeable sum of gold on the fact that it had been Ivar Bloodfang or one of his pack that was responsible.

The thought had not been a pleasant one, the knowledge that an enraged wolf man with the full intent of ripping out his throat, or at the very least ripping out his entrails and strangling him with them, could come busting through the less than sound roof at any moment had made any meaningful rest impossible. And so, the Priest had spent the hours of darkness lying listlessly in the lumpy old bed, crafting polishing and just as quickly discarding countless plans of action which he might potentially take in order to remove himself from his captivity before finally settling on the one which he was enacting now.

Step one: gain the trust of someone local to the area at least to the point where he’d be able to convince them to take him out of the city under the pretense of viewing the interesting sights which Kul Tiras had to offer. Preferably the interesting sights near or over the border between Tiragarde Sound and Drustvar as a cursory glance at the map he’d managed to filch had made it plain that the mountainous area would be his best chance of keeping hidden until help could arrive to get him home. Though there was an admitted trade off in choosing that route: in such terrain his crippled leg would leave him considerably slowed down, so it would be stealth instead of speed which would be his greatest ally. And he’d need to keep well aware, seeing as Ivar had all but straight out told him that he expected him to run and that when he did, he’d hunt him down and kill him.

But it was a risk he’d have to take. He couldn’t in good confidence simply sit by in relative safety once again. Anduin could never look his reflection in the eye again if this turned out the same way
his kidnapping by Onyxia had. If he had to be fished out of trouble without even making an effort to help himself.

He’d promised himself when he’d woken up in captivity that he’d make his kidnappers sorely regret what they’d done and he couldn’t do that while trapped beneath their thumb.

So there he was, at half past noon and under the blazing white-gold sun, clip clopping his way along the main drag of Trade Wind’s Market. Breathing in the tang of salt and brine and ignoring the hard stares of his Grey Guard escorts. Charting a course for the only place he knew of in Boralus which was reasonably liable to have a second function as a drinking hole, the inn.

What better way to make friends, after all, than to share a few rounds of something strong? After all, the looser the ties on a man’s sobriety the easier it was to gain his trust. And adding in a bit of help from the Shadow-though he couldn’t bring to bare anything overt or one of his Gilnean Keepers would be certain to notice-the deck was stacked in his favor. Maybe it wasn’t fair, Light who was he kidding of course it wasn’t, what he was doing was the furthest thing on Azeroth from sporting, but with survival on the line rules weren’t something he much cared to observe. He’d have to make another trip to Light’s Hope Chapel when all of this was over and sequester himself for a period of observance in order to atone. So be it. Sylvanas would no doubt be sorely disappointed she couldn’t convince him to remain locked up in the Royal Chambers with her for the next month following his return, but he didn’t doubt that the delay would be forgiven. If only once it had come to an end.

The front of the buildings in Boralus appeared ostensibly the same, sturdily built from large sturdy blocks of dark stone and roof with corroded tin. A rickety wooden sign had been bolted to the side of the doorway by thick copper bolts, the words **SNUG HARBOR INN** proclaimed in faded black letters. Shifting his grip on the dark blue cane in his hand-not quite fitted to him the way his black one was; just slightly too short and with a differently shaped grip that was difficult to comfortably hold onto-Anduin adjusted the way his shirt was lying and started up the stairs. Five steps were all that stood between him and entrance into the inn and any other man would have crested them in less than half the time, but then again, any other man was also presumed to have properly functioning legs. A luxury which the young King had almost forgotten what it was like to experience. One foot up onto the first step, and then the foot of the cane, and then his other foot. Once all three feet were on the first step, he moved onto the second and so forth until he made it to the top at last and stepped over the raised threshold.

The space beyond was mid-sized and cozy, rusting looking in its décor with sidings and furniture built from salt-scoured drift wood. The smell of good pub food, alcohol and smoke from the large wooden hearth enveloped him; curls of haze wrapping around him in ghostly tendrils which settled softly against the exposed skin of his face and hands. Alert blue eyes, doing their best to look friendly and inviting to cover the calculation in his gaze, panned over those whom inhabited the space. The innkeeper and bartender, a man with black hair and a well-groomed moustache. A pale haired youth who appeared to be a trainee of some sort in the Proudmoore Admiralty. A fluffy white and black cat. A man with a familiar brown coat and long auburn tail.

The man whom he’d approached for directions to the Hold in the day of his disastrous audience with Katherine Proudmoore. An already established point of contact and an individual whom, it was plain from having spoken to him, had something of a disregard for the rules. A fact which would be advantageous for him as it was likely he wouldn’t much mind the thought of taking him out to ‘get the lay of the land’ regardless of what he was told by the Admiralty or Genn Greymane. And where some part of him felt undeniably guilty for planning to take actions which would certainly get the man into untold amounts of trouble the Priest had already forced his tendency to put those around him before himself temporarily in manacles at the very back of his awareness.
Slipping into the stool beside him with all the grace a cripple could ever hope to muster and propping his cane against the counter Anduin reached out to the cat sitting on the bar and began to scratch behind its ears. Soon, the soft sound of purring filled the air and he found himself fighting off memories of Snowball.

“I didn’t get to catch your name the other day.” He said by way of greeting, sticking out his other hand as the man turned his head to look at him. Confusion plain on his face as he peered at him through the semi-darkness. “Or to thank you properly for your help. Your advice was effective. I got my audience even without appointment though, sadly, it didn’t amount to anything.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that I could be of assistance. Always happy to help. And as for my name, it’s Flynn Fairwind.” He flashed a lopsided smile, then tilted his head. “Remind me who you are again.”

“Stormwind.” Anduin said. “Well, that’s what you called me at least. My name is Anduin. Anduin Wrynn.”

Flynn, who’d been midway through taking a draught from the drink in his hand, almost choked. Setting the heavy stein down on the wooden counter top in front of him. “Wrynn? As in the royalty Wrynn?”

Anduin nodded. “As in the royal Wrynn.”

Grey green eyes still wide with surprise, Flynn shook his head. “No wonder you do ‘important’ so well, you’re the bleeding King of the Alliance!” The other man paused, sitting back further in his stool as if to observe him from another angle, and narrowed his eyes appraisingly. “I could have sworn that you were supposed to be older. And bigger. And darker haired.”

Anduin looked away, expression falling as old wounds twinged and crawled. “You’re thinking of Stormwind’s former King. Varian Wrynn. My father.” He swallowed thickly and took a deep breath, struggling to steady his voice. “My succession was…fairly recent. He died fighting on the Broken Shore.”

“Oh. Uh…oh. Well, I didn’t mean to, that is to say…let’s talk about something with a bit more levity, shall we?” barking a rather nervous sounding laugh Flynn picked up his stein again and took another drink before turning back to him and wiggling his eyebrows. “So, Stormwind, might I ask what you meant by ‘thank you properly’?”

The young Priest blinked at him, then grinned. “I mean to thank you properly, Flynn, by buying you a drink. I’m sure that it can be placed on my…guardian’s tab.” He said. “Make no mistake, I’ve as much an appreciative affection for a man’s anatomy as a woman’s and you’re by no means unattractive but I’m a married man. Loyal to my wife. And if she were ever to find out I think castration would be getting off lightly.”

“Well,” the other man said, wincing. “I suppose that’s what one signs up for when they marry an Orc. To each their own, sure, but they’re not kidding when they say there’s no accounting for taste.” Catching on to the fact that Anduin was staring at him he raised an eyebrow. “No judgment if you’re into green…burly women.”

“What gave you the impression that my wife is an Orc?”

“the news of your marriage to the Warchief of the Horde spread like wildfire, Stormwind.” He said. “Aren’t their Warcheiefs always Orcs?”
“Her predecessor, Vol’jin, was a Troll. And as for Sylvanas,” Anduin accepted the drink he’d called for when the bar tender brought it by, “the Lady Moon is an Elf. In my eyes, though the Holy Light knows I’m biased, my wife is the most beautiful High Elf on the face of Azeroth.”

“Well, an Elf is something I can understand. Me? I’m more into women of my own race, particularly black haired, but its obvious enough from the way you talk that you love her.” Raising his refilled mug, Flynn tilted it towards him. “To a King’s marriage.”

“Thank you, Flynn. Really.” Blue eyes reflected back at him from within his mostly untouched cup. “Though I wish I could be home with them.”

“There are plenty of boats in the harbor; coming and going all the time. I’m sure one of them could be convinced to take you home.” He said. “It’s not as if you couldn’t pay for it.”

“It’s isn’t that simple, I’m afraid.” He said. “This isn’t exactly a vacation. I didn’t have a choice in coming here. Not that that’s an unusual trait of kidnappings.” Anduin shook his head, a strand of his gilded hair slipping from its tie and falling into his face. “The only reason I’m not locked behind closed doors, I don’t doubt, is that Kul Tiras is an island. A big island, but an island none the less. And, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, it’s surrounded on all sides by the Great Sea. And where I’ve once made close acquaintance of a Dragon I haven’t wings of my own. Where could I possibly go?”

Flynn raised an eyebrow. “Aside from the Harbor?”

“My escort,” trying his damndest to be discrete to minimal success Anduin tilted his head enough to indicate where Brea and Terrance stood against the wall, glaring. “don’t let me within spitting distance of those ships. There’s no way for me to board one.”

The other grunted, setting his stein down and turning his head to look at him. “I used to be a pirate, Stormwind. I’m reformed now, cross my heart, but I still know when someone wants something out of me.” He said. “What are you after?”

“Entertainment.” The young King’s reply was even as he pushed the free strand of hair back behind his left ear. “I’ve always been curious about Azeroth, but with my duties as Crown Prince, and now King. I simply haven’t the time. But while I’m here, why not make the most of it?”

“So, you’re in need of a tour guide?” Flynn still looked suspicious.

“Ostensibly.” Anduin took another drink, eyes on a knot in the wooden paneling which covered the wall behind the bar. The Innkeeper shuffled about at the far end.

“But not actually.” A shrug in answer. Flynn sat back in his moustache thoughtfully. “Well, I could take you around Tirigarde I suppose, but if you’re not interested in Freehold…?”

“Drustvar, actually, is where I’d most like to explore.”

“Into dark purportedly haunted wolf infested forests Stormwind?”

Anduin smiled. “What’s life without a little bit of danger? I grew up in a forest and I’m used to wolves.”

“Are you used to ghosts?” he shook his head, muttering what might have been ‘damn Southerners’ under his breath and then said “I suppose taking a man who’s clearly not a pirate to a pirate city isn’t the wisest choice. But I’m not the person who’d be best for that job.”
“You wouldn’t happen to know someone who was, would you?”

“Well, Stormwind, it must be your lucky day,” Flynn said, “because it just so happens that I do. Once we finished our drinks, your Royal Highness, I’ll take you to see her.”

“Sounds good to me.” Anduin said. “Lead the way.”

Ten minutes later the pair, shadowed still by his Grey Guard keepers, exited the inn and started off down the streets of Boralus. Where Anduin expected to be led he wasn’t certain, but the Flight Master’s stables wouldn’t have been the first guess to come to mind.

“This,” Flynn informed him, leading Anduin through the low-slung door into the stable itself; warmer than outside by a handful of degrees and smelling of the sweet hay which lay strewn across the hard-packed ground, “is where she spends the majority of her time while not running jobs for Cyrus, the Harbor Master.”

“What does she do in here?” Anduin asked, looking around. Most of the stalls were empty.

“Looks after her precious baby, Wonder bird.”

Anduin blinked. “Wonder bird?” Flynn’s response was to indicate a stall at the far end of the stables. After a moment’s further hesitation Anduin headed down the long aisle between the stalls and stopped outside the only on which contained anything and looked in.

A curious pair of dark eyes met him, the Griffin they belonged to letting out a warble and stepping forward. A breed he’d never seen before which he assumed must have been native to the island, it was snow white in color with a trim of blue-grey along the edges of its wings. “Hello.” He said softly, extending a hand but not touching the animal. Allowing it to make the final motion and press its curved beak into his hand. Leaning into his touch when he stroked its feathers. “Aren’t you gorgeous, Wonder bird?”

“Wonder bird is what Flynn calls her.” A voice said from behind him. “Her name is Galeheart. I raised her from a chick. Cyrus gave her to me.”

“You did a good job.” Anduin said, stepping back and turning towards her. A young woman, he found, with short black hair and skin tanned dark by the sun. “I know how difficult it can be. I don’t get much time to ride him but I raised Whitetail from a chick as well. And my horse, Dreamer, from a colt. It’s worth it.”

“Explains why you’re such a natural.” She said. “You’re a friend of Flynn’s? Funny that I’ve never seen you before. I’m Taelia, though my friends call me Tae.”

“Nice to meet you.” He said, inclining his head. “I’m Anduin. Anduin Wrynn.”

“And yes, Tae, before you ask. It is the royal Wrynn.” Flynn said.

“The royal Wrynn?” she repeated. The way she looked at him suddenly different, almost desperate as she stepped forward. “As in the royal Wrynn from Stormwind?”

“The King of Stormwind, yes. Though that development is still rather recent.” Anduin said. “Is that of some personal import to you?”

“Yes. Yes, it is.” She said. “My father was sworn to your Court. To the Court of Stormwind, at least. He may have instead served your father but surely you at least know him.”
“I may.” He said. “Who is he?”

“Bolvar Fordragon.”

Anduin felt as if the floor fell out from under him; had the door of Galeheart’s stall not been behind him he’d probably have hit the ground of the stables then and there. Bolvar. His mentor. His surrogate father. His only real ally in a court commanded by Onyxia. The man who’d read to him from books on the Light and told him stories to ease him to sleep. The Paladin whom he’d last seen boarding a ship to Northrend. A place from which he’d never returned. “You’re Taelia Fordragon?”

“Yes.” She nodded, black hair whipping about her head. “You knew him, then?”

By the Light, why? Was this some sort of test? Some trial to determine his resolve? Flynn was a nice enough man, certainly. Amusing company to be sure. But Anduin had no real connection to him. No reason not to make use of what he could offer. But Taelia? Bolvar’s daughter? The flesh and blood of a man whom he’d loved like a father and whom, he truly believed, had improved his odds of survival during Katrana’s reign of terror by miles.

People never liked to be used. He’d be earning her resentment at the very least with this. Losing his chance to bring something of what he’d lost back into his life. But, ultimately, that was a small price to pay to return to his home, his family, and to keep his promise. Steeling himself with a deep discrete breath Anduin selected the appropriately grave and solemn expression and molded it onto his face, nodding once it had settled properly into place.

“Yes.” He said. “I knew your father. Bolvar Fordragon was a noble man and a powerful Paladin; my mentor and a father figure to me. He’d talk about you sometimes. About how he wished he hadn’t had to leave you and hoped you were safe. He’d write letters to you. Call you—.”

“‘My shining star’.” She nodded again, face breaking into a watery smile. “But the letters stopped coming. I haven’t heard from him in years and no one knows. Or maybe they do know and just don’t want to tell me.”

Anduin dipped his head and let out another heavy sigh. “I wish that I could bring you better news.” He said. “But I’m afraid that I’m unable to do so and still speak the truth.”

“I knew.” Taelia told him, unable to meet his eyes. “After six months with no contact…there was no other explanation.”

“‘The seas and sky had been a clear, merry blue. Showing no hint of the Demonic invasions taking place across the planet. The docks seethed with the armor-clad bodies of soldiers shipping off to war on boats and airships. His father, setting his hand on his shoulder and promising him that he’d return. Something in his expression revealing he didn’t believe it to be true. ‘If there’s anything that I can do…?’”

“I finished grieving years ago.” She said. “How?”

“He died as a hero to the Alliance. Fighting the forces of the Lich King.” Anduin said. “At the Wrath Gate.”

“That was the incident caused by the Forsaken, wasn’t it?” Flynn piped up from where he stood against a nearby wall.

“Deserter’s, led by then High Royal Apothecary Putris and the Dreadlord Varimathras. Their actions weren’t sanctioned by either the Forsaken or the Horde as a whole.” Anduin said. “Lives on
both sides were lost that day, and retribution soon came when both Factions invaded the Undercity and rooted them out.”

“You know an awful lot about the Forsaken, Anduin.” Taelia said.

“I’d say I do indeed, but given my position it’s only natural that I would.” He said. “I am, after all, the ‘Banshee King’. I married their Queen to put a stop to the war, as she’s also their Warchief, and due to that Genn Greymane and Jaina Proudmoore believe me to be mentally compromised. Hence why I’m here.”

Hearing a muffled choking sound Taelia glanced over at Flynn with a mild glare. “It looks like Flynn may agree with them.”

“No, no Tae. You don’t get to go putting words in my mouth dear.” He said. “Mentally compromised is too harsh. Deviant, maybe, but there’s nothing wrong with that. Everyone has different tastes after all. As I said before I’ve no problem if you’re into burly green woman and I’ve likewise no problem if you’re into…into…would it still be considered necrophilia?”

“Neither of us are dead at current.” Anduin said.

“She is!”

“Undead.” He said. “There’s a difference.”

“That, my royal friend, is a loophole. Not a difference.”

“Flynn!” Taelia snickered, turning towards Anduin. “I’m so sorry, King Wrynn!”

“Anduin, please.” He said. “And I’m not one to take offense easily; I find him amusing, really.”

“See, Tae. He finds me amusing.”

“Dancing monkeys are amusing as well, Flynn.”

Anduin grinned. “Something tells me you two are together.”

Taelia turned bright red and looked at him with wide eyes. “W-What would make you think that?”

“Because I have this sort of banter with my wife.” He said matter-of-factly. “And because Flynn mentioned having a thing for woman with ‘hair like raven’s down’.”

“Stormwind, oi!”

The young King burst into rollicking laughter as Galeheart nudged her beak against his shoulder. “There’s no shame in it. If you love someone then you should be allowed to be with them. No matter what those around you claim, if they truly care for you then the fact that you’re happy should be more than justification enough.” He looked away, allowing a measure of honest pain to show on his face.

“You really miss her, don’t you?” Taelia asked.

Anduin nodded. “My family is waiting for me to come home to them.” He said. “I’ll do anything it takes to make sure that happens.”

“Well, let’s move away from dark and our embarrassing subjects and move on to why we’re here.” Flynn said, rubbing his gloved hands together to fight off the chill of the Sound. “Anduin here has
an interest in exploring. Having a nice look around and satisfying his curiosity since he’s going to
be here for a while. He wants to have a bit of a glance at spooky haunted forests, so what do you
say we take him just over the border to poke around those ruins and then get back to nice, safe,
witch free Tirigarde Sound?”

“Um…witches?” Anduin repeated, raising an eyebrow.

Taelia shook her head. “Don’t let Flynn scare you, all that witch business is nothing but
superstition. It’s the sailor in him.”

“’Superstition’, Tae, has saved my hide a handful of times.” Flynn said. “There’s weird shit that
goes on out there on the open ocean.”

“Is that why you refuse to swim in salt water?”

“You can’t let the ocean get at taste for you.” Anduin snickered, doing his best to echo the grave
tones he’d once heard from a salt crusted sailor on the docks of Stormwind.

“See!” Flynn gestured exaggeratedly in his direction. “Stormwind knows! If you swim in the ocean
then the ocean gets a taste for you. And if the ocean gets a taste for you sooner or later you end up
drowned.”

Taelia made an indulgent noise, turning away towards the stable door. “We should get around to
shopping for the supplies we need before we start him on anything else; we’ll be stuck here all
night otherwise.”

“Well, it’s warm in here at least.” Anduin said, then sent a glance in his escorts’ direction. “But…I
should make sure I have permission before we go through all the trouble of making preparations.
Do you mind if we make a brief stop to see King Greymane?”

Taelia shook her head.” Not at all. We’ll head over there now.”

“Thank you.” Anduin said, paying Galeheart a last smile before following them out.

Their walk back to the former merchant’s district was made in amicable silence. Anduin leaving
the pair behind at the porch and proceeding inside with the Grey Guard behind him. Genn didn’t
bother to hide his surprise when he found Anduin standing in his study, rising from behind the
desk. Slowly, as if in fear too sudden a movement might frighten him off like a deer.

“My boy,” he said, “is there anything I can help you with?”

Anduin hung his head and sighed, shoulders rising and falling with the motion. “I’ve heard stories
about Kul Tiras. And you know, by now, how much I love seeing new places.” He said. “I’ve…
made friends today. We were going to go camping, but I thought I should…” he peered up through
his fringe, measuring the effect of his performance.

Genn sighed as well, stepping forward and putting a hand on his shoulder. “I think that’s a good
idea.” He did? Anduin straightened up, barely able to restrain himself from openly staring. “Go out
and look around. Spend a few days outside of the city. Enjoy yourself.”

The blonde blinked. “I…is something wrong?”

The older man’s face was grave. “Nothing is wrong, my boy. I just think it’s best to not allow
yourself to end up alone with Jaina for the time being.”
Anduin felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. “What do you mean?”

“Jaina is considering…doing something to attempt to…help you that I don’t agree with.” He said. “I know that you don’t think so, now, but I really am doing the best I can by you.”

Anduin kept the derisive snort carefully contained. “And just what precisely is she planning to do to me?”

“Keep away from her and it won’t matter. I promise you, Anduin, I won’t let anything happen.” Genn said, his efforts at a smile failing miserably. “Have fun.”

Covering his irritation at being addressed as if he were a child with a much more natural looking false smile Anduin asked “I don’t have to take my babysitters, do I? I don’t think either Brea or Terrance would much appreciate being dragged about on a leash.”

The aged King stared at him for a drawn-out moment before sighing once more easing himself down behind the desk. “You may leave them at Boralus’ gates.” He said. “But I don’t want you near Ivar’s reach without someone there to defend you.”

Well, it was better than nothing. “Thank you, Genn.” He said. “I’ve left Flynn and Taelia outside for long enough now, I think. I should be getting back to them.”

Flynn and Taelia were still in the vicinity of where he’d left them, Flynn leaned against one of the support beams of the porch and Taelia seated on the top step. Both looked over at him when he stepped back out of the crumbling mansion.

“Verdict, Stormwind?” he asked.

Anduin grinned. “Good to go.” He said. “Let’s see about those supplies.”
A Walk in the Woods

Chapter Notes

Every time Anduin ventured into Boralus’ Market District it only seemed to grow bigger; a bustling dock and a few harbor side stalls replaced by and handful of blocks full of stores replaced by a sprawling bazaar selling wares and services from across Kul Tiras as well as all of Azeroth. His position as Crown Prince, and now as High King, had left Anduin well acquainted with the process of waking up wid or before the sun-provided that he even got to sleep at all—but had somewhat been neglecting what could be considered good form since his capture off the coast of Westfall and, as such, was certainly feeling the affects of having forced his 7/8ths of the way still asleep body out from beneath the thin covers of his uncomfortable bed and couldn’t quite manage to properly keep his eyes open. His Grey Guard escorts, however, still somehow managed to appear as sharp as their swords and had watched him putter around the confines of his bedroom getting dressed and organizing his prepared supplies as if his display of exhaustion were some sort of dire plot.

They were quick to catch on, he had to give them that much, and by consequence extend reluctant commendations to Genn for having thought things out well enough, having known him well enough—though really that wasn’t too much of a surprise seeing as he’d once considered the man to be something of a surrogate grandfather—to have thought to assign them.

Luckily for his plans, Anduin had successfully gotten permission to proceed into the Kul Tiran wilds with only Flynn and Taelia for company. And neither of them would know him well enough to recognize a need to keep so close an eye on him. Not that they’d have been able to keep him on a leash even if they had, even if they were a former pirate since reformed and the presumably trained in combat squire of the Harbor Master to who’s office he was currently headed.

The Shadow hissed, slithering beneath his skin like a venomous snake.

His crippled knee protested loudly, the joint popping as his weight shifted. Pain shooting into his cracked hip and up his spine. Wincing, balanced against the cane in his hand, the young King made his way down the stone paced strip towards the building which Flynn and Taelia had indicated to him the day prior, while they’d been out purchasing the necessary supplies.

Extra food. Extra water. A compass. A blade. If either of them had considered his insistence on having those things to be strange they’d said nothing.

He doubted they suspected him of something. His well-practiced innocent Light Bearer façade did well to shore up the hole in his general dependence on established credibility which was strangers who didn’t know him or his reputation as a good hearted, soft young man. But regardless he had the full intent to bide his time and wait until his new ‘friends’ had let their guard down. Until they’d fallen asleep. And then, once there was no one to see him, no one to stop him, he’d slip away into the dark of the night with his supplies and the battered lantern he’d managed to procure.
and make use of the few hours he had before his deception was discovered and reported to put as much distance between himself and his captors as physically possible. Be they agents of Jaina and Genn, who’d seek to return him to his captivity and no doubt rob him of the admitted privilege which having such freedom of movement was, or Ivar Bloodfang who wanted his heart in a jar and his head on a pike.

Light willing, he’d manage to hold out in the wilderness until someone came to take him home.

At last coming to the end of the harborside walkway, Anduin turned through the open doorway that he found their and stepped into the shadowed hallway beyond. Kul Tiran guards stood at stiff attention along the walls in sets of two, holding heavy polearms in their hands—poleaxes or halberds Anduin wasn’t sure—and watching him from beneath the wide brims of their plated helms. Gazes unfriendly as they pathed his slow, hobbled progress towards the wooden staircase leading to the floor below.

Stairs, since his arrival in Kul Tiras, had rapidly become the very bane of his existence. The rickety stairs back at the manor which had served him as a prison took him almost fifteen minutes to make it down. Even the three-stair tall stoop of the Snug Harbor Inn where he’d met with Flynn had proved a trouble. But this staircase, longer and steeper than any he’d yet to come across in Boralus presented a near to insurmountable obstacle.

Briefly and without much hope for aid, Anduin looked over at his escort. Both Brea and Terrance met his gaze with an even, pitiless stair. Sighing, the young King turned back to the staircase before him and reached out for the banister. Catching a firm hold of the smooth wood and testing his weight against it to ensure it wouldn’t suddenly give way, potentially leading him to a painful tumble or a broken neck. It held, quite firmly, without the slightest sign of weakening. With another deep breath the Priest began to descend.

Grip the banister. Put his uninjured foot on the step below him. Put the foot of his cane on the step below him. Bare down with his weight on both the cane and the banister and bring his injured foot down as well. Return his weight to his good leg, catch his balance and repeat. He made it down seven steps in this manner before his arms and shoulders began to ache and then three more before the foot of his cane slipped from beneath him, the walking aid spinning away and landing with a clatter on the stone floor below. Anduin only barely stopped himself from falling as well by catching a last second grasp on the banister.

Without his cane he was essentially stranded in the middle of the staircase, provided he didn’t want to attempt to slide down the rest of it on his bum which would not only be incredibly undignified of him given his position but would also risk refracturing his hip. Luckily, he didn’t have to resort to that because the wooden clatter of his falling cane had drawn the attention of his waiting party and Taelia soon appeared at the bottom of the stairs. Her smile swiftly changed into a look of alarm at his half-hunched posture and expression of concern and she rushed up the remaining steps towards him.

“Tide Mother, Anduin! Come here!” Gently, though her grip was firm—surprisingly so, the woman really was shockingly strong though for a warrior it really wasn’t surprising—the Harbor Master’s squire took his arm and slung it around her shoulders. Helping him to half hobble half hop down the rest of the stairs on his good leg. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t think your leg was this bad. If I had I’d have suggested somewhere easier for you to reach.”

“It’s more than alright, Tae.” He said, smiling through the dull persistent pain of jostled bone as she set him down against the cold stone wall. Quickly grabbing his cane from the floor and handing it to him. “I don’t want to be a bother. And I’ve always managed to manage before.”
“You really want to go into the mountains?” she asked, eyes wide with concern. “Surely somewhere flat, or at least flatter, would be easier on you. Tirigarde Sound is beautiful. And if you’d rather go a bit further out, we could go to Stormsong Valley instead. It’s vibrantly green this time of year and the people are friendly. I’m sure you’d love Brennadam.”

“Yeah, real friendly Tae.” Flynn grumbled, heading over. “Which is precisely why the Stormsong Guards have set up a ground blockade and aren’t letting anyone through no matter what business they claim to have, official or otherwise.”

“I appreciate your concern, Tae. Really, I do. But please, I can handle his. My interest lies in Drustvar, at these ruins I’ve heard you both mention. And comfort isn’t worth a price so high as allowing old injuries to regain control of my choices.” Anduin said. “I almost died because of them. And then I almost lost any chance of ever walking again. It would have been more comfortable to give up. To lose my leg. Perhaps even to die. I fought then. I won’t give up now.”

“But…are you certain?”

A gruff grunt issued form the far corner of the firelit room. Startling slightly, Anduin looked up and met the even gaze of a large powerfully built man with hawk like features and greying hair. The Harbor Master himself. “He’s definitely a Wrynn. That bloodline always was too stubborn for its own good.” He said. “Be cautious in the area, both of you. Superstitions and all of this nonsense about ‘witches’ aside the fact of matters is that House Waycrest hasn’t been heard from in weeks and somethings scared the merchants off. Don’t let curiosity threaten your lives.”

“A sailor knows better than to sneeze at superstition.” Flynn sounded almost nervous, Anduin noticed. “You know me, Cyrus. The first sign of something witchy and I’m out of there like the Dutchman from the Locker. And I’ll be dragging these two with me.”

“Say the word and I won’t complain about leaving.” The young King said smoothly, doing well at appearing sincere though the Harbor Master didn’t quite seem to buy it. Likely due to his earlier comment about Wrynn stubbornness which was, admittedly, a force of nature. “You know this land better than I do, after all, and I have no intention of being turned into a frog or otherwise bewitched. My wife would be most displeased if I couldn’t say anything but ‘ribbit’.”

Taelia shook her head. “Please, Anduin, don’t encourage him.”

“Well, Tae, when you get turned into a frog Stormwind and I will refrain from telling you we told you so.” Flynn informed her rather tartly. Anduin covered up a snicker with a well-placed cough. Grey green eyes fell on him appraisingly. “Want some help getting back up those stairs?”

“If you wouldn’t mind.” Anduin offered a smile, small but genuine, as the other man extended his arm for him to take. ‘I’ll be able to manage well enough with just my cane once we get out there, but stairs…they’re murder, I’m afraid.”

With assistance from both Flynn and Taelia, while the Grey Guard stood by looking rather bored, Anduin managed to make it back to the top of the staircase in good time.

“We’ll take a ferry to Drustvar; the ferryman, Will Melborne, does his work on a small dock just over this way.” She said, directing their path towards the harbor. The only part of Boralus he’d previously not been allowed to venture into by his escort, who now stood stiff behind him but didn’t try to stop him. “There’s another staircase we’ll have to go down here. It’s slick and doesn’t have a railing. Hold onto me, Anduin, I don’t want you to fall.”

“Thank you, Taelia.” He said, once more taking her offered arm. “Only twenty-one and I already
feel like an old man.” A rather horrifying thought suddenly dawning on him Anduin huffed out a sigh. “Light, if I’m this bad now I don’t even want to think about what I’ll be like as an old man. I’ll have to be carried around everywhere, I’m sure, unless I end up taking up Marius’ offer to replace my leg.” He chuckled and shook his head. “He almost made an attempt to do so when I visited the Under City on our marital tour. Was trying to help but had forgotten how the living worked. It was terrifying at the time, but now? I find it funny. His heart was in the right place and that’s what matters, even if it probably would have killed me if Gunther hadn’t stopped him.”

“You seem very fond of the Forsaken, Stormwind.” Flynn was sounding nervous again. “You seem to be someone who believes in mercy, so I can’t understand how you and them get along. They’re supposed to be brutal.”

“The Forsaken and the living have less than kind relations because the living rarely treat them as anything more than monsters. Even their allies within the Horde don’t trust them. A bit of kindness goes a long way, Flynn. And a bit more understanding, I think, would make Azeroth a much better place.” Anduin said. “Stop a few wars, at least, before they start.”

They’d reached the bottom of the staircase now. Leaning heavily on his cane, the young King listened to the wooden slats creak beneath them as they made their way along them. Mind wandering back into the past. Of hot, red days in Orgrimmar. Smoky nights in Thunderbluff. The salty scent of Stormwind’s harbor seeping through the walls of the Royal Chambers, mixing with the smell of sweat and sex. The way the soft glow of red eyes melded together with charcoaled shadows.

Anduin was pulled back to the present by Taelia’s voice. “If you don’t mind me asking, how did you end up so injured?”

Eyes bleary, he had to blink a few times before his surroundings returned to focus. He arranged his face into a smile; a small thing edged with just enough discomfort as the be properly convincing. “I can’t fault you for your curiosity, Taelia. Not myself being the way that I am. And if there’s one thing I don’t wish to be it’s a hypocrite.” Shivering in the teeth of a frigid gust which whipped off the water he wrapped the arm not baring his weight against his cane around himself. “Before my wife was Warchief, and before her predecessor Vol’Jin, the Horde was led by an Orc by name of Garrosh Hellscream; a warrior and the son of their great hero Gromm, whom had sacrificed himself to break the curse the Pit Lord Mannoroth had left upon their people. By all accounts he was an honorable man, once, but the pressure of leadership, of filling his father’s shoes and Thrall’s shadow while the Horde he was meant to lead turned on him, it was too much. When the mist shrouded land of Pandaria was found both the Alliance and the Horde wanted the resources and artifacts of power which could be found there for themselves. But we didn’t know was that there was a darkness hidden there as well. An ancient evil buried long ago beneath the earth by the last Pandaren Emperor Shaohao. Negative emotion, Anger Violence Pride, made manifest. It was known as the Sha, and it consumed him.” When he’d stood on that windswept terrace in Kun Lai, the Mallet of Harmony clutched for dear life in his shaking hands, Anduin had known that he wasn’t looking at the same Orc he’d spoken to of the merits of negotiation over violence at the Theramore peace talks prior to the out break of Deathwing’s Cataclysm. Still he’d tried to reach him, knowing that he’d fail. Knowing that that kind of soul sucking darkness was the author or irrevocable change. He liked to think that, had it not been for its presence, he’d one day have succeeded. Maybe then he wouldn’t have had to die on an alternate version of his ravaged home world. “In his pursuit of domination Hellscream sought out many of the powerful artifacts hidden in Pandaria, among them a tool of the Thunder King. Shin’quing: the Divine Bell. Forged in the breath of darkest shadow, so the legends said, from the flesh of the fallen Keeper of Storms Raden. It weighed at least five tons. And when I thwarted his efforts to use it as a weapon, he dropped it on me.”
“Screaming sirens.” Flynn muttered.

Taelia looked horrified. “And what happened to him? He was punished, wasn’t he?”

“After betraying the Horde and attempting to take Azeroth for ‘pure Orcs’ he was captured and put on trial. And when he asked for my council, not as a defender but as a Priest, I went to him and listened. I’ve never breathed a word of what he told me and I never intend to.” He said. “And I firmly believe that Garrosh didn’t deserve the death he got; murdered by the mentor whom, in many ways, set him up for failure.”

“You talk like you don’t blame him.” Flynn said.

“He isn’t free of blame. Not completely. Even with judgement clouded by darkness the actions that he took were still his own.” Anduin said. “But a grudge is a curse upon none but the one who holds it in their heart. I am a servant of the Holy Light and one of its core tenants is forgiveness. So I forgave him. Years ago. And I hope he found some measure of peace.”

“You’re a good man, Anduin.” Taelia said as they found their way at last to the proper dock and turned onto it. “Maybe too good a man for your own good.”

The King of Stormwind flashed a brittle smile. “I really wish that that were true, Tae.” He said. “But I’ll warn you now that I’m not as good a man as you might think.”

Will Melborne was a tall man with russet hair and a thick beard, a wide brimmed brown hat perched atop his head. Hung from his belt, alongside a coin pouch and a small bag, were a pair of hooks large enough to serve as weapons if need be. Anduin raised an eyebrow.

“Flynn, Taelia, good to see two of my regulars again.” He smiled, revealing a couple of missing teeth. “Out for Cyrus?”

“Not this time, mate. Just taking out new friend here,” Flynn indicated Anduin, who mustered up a small wave, “out for some camping to have a look around while he’s here. He’s from pretty far off, you see. Stormwind to be exact.”

“Well, nice to meet you.” The Ferryman said heartily, tipping his head. “A discount for a friend of these two. Keep me afloat all on their own they do what with how often the Harbor Master has them off and around Kul Tiras. Where are you headed to?”

“Against a sailor’s better judgement,” Flynn said, “Drustvar. Stormwind seems to be the type for evil forests and cursed ruins and having his feet ripped off and eaten by wolves.”

“I’ve grown up around wolves, Flynn. Unless they’re rabid, starving or trained by Orcs they’re no threat to Humans.”

“Drustvar, at a time like this?” Will shook his head. “Good luck managing that. Most of the oarsmen won’t go near the area anymore.”

“With all respect,” Anduin piped up, “I think I can convince them. You see, I can be rather… persuasive if need be. I’m sure I can get them at least to let us off in the shallows. A bit of a swim won’t kill us.”

“Well,” he said, taking of his hat and using the brim to scratch the top of his head, “you’re welcome to try, lad, but I’m not certain you’ll meet with much success. The next ferry out should be arriving in about a minute or so.”
And, true to the Ferryman’s word, not more than a few seconds after he’d said as much did the distant shape of a small wooden boat appear on the horizon, rapidly growing larger as it approached until Anduin was able to make out the details of the figures inside; a woman with long reddish hair and a heavy-set man in dark red, both wielding long wooden oars.

“Well, it looks like you might be in luck.” The older man said. Finley is possibly the only oarsman left under my employ willing to go near those waters. Do be careful out there, all of you.”

“With Flynn and his superstitions around,” Taelia’s tone struck a firm middle ground between affection and exasperation, “you can be certain that we will be. Thank you.”

With one last glance at his escort, and daring to flash a cheeky smile, Anduin followed the pair over to the end of the dock. After briefly negotiating with the pair in the boat, both Flynn and Taelia boarded before turning to help him do the same. Balanced precariously on the slanting bottom of the unsteady boat, Anduin managed by some small miracle to lower himself onto one of the benches without toppling over the side into the harbor.

“Drustvar, eh?” the heavy-set man, whom the King assumed was the previously mentioned Finley, grunted as both he and the woman dipped their oars into the water. The boat beginning to glide forward. “You’re lucky you’ve got me skippering this boat. Most won’t dock in the area anymore with all the dark rumors about.”

The water about the was clear and smooth, reflecting the blue of the lightening sky and the image of the anchored battleship they drifted past with nary a ripple.

“Not long ago this ferry used to be full of merchants looking to secure goods from the miners and butchers living in the area. Lately though, the mines seem to have dried up. And the butchers.” He snorted and shook his head. “Nowhere to be found.”

“What happened to them?” Anduin piped up from where he sat with his back propped against their packs, Taelia and Flynn both beside him and looking curious as well. “Do you know?”

“Not a clue. No one does. I’m not superstitious like most Kul Tirans are, mind, but I have to admit that something about Drustvar these days gives even me the willies. I wouldn’t recommend going out there for a jaunt in the woods, let alone to stay the night, but I suppose there’s nothing that can be done to convince the young not to do something they’ve already set their minds to. Even when there’s danger about.”

“Two of the three of us don’t believe in witches.” Taelia said, elbowing Flynn playfully.

The oarsman grunted again. “Under normal circumstances I’d be letting you lot off at Carver’s Harbor but it’s not a friendly port these days. Last time I dropped anchor there a bloody great wolf almost took my leg.” He said. “You believe in wolves don’t you, little lady?”

“Of course.” She said. “I’ve seen wolves. But no one’s ever seen a witch.”

“No one’s ever seen a witch and lived to tell about it.” The woman said. “Doesn’t mean they don’t exist.”

Flynn let out a nervous sounding chuckle. “Is it too late to make a change of plans and head to Stormsong Valley instead? I’m sure we could get around the barricade by coming in on a ferry.”

“Tide Mother, Flynn, we’re going to be fine.”

“Well, I think we should get Stormwind’s opinion on this. His is the guest after all.” The auburn
man turned to him. “So, evil forest or tranquil valley?”

“I fear no evil for I know that I walk with the Light. Whatever fate I may meet is predetermined and thus out of my hands.” Anduin informed him sagely. “So I vote for evil forest. Adversity is the spice of life.”

Taelia snickered.

“Well, that’s all well and good for you, Stormwind. Really. But me? I prefer to maintain a healthy fear of evil. That’s what keeps a man alive, in my experience, in a world like ours.”

Anduin was aware that the smile on his face didn’t appear in the slightest genuine but in that moment, he couldn’t fully bring himself to care. “I don’t think that evil is what’s going to do me in, Flynn. Though I can understand your concern. We’ll be fine in Drustvar, regardless of whether the land is cursed or not. If anything comes for us, I’ll drive it off with the Light.”

Finley chuckled, though he didn’t sound amused. “You’ve got strong faith, boy.” He said, pulling the boat around towards an otherwise barren stretch of stony beach. “Whether that will be enough to spare you whatever darkness dwells here has yet to be seen. You know where you’re going?”

“We’ve a map.” Taelia said, leaping form the small boat onto the loose gravel of the shore. Flynn was much less eager in his own departure, and the young Priest suspected that it was less out of politeness and more out of a desire to stall that he turned back to help Anduin out and gather the supplies.

“Watch yourselves out here.” Finley called to them as he began to paddle away, turning back towards Tirigarde. “With House Waycrest gone silent there’s no one who can really be spared to look for you lot if you go missing out there.”

That Anduin doubted, at least where he was concerned. He knew that Genn and Jaina both would be out looking for him the moment that his deception was realized. And then there was the matter of Ivar.

Better not to think of that now.

“So, about these ruins that we’re headed to,” Anduin said, the unlit lantern on his belt clattering as he pulled his pack up onto his shoulders. Beginning to totter forwards after the pair on his cane. “What are they from?”

“The Drust.” Taelia said. “2700 years ago, when the first Kul Tirans arrived here, those who settle in the area were met with a hostile race of giants which practiced some necromantic variant of druidism and weren’t pleased by the prospect of sharing their lands. I don’t know much about the area or its history, I’ve only been here once a few years ago on a hunting trip, but according to the annals they were finally defeated when Arom Waycrest, the ancestor of House Waycrest which still to this day is one of the most powerful Houses in Kul Tiras, defeated their leader Gorak Tul.”

“Necromantic druidism?” Anduin repeated. “I’ve heard of Necromancy and I’ve heard of druidism but I didn’t think combining the two was even possible.”

“Apparently it’s possible. And also, quite horrific.” Flynn said. “Brambles and souls and bad things which shouldn’t go together, Stormwind!”

“Let me guess,” Anduin said with a small smile, “these ruins that we’re headed to are supposedly haunted.”
“Extensively.” Taelia chirped.

“If it is, I hope we run into at least a few of those ghosts.”

“What?” Flynn yelped. “Just because you’re married to one of the Undead doesn’t mean they’re all friendly!”

“It’s not a question of friendly or unfriendly.” Anduin said calmly. “Spirits bound to this world, be it through another’s dark power or a sudden violent death or unfinished business, deserve rest. If there are ghosts there, the least that I can do as a Priest is attempt to move them on. I doubt it would be of much affect unless we were to happen upon sage on our way there but I need to try.”

“I said it earlier,” Taelia said, “but I’ll say it again now. You’re a good man, Anduin. Stormwind really is lucky to have you for a King.”

The young Priest offered up a small smile but didn’t respond and directed his attention to his surroundings. Doing what he could to put the terrain around him to mind the landmarks that they passed as they made their way up a curving dirt road.

“Fletcher’s Hollow is about five miles to the South of here,” Taelia announced, pouring over the map in her hands. “Fall Haven is about the same distance to the North. And Barrowknoll Cemetery is about three miles in that direction as well. The ruins we’re headed to are about halfway between them, in the foothills of the central mountains.”

“How long do you think it will take us to reach it?” Anduin asked.

“Mounted? A few hours. On foot, walking a regular pace? By evening.”

“And walking at my pace?” he asked, aware she wouldn’t have brought up his leg out of politeness if he hadn’t done so for her.

“We’ll have to make camp tonight,” she said, sounding almost apologetic, “and should get there around noon tomorrow.”

Perfect. “Well then, we’d better keep moving.” He said, continuing to hobble along at the steadiest pace that he could manage. “Where I don’t believe that we’re in any real danger I have to admit that there’s something about this place that’s begun to make me nervous.”

The rest of the day past in a state of relative uneventfulness, apart from Taelia making use of a bizarre idol she’d found tied to a tree to scare Flynn half to death during one of their brief rest stops around mid-day. The central mountain range which bisected Drustvar like a jagged spine were visible in the near distance when they finally stopped for the night. Daylight fading rapidly from the sky as the temperature plunged. Unable to be of much help with setting up the tents, Anduin busied himself with starting a fire and beginning to cook a meal while Flynn and Taelia worked.

He didn’t pay much mind to the conversation that was had, responding only when spoken too, and retired early. Lying in his tent with his heart pounding in his chest, he watched the light of the fire fade from outside until, at last, it winked out.

Cautiously, taking care to make as little noise as possible, Anduin slipped his bag of supplies back onto his shoulders and detached his lantern from his belt. Turning it on low enough a setting to give off just enough light for him to see by without risking giving his position away. Poking his head outside and looking around to assure himself that both Flynn and Taelia had indeed retreated to their respective tents.

There was nothing outside but the slowly cooling ashes of the fire. Pulling himself cautiously free
of his tent, one quiet measured motion at a time, the young King of Stormwind rose to his feet and, lantern in one hand and cane in the other, slunk away into the freezing night.
Wicker Woes

Chapter Notes

It's been a long time since I last posted and I'm really sorry about that but finals don't allow me to really give me attention to much else. Hopefully the length of this chapter and the amount that happens in it at least partially makes up for it.

The potent mix of adrenaline and the instinctual fear of the dark had buoyed him well past the point where his energy would normally have given out after a full day's arduous travel, but even still Anduin had only managed to forge onwards for a couple of hours before the demands of his body for rest could no longer be ignored. Near to frozen through at that point and unable to convince himself better of the assertion that something was watching him from just beyond the lantern's glow, the young King had transitioned his attention from making headway to finding shelter and had ultimately found his way to a suitably abandoned cabin just before he reached the point of collapse.

Able to stay awake only long enough to turn off the lantern to conserve its fuel, remove the blankets from his pack and wedge himself into the smallest space that he could manage in case something fanged and unfriendly found its way in as he slept Anduin had summarily passed out where he sat half-slumped against the wall without bothering to check the nature of surroundings first.

So it was a rather unwelcome discovery the next morning with sunlight pouring through the broken windows and his breath rising silver in the frigid air to find the space cluttered with an assortment of odd things none of which Anduin could particularly recognize or place and all of which raised the hairs along the back of his neck.

He'd never say that he'd studied Necromancy because he hadn't, the art was vile and one which he wanted no part in practicing, but he'd researched the terrible school of dark magic extensively enough during his priestly training to be able to recognize the baleful runes which never failed to be present. And there they were, etched in a circle on the dusty wooden floor, still faintly glowing purple but no longer emanating any sort of power which explained why he hadn't noticed their presence the night prior.

Leg aching and body still heavy from want for sleep Anduin hauled himself upright and hobbled across the room. Using his good leg to thoroughly disturb the etchings and break the circle which had been formed.

Whatever had been done here, it wouldn't be again. That much he'd made certain of.

Satisfied with his work, Anduin turned his attention back to his surroundings and nearly leapt out of his skin before realizing what he was looking at. Barking a half-crazed laugh, he lifted the dead eyed idol from the little table that it sat on.

The empty sockets of the defleshed but still foul-smelling raven skull stared through him, seemingly to his very soul. This thing, whatever its purpose may have been, had been there all night. Facing him. Watching him sleep.
Light, he’d slept here! He was lucky that whoever, or perhaps whatever in this case, had been making use of this cabin for such dark arts had either not returned or not seen him when it had. Frankly, Anduin thought he’d pushed his luck on the matter far more than long enough and needed to vacate the premises immediately.

Maybe Drustvar hadn’t been such a good idea after all. Maybe there was more to the rumors than he’d allowed himself to think; perhaps not ‘witches’, per say, but maybe not all of the Drust were gone. Maybe they’d left and hid somewhere but had since returned and were at it once again with their ‘necromantic druidism’. Whatever the hell was going on in that cabin, it lined up well enough with what Flynn had said about brambles and souls and bad things that shouldn’t go together that the young King was perfectly content to shove his curiosity and book it as fast as his crippled leg could possibly take him. Maybe one day, once he was back home and could take Sylvanas, who knew far more of Necromancy and how to handle it than he did, with him he might return to investigate and document but not now. Not while he was alone and the next skull whatever was using that cabin might turn into decoration could be his!

Strapping his lantern to his belt, pulling out the short sword that he’d brought with him and yanking his pack back onto his shoulders Anduin took enough time to ensure that there was nothing lying in wait to pounce on him outside before he took off running—or as close to running as he could manage-out of the cabin and back into the forest.

Anduin didn’t stop until his breath tasted bloody. Until his leg hurt so badly that it felt as if the joint was grinding up into the socket of his hip with such force that, each time it did so, a bit more of the bone fell away to dust. Until he’d gotten so turned around in his fear and panic that, for all he knew, he’d turned around and started back towards the cabin he was fleeing.

It was better that he stopped, no matter how terrified he was. To stop and to rest and to get his bearings the best that he could without a map. Without any familiarity with the area or his surroundings. Gasping and wild eyed, gaze darting left and right and all around him, Anduin slowed. The pain in his crippled leg increasing until he felt as if the bone would crumble to shards at any moment. Finally, unable to remain standing, Anduin collapsed. And there, on all fours, he crawled. Crawled and crawled until he at last came to a rock and hauled himself up onto it. Propping his back against the cold uneven side. Letting his head fall back against it and wincing as his skull bounced off stone. Waiting for his breathing to slow. For his heartbeat to steady. Mentally running through prayers to the Light for relief and protection.

Finally, when he could hear the wind and the birds and the wolves again, when the pain had once more faded to levels that were bearable, Anduin dug through his pack for the compass that he’d brought and flipped open the slightly dented copper lid. Watching the needle inside wobble and sway with the rampant shaking of his hands. Trying not to think of the last time he’d really looked at a compass, or what had once been a compass; a last memento of his father lost to the deep waters off Soldier’s Torment, recovered and returned by one of the Alliance’s countless champions in a state barely recognizable in much the same way his life had become with his last living family gone.

Taelia had mentioned that a town called Fallhaven had been just to the north of where they’d landed. Under normal circumstances remaining well away from Kul Tiran civilization lest he be discovered and returned to his captivity in Boralus would be the last thing he wanted to do, the brief contact he’d had with whatever madness had gone on in that isolated cabin was more than enough to convince him that it was a safer risk to run that the alternative.

And, if nothing else, at least then he’d know where in the Light he was and might stand to hear news of any efforts which might have been launched by the Alliance and the Horde to save him.
But first he needed to figure out which direction North was, and for that he needed the compass to stop shaking.

Which meant he either had to make his hands stop shaking for longer than a few seconds or set the compass on the ground. As the latter option was the faster one to achieve, the young King set the compass down on the frozen ground in front of him.

Steadied, the needle continued bobbing for a moment before at last evening out. Taking a moment to examine the reading Anduin once more gathered up his things and started off. Trudging onwards at the highest pace his hobbled stance could manage, Anduin didn’t allow himself to rest again until, on the edge of evening, he reached the outskirts of Fallhaven.

The Light within him roiled, gooseflesh flushing across his skin, and he knew immediately that something here was very wrong. Cautiously, eyes wide and alert for any signs of danger, the young King edged from the tree line and stepped out onto the cobbled street.

A raven, perched atop the head of a man who’d somehow become frozen midstride, turned to look at him with a harsh caw. Anduin, realizing with sickening horror that the thing had been well into the effort of gouging at the man’s eyes, leapt forwards and shooed the menace away. Forcing it to take flight in a while of inky feathers.

Thoughts of escape and remaining in hiding dashed, slipping instantly into the familiar mindset of a healer, the Priest called to the man. Realizing, sickened, that the bird had left him blind and bleeding.

“Hello. Can you hear me?” he called, forcing panic not to show through in his voice. “My name is Anduin. I’m a Priest. A Healer. I’m going to do what I can to help you.”

No response. No acknowledgement. Light, the man didn’t even seem to be in pain! Was he still alive? Anduin couldn’t tell. Touching the man felt strange, as if his skin was coated in a static energy belonging to something dark. Something malevolent that he’d never come into contact with before. He’d stopped the bleeding but there was nothing else that he could do. The Light unable to break through the chains of whatever it was that was holding him in place. Flooded with a primal fear yet again, he left the man where he stood and kept going. Passing more ravens. Ignoring their caws as he went.

Anduin whirled around when he heard a low, guttural grunting screech and was met with the sight of a pig, tainted back and eyes a blue blaze of dark magic, charging at him with murder on its face. He’d never once considered barn yard animals to be dangerous before, but after reducing the mad beast to ribboned bacon Anduin found that that his former perceptions on the matter had been considerably rewritten.

He’d never look at pork the same way again.

After thoroughly checking over his surroundings to ensure that there were no other previously thought to be harmless animals to attack him Anduin kept moving. Soon, he found himself stood in the center of the town.

More ravens, staring down at him judgmentally from their perches. Pumpkins, likely set out at some point prior to serve as decoration, had begun to rot. Melting where they stood as flies swarmed around them. More people had been frozen in the midst of heated conversation, or the shaping of horse shoes, or the nailing of a notice of a newly imposed curfew to a nearby post but he paid them little mind. The majority of his attention was drawn to the giant idol which stood in the middle of the town. Towering above many of the homes with arms raised and talons extended, the
sockets of the deer skull which crowned it blazed with yet more of the sickly sorcery which lay over the area in a choking veil.

Fear and anger filling him Anduin called the Light to his hands and brought down a pillar of white fire from the sky, fully intending to set the vile thing ablaze and break whatever spell it had been used to cast. To his surprise the Holy magic was forced to part around it and funnel into the ground, leaving char marks on the cobbled road. He tried a Smite as well, and then a Penance each to no affect before being forced to amid that magic wouldn’t work. Perhaps he could damage it physically.

Pulling the blade from his belt once again Anduin stepped forward and swung with all the force that he could muster.

In a blinding flash of blue light Anduin found himself sprawled on his back a handful of feet away.

A high-pitched giggle reached his ears just before a playful voice trilled “that isn’t going to work.”

Suddenly tense and snatching back his weapon the young King rolled up onto all fours only to immediately relax when his eyes fell on whom the voice belonged to. A little girl of no more than ten, clad in a pink dress smudged with dirt and faded by the sun and her blonde hair done back in twin braids.

“He’s.” He said, somewhat shakily. Burning for answers though he was he knew that he couldn’t risk frightening the little girl away by pouncing on the chance to ask then and immediately demanding answers. Plans to escape aside, he couldn’t just leave a child behind in the middle of whatever the hell this was. “My names Anduin. Anduin Wrynn. I’m a Priest and I can help you. What’s your name?”

“My name? I’m Abby. Abby Lewis.” There was something about her angelic smile which seemed…off to him for some reason. Anduin quickly shook the notion off. “You said that you were going to help me, Mr. Wrynn?”

“Of course. I can’t just leave you here.” He said. “I’m trying to get back to my home in Stormwind, so I don’t have any plans to go back to Boralus where my kidnappers can get to me, but we can stick together until my friends find me. It’ll certainly be safer.”

Abby regarded him for a moment before nodding. “Alright Mr. Wrynn. You seem nice, and I like nice people, so I’ll keep you company until your friends get here. But we can’t leave yet. I need to gather up a few things and see if we can find some of the others, and we need to have the tea party first. I already put everything together and we can’t waste it!”

A tea party? In the middle of a town locked under some sort of curse which reduced its people to being as good as statues? Anduin didn’t like the thought, but humoring his new companion seemed to be the quickest way to leave Fallhaven and seek a safer place so he reluctantly obliged. “Very well. A tea party sounds wonderful. Am I the only guest?”

“My name not, silly! There are four other guests we need to find.”

“And who would they be?”

“Trunksy, Mr. Munchikins, Mayor Striggs and Smoochums.” Abby informed him. “We can’t have a tea party without Smoochums.”

Anduin couldn’t help the soft smile which spread across his face as he extended a gloved hand for her to take. “Well, let’s go and find them then. It’s starting to get late, Abby, and we’ll miss the
“Come on, Mr. Wrynn! Hurry!” She tugged on his hand insistently, dragging him away from the giant idol and towards a stone bridge. “Glenbrook Homestead is just over this way. This is going to be the best tea party ever!”

Moving at a limping half-run in order to keep up with her, Anduin couldn’t help but be mildly concerned by the presence of a number of wolves milling about like stray dogs on the streets but they paid as much mind to them as Abby did to them so for the time being Anduin filed their presence away to be dealt with later.

“Let’s look in here, Mr. Wrynn!” Abby happily skipped up the stoop and disappeared through the door, plainly unbothered by the massive slick of blood which had dried across the stone floor as she picked up the elephant plush sitting nearby. “Trunksy!” She chided, squeezing it tightly and provoking the squeaker inside to let out a drawn-out groan. “You know Ms. Mary doesn’t allow you into the house! You track mud everywhere!”

“Well, that’s one down.” Anduin huffed, propping himself against the door frame and eyeing the massive canine curled up on the other end of the porch a few feet away. “Three more!”

“Yes, yes! Three more, Mr. Wrynn, and then we can look for Sam, Mr. Hayes and Ms. Mary. They might still be around.” Leaping off the stairs Abby darted away towards a nearby pen and ducked beneath the fence. As he struggled to descend the steps he heard her say “Oh, Mr. Munchikins! You were hungry, weren’t you! Come along now, it’s time for tea!” By the time he made it to the bottom of the steps she’d rejoined him, a second plushy-this one shaped like a velociraptor-clutched under her arm. “Two more, Mr. Wrynn. Are you sure you don’t need to sit down?”

“I’m alright Abby, thank you.” He said, hiding his pain behind a smile. “We still have Mayor Striggs to find, don’t we?”

“Oh yes, he should be just this way. Follow me, Mr. Wrynn. I promise you don’t have to go up the stairs this time!” Grabbing his hand again she resumed towing him along. They ended up at another house a few minutes later and Anduin remained at the foot of a set of stairs while Abby bounced to the top and picked up the rather ragged doll she found there. “Naught, naught Mayor Striggs! Always running away from your responsibilities to the townsfolk!” She flashed a rather creepy looking smile. “Well, you can’t run anymore.”

“Well, that’s Trunksy Mr. Munchikins and Mayor Striggs.” Anduin said. “Now we just need Smoochums, Sam, Ms. Mary and Mr. Hayes and we can get out of here and find somewhere safe to stay the night.”

“Of course, Mr. Wrynn.” Abby skipped down the steps and held up Mr. Munchikins. “You should ask Mr. Munchikins where Smoochums went. He says that he saw him.”

“Well, Mr. Munchikins, we’d both be pleased if you could tell us where Smoochums went?”

“Smoochums loves the woods. I saw him run off into the trees a few days ago. You’d better go after him before the mean doggies get him.”

The woods. Where the Light only knew what kind of dangers could be lurking. Where they’d probably have had to go anywhere to look for the missing villagers. Really, it was a lucky thing that Abby had found him when she did. He didn’t want to think about a child attempting to go out there on their own.
“Alright, then. Thank you, Mr. Munchikins, for your insights on the matter. They were very helpful.” Turning again to Abby he offered her his hand. “Shall we?”

“Wow, Mr. Wrynn. You really are a gentleman.”

He smiled. “Well of course. A King must have his manners, after all.”

Her blue eyes went wide. “Are you really a King, Mr. Wrynn?”

“I am.” He said. “I’m the King of Stormwind. A Kingdom in the south of the Eastern Kingdoms.”

“I’ve never had royalty at one of my tea parties before.” She said. “This really will be the best one ever!” And it would also have to be a quick one because Anduin had no intention to sit around in the abandoned wolf infested village which had plainly been the site of a series of brutal murders having tea with a ten-year-old! “Do you like songs, Mr. Wrynn?”

“Songs?” he repeated. “Of course. I’m a Priest, after all. Music and Hymnals are integral to my craft. Did you have one in mind?”

“I do.” She chirped. “Would you like to hear it?”

“Sure.” He quickly regretted accepting her offer, the lyrics only intensifying the discomfort of his surroundings rather than alleviating them.

“My poor little village is dead. All the people have gone stiff or fled. Now there’s no more noise except me and my toys. Just like all the dark birdies said.”

“That, uh…a very pretty song Abby.” Anduin’s voice was brittle, his throat suddenly dry. “Is it about what happened to your village?”

“Yes.” She said, attention shifting away from him to the fluffy cat sitting on a tree stump. “Smoochums!” The feline let out a yowl of fright and attempted to flee but Abby was faster. Managing to wrap her arms around its middle before it could successfully scamper away.

He couldn’t help but think the feline’s desperation to escape was more than a little bit strange but pushed thoughts of it aside. Doing his best to convince himself that he was merely being paranoid. Allowing the situation to get to him.

What sort of damage could an unarmed ten-year-old girl possible stand to do to him, even if they were more than a little bit…creepy?

“Let’s go and find those people you were looking for.” He said, wanting to leave that ragged little stump behind. Afford himself the distraction of moving even if it meant going deeper into the woods. “If it gets much darker, we’ll have to skip the tea, ‘waste’ or no.”

“Trunksy says that he saw Mr. Hayes go into one of the caves just over that way.” Abby said, pointing east with the arm which wasn’t busy restraining the flailing cat. “He might still be there, Mr. Wrynn. I think we should check.”

There was something in her tone which sounded almost like a threat but again he dismissed it. Forcing his mounting sense of dread aside and driving his feet forwards. Leaning heavily on his cane, though it was more out of nerves than pain, as he approached the cave; a vaguely visible hole in the earth from afar which rapidly widened into a rocky maw as he drew closer. Bracing himself against the jagged side of the stalagmite stretching near as tall as he was Anduin descended into the darkness. Pausing only long enough to light his lantern the King forged onwards into the
shallow cave. Almost hyper aware of Abby’s quiet footsteps behind him.

As they reached the back of the cave the dim glow spilled across the pale form lying crumpled against the stone. Anduin dropped the lantern, the glass cracking but the fire inside not going out, and fell to his knees beside the man. Ignoring the pain which flared in his leg. Pulling one of his gloves free with his teeth and pressing his fingers against his neck. No pulse. The man was still and cold. Checking his body for injuries Anduin caught sight of the ragged hole in his chest, or what wasn’t there, and reeled back in alarm. Dragging himself up onto his feet so quickly one of his ankles nearly buckled.

“We need to leave.”

“But Mr. Wrynn, the tea party!”

“We need to leave! Now!” Awkwardly with his cane in the way and her weight and his crippled leg tilting his posture sideways Anduin scooped the little girl up into his arms and made for the mouth of the cave. Weaving around jutting growths of stone, repeatedly almost losing his footing and finally making it out of the cave the young King skidded to a stop at the sight of a grinning fang filled maw.

Of all the times for Ivar to catch up with him it had to be now!

Yellow eyes over bright and hackles raised the Worgen, crouched and coiled down to spring, was frothing at the mouth. “Found you, little lion.” He snarled. “I’ll rip out your heart and send it to that undead bitch in a box!”

He pounced, form a blur of dark motion as he closed the distance between them between one blink and the next. Crashing into Anduin who’d turned broadside in an effort to protect the child in his arms with enough force to knock him to the forest floor. Abby letting out a shriek and Smoochums a yowl as they fell. The cat wasting no time in bolting for its life. Claws flew towards his face. A last moment Powerword: Shield all that kept them from meeting with his flesh. Heart racing and nearly blind with adrenaline, he brought his cane up to block a second strike.

“Abby!” The Worgen above him roared and brought his claws down again. His cane holding but emitting a concerning crack. “Run!”

“Run?” she repeated, dusting off her dress. Oddly unbothered by the sudden appearance of a vicious wolf man clearly out for blood. “But why would I run? I’m not afraid of the doggy.”

Doggy? Had she really just referred to a feral Worgen as a doggy? Anduin didn’t have much time to dwell on the matter as a third blow snapped his cane in half. His efforts to use the jagged ends to gouge at Ivar were quickly thwarted when the Bloodfang Alpha seized him by the throat and began to squeeze. “Die, traitor!”

“Bad doggy! You get off of Mr. Wrynn right now!”

Internally, while struggling to breathe and tugging uselessly at the constricting fingers wrapped around his neck, Anduin cursed. It was bad enough that Ivar was attacking him. He could, at least to some degree, defend himself. Abby was a child. If Ivar went after her she wouldn’t stand a chance. His vision was starting to blur now. His blood thudding in his temples so hard it hurt. Things were getting darker. Darker than they half have been even given it was evening, his vision blurring around the edges. He’d lose consciousness soon if he didn’t do something but it was difficult to draw on the Light when his brain was starved for oxygen.
“Doggy, get him!” There was a guttural roar and a blur of color as something massive crashed into Ivar’s side and knocked the Worgen Alpha off him. Allowing Anduin to finally gasp for breath, the influx of air only hastening his plunge into unconsciousness. Sound around him dimming as Ivar let out a pained sounding yelp and whatever was attacking him snarled a final time before silence fell again. Abby appeared in his fading line of vision, an almost demonic smile twisting her features. “It’s ok, Mr. Wrynn. You can take a nap. You look like you need it.”

His vision blurred to black a moment later.

When he came too again, he was lying prone on his back, an empty starry sky overhead where trees had formerly been. It wasn’t the same place. He’d been moved. But how? How in the Light’s name had a ten-year-old girl managed to move a fully-grown man on her own? And not one of small stature either, having inherited no small amount of his father’s nearly seven feet of height. Sore and confused, bruises no doubt ringing his throat, Anduin attempted to sit up only to discover he couldn’t move anything before his neck.

Paralyzed, not bound, though by what he didn’t know. Confusion mounting and beginning to tint with fear the young King did his best to investigate his surroundings while only able to turn his head.

Looking to his left Anduin found himself face to face with the staring eyes of Mr. Munchikins; Trunksy, Mayor Striggs and Smoochums-a bloody mess with the curved dagger used to kill him still sticking out of his side-arranged into a pattern nearby. Heart beginning to race he raised his eyes slightly to the thing which loomed over him; towering and jagged looking with thin gnarled limbs, the head of the wicker construct formed from the empty eyed skull of a sharp horned stag.

Frozen by the magic in the dark circle he’d been laid at the center of all Anduin could do was curse in surprise and stare at it. It wasn’t moving, thankfully. Appeared to be incomplete, at least for the time being.

“Oh, you’re awake already Mr. Wrynn?” Abby came skipping back into view holding something in her hands. Wide eyed and incensed Anduin watched her mount a small pile of stones and set what she was holding between its antlers, against the polished bone. A circlet of woven wild flowers. Catching his gaze, she smiled and said “a King needs his crown.”

Given everything that had happened and the fact that he’d only just regained consciousness to find himself the centerpiece of some form of dark ritual Anduin would have preferred to have been a great deal more eloquent but all he could manage in that moment was a choked off “W-What?”

“The dark birdies said that I can keep you, Mr. Wrynn, but only if I give you a new body. They don’t like men, you see.” She said it so matter of factly, as if anything about the given situation could in any way be considered normal. “And you said you were a King. So, I made your new body a crown to wear.”

“My…? What do you…? Why are you doing this?”

“Because I like you.” Blunt. Cold. Not bothering to even attempt to hide her true motives and make it seem as if there was some purpose for it towards some greater good. “You’re nice. Not like the others. I was just going to kill you originally, Mr. Wrynn; feed you to my doggy. But then you protected me. And my doggy ate the bad doggy so I know he won’t go hungry. I get to keep you now, which is good because I was getting bored here all alone.” Leaving the little pile of stones, she bounded over to him with that smile on her face again. “But now we can play together and have tea parties all day and there’ll be no one to stop us. And you’ll be able to use your new body to help the dark birdies and get revenge on the bad people who took you in Boralus.”
‘New body’. That term kept coming up. As if she was going to somehow rip out his soul and shove it into that **thing**! That gangly monstrosity of wicker and bone. “Please.” It came out as almost a whimper but Anduin didn’t care. Pride, at this point, was a concept entirely forgotten. “Don’t do this, Abby. I’ve a family. A son. I need to get back to them. Back to Stormwind.” He said. “I can take you with me. We can find you a family. Friends. You won’t have to be alone anymore.”

There was no hint of mercy in her eyes as she stared down at him. “No thank you, Mr. Wrynn. You really are very nice but I’ll be staying here.” Once more with that damned smile. “And you’ll be staying with me.”

Thank the Light that the little witch—because that, he now realized, was exactly what she was—never got the chance to cast whatever spell she’d had in mind. The circle she’d etched into the loamy soil freezing solid and then shattering just as quickly, bleeding its dark power into the open air.

Hissing in displeasure and glaring daggers Abby turned tail and darted off into the shadowed forest, leaving her toys and butchered cat behind, but at that moment Anduin couldn’t have cared less for the fact that the demon child was still at large potentially to prey on other unsuspecting victims.

He also couldn’t have been more relieved than he was in that moment to see the woman he’d once considered close family in spite of their lacking relation, and whom had played no small role in his kidnapping. It didn’t matter that her expression looked about as inviting as the frozen north.

“A tracking spell.” He huffed, head dropping back against the leaf litter. Eyes on the winking stars. “I should have known you’d put a tracking spell on me Jaina.”

“I helped raise you, Anduin. I’m well aware of all your tricks.” Her voice was frigid as she walked towards him, lips a thin line and staff held white knuckled in her hand. “Are you hurt?”

“A bit scuffed. But otherwise?” the bruises on his neck twinged as he swallowed. “I’m alright. You’re taking me back.”

A statement, not a question. Jaina bent down, gripping his arm and dragging him upright with her. “I hope you enjoyed having free reign of Boralus, because you’re never setting foot outside the manor again.” She bit out. “Not until I’ve forced you to see sense.”

Genn’s cryptic warning returning to his mind, all the possible meanings of ‘force you’ raising the hairs along his neck and arms, Anduin hung his head and took a last look around at his surroundings—grim as they were—as the violet glow of arcane magic overcame his vision.

“Nathanos.” Sylvanas didn’t tear her eyes away from the map spread out in front of her but knew that her Champion was awaiting orders with rapt attention from the soft shift of cloth to her right and just behind her. “Little as I like the idea of it, given the report reaction of these ‘witches’ to men its best for the time being that you not accompany us.” She didn’t need to see him to know he was about equally as displeased. “Vareesa and Alleria, along with Lyana and Vorel, will be accompanying me to Corlain where Waycrest Manor lies. I’ll need you to look after things here while I’m away.”

Another shifting sound, accompanied by the clatter of loose gravel as he brought his fist to his chest in salute. “Of course, my Lady. I’ll manage our foothold here while you’re away negotiating for the Heartsbane Coven’s aid.” He said. “All will be well when you return. I swear it.”
“I’ve no doubt of that.” Unable to stare at the map any longer Sylvanas folded it viciously and tossed it away in near disgust. “If things go well, we’ll make use of them to distract the forces of the Proudmoore Admiralty, and perhaps get Proudmoore killed or maimed, and if things go badly, though I hate the thought of wasting further time which could be devoted to retrieving Anduin, they’ll have to be destroyed as I doubt, they’ll allow us to advance through Drustvar unimpeded. I want things prepared for that possibility; our foothold here yet remains unsound and we cannot afford to be uprooted.”

“It will be done.” He said. “We’ll be ready to move, either on the nearby town or the coven’s forces, at your word immediately upon your return.”

“I’ve full confidence you will be.” She said. “Either way, let this be done with quickly. I won’t have Anduin subjected to the delusions of that rabid cur Greymane for even a moment longer that is absolutely necessary.”

Her party had already assembled outside; Lyana and Vorel atop their skeletal horses and her sisters astride hawk striders-white for Vareesa and a void warped nightshade for Alleria-to either side of Geryon. Though the Dark Rangers remained looking ahead of them, both of her sisters turned their heads to look as she approached.

“Sylvanas,” Vareesa said, “are you sure about this?”

“I’ve already answered this question Little Moon.” It was difficult to keep even a margin of a snap out of her voice but somehow, she managed. “I’m going to take any option which might give me an edge in returning my husband his freedom. Even if it means courting the aid of something as unctuous as the Heartsbane.”

“I’ve contacted Umbric and the rest of my Void Elves on the matter.” Alleria said. “If things turn bad, we’ll be able to be out in a few moments.”

“We will not retreat unless we’re given no other choice.” Sylvanas prodded her horse forward. “If given a chance to behead their leadership should this ‘coven’ prove hostile we should take it.”

“I understand that you want to cut down on the time that must be devoted to other things but we can’t afford to be rash.” Alleria warned. “It will only slow our progress further.”

“I’m aware. And I’ve no intention to be ‘rash’.” She drawled, resisting the urge to push her mount faster. “We’ll reach Upper Corlain in just over an hour.”

“Their ride along the coast in the northwardly direction was brief, a treacherously steep cliffside path seeing them to the top of the beachside cliffs where they soon found a cobbled road which led them straight to their destination. What had once been a rustic mountain town, built of sturdy wood to support the weight of heavy snowfalls, was now overrun with ensorcelled guards and horrific wicker constructs. They’d been made aware of their arrival, clearly a no efforts to draw their weapons were made.

The party only stopped when they came to a closed gate, at which point one of the guards approached them. Eyes blank and glowing blue in a way which reminded her far too much of a Death Knight’s.

“‘Dark Lady’?” he grunted around a thick Kul Tiran accent.

Sylvanas felt her lips curl back. “I am she.” Too heavy. Too Gilnean in flavor for her taste. Nothing like the slight, sweet purring drawl which Anduin-and most of Stormwind-spoke with.
“The Mother will see you.” The guard informed her, then turned tail and began walking through the gate which had been winched up with a great clatter. His movements were stiff and doll like. The three sisters exchanged glances before following after.

Within the gates of the cursed city there were more ensorcelled guards and creatures, but added to the scenery were etched circles and rag dressed hags casting spells which radiated necromancy of the worst kind. Both Alleria and Vareesa were struggling not to allow the horror they were feeling to show through on their faces. Sylvanas clutched the reigns of her mount tightly in her hands. Lyana and Vorel shifted nervously in their saddles.

Waycrest Manor towered above the rest of Upper Corlain, perched atop a hill like a dire crow. Out front of it stood a garden, gnarled and ruin with a pock marked fountain overwhelmed with thorns sitting in the center. They passed it by, dismounting at the foot of the manor’s porch, and proceeded to the door.

Dark, claustrophobic and in worse shape than parts of the Under City, absolutely caked in dust and cobwebs, the centerpiece of the foyer was a grand staircase. Three hags stood at the bottom and behind them, on the first landing, was a wisp of a woman. Its withered form wrapped in wispy cloth and its hair a tangled mess.

This…diminutive thing was the Heartsbane coven’s ‘Mother’?

“One of my sisters tells me that you wished to arrange a partnership of some form, ‘Dark Lady’?” it said, hovering down the carpeted steps towards them.

“The Proudmoore Admiralty has stolen something of great importance for me. Something which I want immediately returned.” Her fingers were already itching for her bow. “As you seemed to be opposed to them, I thought perhaps we could benefit each other.”

“Benefit each other?” the witch revealed a smile full of pointed yellowed teeth. “Yes, I think we can. Come to the parlor, it’s impolite to host guests in the foyer after all. Solena, see to it that we’ve tea to provide them. I certainly hope Raal hasn’t eaten everything in the manor already.”

Neither Sylvanas or her Dark Rangers required food or drink, being undead, and she knew full well neither of her sisters would touch anything these creatures provided them with. Without eye contact or any verbal communication, yet with an unspoken agreement to remain together while in hostile territory, they part of Elves fell into step behind ‘the Mother’s’ floating form as she hovered towards a nearby doorway and down the narrow hall on the other side.

“I’m Lady Waycrest, the Mother of the Heartsbane Coven. Foremost student of Gorak Tul, whose arts you saw at least a portion of on your way here.” The witch said. “His death magic is impressive, yet you stand as evidence that even the Lord of the Drust’s knowledge is minimal regarding the undead. And that means that you have something I want and am willing to trade our aid for. But let’s get the niceties out of the way first. I’d hardly be a Lady if I didn’t observe them.”

Even here, it seemed, she couldn’t escape the suffocating trappings of Human nobility.

“I am Sylvanas Windrunner; Dark Lady, Banshee Queen of the Forsaken and Warchief of the Horde”

The doors before them creaked as they were pushed open, revealing another cramped narrow room with a long table at its center. Adorned with tarnished cutlery and cobweb choked candle holders with the stubs of melted candles roosting atop them like a flock of dour birds. Sylvanas had no
intention of sitting at it, and nor it seemed did any of her accompaniment. Lady Waycrest circled around to the far head of the table and turned to face them.

“So, what is it that the Proudmoores have stolen from you that you want returned so badly?” she asked. “A weapon? An object of value? Military plans, perhaps?”

If only it could have been something so replaceable. “A man.” Sylvanas admitted. “My Husband.”

“You love him enough to march an army across Kul Tiras to retrieve him?” Again with that foul grin. “This will be a long running alliance, I’m sure.”


“Why, we’re much the same.” Lady Waycrest said. “I love my Husband dearly. He’s the love of my life. And when he fell ill and I thought I might lose him…it’s why I turned to Gorak Tul. I’d have given him far more than what I did in return for saving him. To keep him with me. And where it’s unfortunate I had to sacrifice his free will…”

Sylvanas stiffened, Lyana and Vorel hissing softly. In her peripheral vision the Banshee Queen could see both her sisters were poised to act, though whether that was to assist her in the coming attack or to retrain her she didn’t know. “You took his will?”

“It sounds worse that it is. Really; no matter how much you care for your husband once he’s been…properly trained you’ll find him far preferable.” Lady Waycrest waved a taloned hand dismissively. “All of his bad habits and annoying proclivities will be gone. All that will be left is the love.”

“Love?” she was snarling now, her red eyes flaring brighter. After everything that she’d gone through at Arthas’ hand, reduced to a puppet by the Lich King’s will; with the admitted reason for her agreement to the start of their relationship and what she knew full well many people believed of how she saw Anduin the mere thought of someone suggesting such a thing was enough to make her blood boil. Any deal which they might have had with the Heartsbane was officially off. “That isn’t love!”

Both Alleria and Vareesa leapt into action as Sylvanas pulled down her bow from where it hung across her back. Lyana and Vorel knocking arrows of their own and releasing them a moment later. The witch managed to avoid the hail of arrows which were aimed at her, lobbing a bolt of the Heartsbane’s horrific magic at them before turning tail and vanishing through another door. The Banshee Queen’s efforts to follow were thwarted when a thorned vine erupted from the floor, wrapping around her ankle and almost tripping her. The door which they’d originally come through burst open, ensorcelled guard’s wicker constructs and hunch backed witches flooding into the room.

“Sylvanas!” Alleria fired off five arrows at once, taking down a small handful of their attackers only to have the wave behind them trample their corpses underfoot without mercy. “Go after her! We’ll hold them off!”

Sylvanas tried to wrench her ankle free of the vine which held her only to have it coil tighter. The inch-long thorns along its length biting into her flesh. Firing arrows at it did little good. Hissing again, she ripped the short blade from her belt and hacked at the vine until it gave way. Leaping onto the table rather than bother going around it Sylvanas charged towards the door she’d seen the witch pass through, scattering plates and candlesticks and cutlery before her without a care for where they landed. The hallway looked little different than the one they’d first come down, though
it was less choked with foes as nearly every horror that the manor contained was currently being kept busy by her sisters and the Dark Rangers, they’d brought with them. The only thing which she found herself confronted with was some sort of dog beast which was quickly dispatched.

Catching a flash of grey fabric disappearing through a door the Banshee Queen hurried after. Pelting down the steep stone staircase that she found on the other side and winding up in a cellar. Dank and dark, its walls were wet and slick with slime and fetishes of unknown use hung from the uneven ceiling. Red eyes scanned the room and fell on a crumbling hollow in the wall.

On the other side she found yet another, darker staircase. Clutching her weapon in a white knuckled grip she took the stairs too at a time. Barely getting a chance to register the small stone room she found herself in before a powerful force rammed into her from the right. Lifting her off her feet and throwing her to the cobbled floor a few feet away.

Her bow clattered against the worn stones and arrows spilled from her quiver, rolling across the floor and out of her reach. A dull pain radiated through her body as she pushed herself up onto all fours, blonde hair freed from her hood and falling down about her pointed shoulders in a disturbed tangle.

The thing that had collided with her looked like it may once have been a Human man of some advanced age, its body stretched and inflated to hulk like proportions. Head too small and hanging to the side with a long pale tongue lolling out, its misshapen form could only be described as horrific and its twitching unbalanced motion was far too reminiscent of the twisted plague monstrosities the Lich King had used as shock troopers in the Northrend campaign.

This was Lord Waycrest. This was the sort of abomination the witch would suggest she turn Anduin into!

“What are you waiting for?” Lady Waycrest snarled. “Kill her!”

With a muffled groan the hulk threw itself at her again. It was fast, especially for something its size, but not as agile as Sylvanas and had a poor ability to keep its balance. Too top heavy to remain upright after a lunge without a pause to regain its bearings. Snatching up her bow from where it had fallen Sylvanas rolled out of the way of the blow, grabbing the arrows she could reach as she went. Knocking one of the strings as she came up into a crouch and fired.

The arrow struck. The beast toppled and began a slow, scrabbling process to haul itself back to its feet. Not about to allow the horror the necessary time to recover the Banshee Queen knocked another arrow and took aim.

“No!” Lady Waycrest flew at her with a shriek and it was only a swift disengage that prevented talons from catching her in the face. Her back collided with the slick stone wall, the arrow she’d had knocked falling once more to the ground. Snarling a curse, Sylvanas switched to her blade for the second time that night. Bracing herself as the witch launched its withered body at her again. “I will never let him go!”

As the witch and the roting abomination lurched towards her again Sylvanas cast around the room for something she could use to get free of the corner she’d been backed into. Spying a pile of fallen rubble not far away; anything but sturdy but suitable for her purposes. With only a short distance between it and her she put on the highest burst of speed which she was able and vaulted off the pile of stones. Spinning in midair and firing off the last arrow in her hand, a black bolt of wood and dark magic which whizzed through the cold air to meet its mark. With a piercing shriek the witch disappeared, folding in herself and vanishing from sight, and the monster collapsed with a floor shaking thump.
Alert for the potential of trickery, she crept towards the fallen brute and delivered a sharp kick to the nearest extremity that she could reach. It didn’t move. Satisfied that it wasn’t playing possum the Banshee Queen turned her attention to collecting what she could of her spilled arrows. A handful scattered across the uneven ground. A few wedged into the spaces between the tile stones. One fallen to the bottom of some form of trench cutting its way through the room for some reason which she couldn’t discern.

Leaping down to collect it, when Sylvanas straightened up she was confronted with the sight of yet another hollow into the wall, through which she could see a tangle of thick roots and crumbling ruins. Something was down there. She could feel it, deep in her bones, that whatever was on the other end of that passage would be the real key to unraveling the Coven which now stood firmly in her way. Destroying Lord and Lady Waycrest wouldn’t be enough. She’d have to at least chase out, if not defeat, the thing hiding in the darkness below her.

Cautious, arrow on the string of her bow, Sylvanas stepped over the crumbling wall and into the passage beyond. Narrow steep and curving downwards. She almost lost her footing twice on the loose soil but made it to the bottom. Finding herself standing in an ancient chamber with a well spring of dark water at the back, and standing between her and that spring was…

A Vrykul?

Grey skinned and glowing eyed, the towering figure looked to have been fused with a gnarled birch tree and wore a tattered bear pelt on its back but never the less Sylvanas was able to recognize one of the gigantic precursors to Humanity. How could she not, after all the time spent fighting them at Winterskorn Village and in Northrend’s frozen wastes? After her hunt through Stormheim for Helya’s lantern and then, later, Eyir?

“I take it you’re the one that that creature named as Gorak Tul?”

The Vrykul’s face was permanently set into a rictus of bared blunted teeth and yet, somehow, his expression still managed to convey a clear threat. “And you’re the one whose torn apart my coven?” His voice was warped. Unnatural. Sylvanas’ ears pinned back flat against her head. “I waited almost three thousand years for this chance, ‘Dark Lady’. Do not think that ruining my plans will come without consequences.”

“Consequences?” she hissed, keeping her bow drawn and aimed but not firing. Not yet. “I don’t fear you or your necromancy. I’ve mastered death!” And had Azerite at her disposal. Ships full of it. If this ‘Durst’ tried anything she’d have him blown clear to the North Sea; a test run for reducing Boralus to a smoking crater if he hand was forced to do so. Pity she hadn’t thought to dust her arrows with it before she’d left.

The Vrykul before her only laughed, the sound like snapping branches. “Perhaps.” He said, grin never wavering. “Has he?”

Anduin. That same blinding rage flaring up within her at the mere suggestion that Gorak Tul would set his sights on her unsuspecting, vulnerable, mortal husband was enough to free her arrow from the bow string. The black bolt exploding against the wall after being shrugged aside as if it were nothing. The chamber shuddered dangerously, debris tumbling from the crater left behind in the wall, but didn’t fall.

“You’ll find I’m not so simply dispatched as that fool Waycrest and her pet.” She avoided a bolt of dark magic only narrowly, the projectile whizzing just passed her and up the tunnel. “You cost me my servants. It’s only right that you replace them. I’ll drag the Lion of Stormwind’s soul into Thros and break him of his Light; he’ll serve in that woman’s place in returning Kul Tiras to its rightful
owners.” Another arrow was swatted aside. “One left in her quiver before she’d been left only with her sword. Sylvanas doubted she’d fair much better with the blade. “His fate is sealed. And so is yours.”

Knocking her last arrow on the string, Sylvanas took aim again. This time at the ceiling. Her arrow exploding against the exposed rock, shaking the chamber again and opening a deep crack but failing to bring it down. It would seem that it needed a bit more encouragement to collapse. Gorak Tul was taking aim at her again with another bolt of magic. Throwing herself out of the projectiles path and releasing her grip on the bonds to her physical body. Feeling her form become less solid and letting out a piercing shriek.

Caught off guard by the scream Gorak Tul stumbled back, the blast of sound at last managing to finish the job which her arrow had started. With a shuddering rumbling crash the ceiling finally fell. Turning tail and bolting up the passage before she could be trapped Sylvanas dodged a falling boulder and lurched towards the stairs. Vaulting over the crumbling wall and back into the cellar proper.

“Sylvanas!” She turned her head towards the sound of her sister’s voice; Alleria was standing beside an open void portal. “Vareesa and the others have already gone through. Hurry! Before this whole manor comes down on top of us!”

The Banshee Queen avoided yet another slab of falling rock and closed the distance in a handful of bounding strides. Pausing through the portal just on her sister’s tail.

Careening to the ground with a heavy thump, scattering the sea smoothed stone in all directions, the pair found themselves back in the provisional command tent the Forsaken had set up on Drustvar’s shore.

“My Lady,” Nathanos stood by and watched her swiftly scramble back onto her feet, knowing better than to offer her a hand, “we stand ready for your orders.”

“Muster our forces, Nathanos!” Sylvanas snarled, throwing her hair back out of her face. “We wipe out the Heartsbane! And once we’ve finished with the witches, we move forward and take that town!”

Her Champion nodded, turning to exit the tent. “The coven will be done away with by the morrow.”

“They’d better be!” Leaving the tent herself without a glance spared to either of her sisters or the Dark Rangers who’d come with them the Banshee Queen stalked to the water’s edge. Standing up to her knees in the ebbing tide and glaring out to see. Searching the horizon for any signs of the Alliance or Horde but finding nothing.

No matter. She and her Forsaken would retrieve Anduin on their own. Would get him off of Kul Tiras and to safety before Proudmoore or Greymane or Gorak Tul could get their claws into him. Even if that meant burning Boralus to the ground.
The Order of Embers

Her Dark Rangers had reluctantly complied with her dismissal of their presence not long after their return to the Forsaken Beachhead but her sisters had stubbornly remained at her side until late into the night when their need for rest had been too much to resist. Now, in the painfully early hours of the morning where the sky hung in the confused grey pall between night and day Sylvanas finally found herself alone and left to her own devices. Sitting in the loose gravel with her knees drawn up to her chest, the only sound the distant rushing of the waves some yards behind her and the rattle of her nail dragging over the ornate band of the wedding ring Anduin had given her.

The ring which had been passed down through the line of Stormwind’s Queens: his mother, his grandmother, likely his great grandmother and even further back. Delicate and gold, fashioned in the shape of vines wrapped around sapphires and crowned with a blue diamond of near obnoxious size. Beautiful. Vibrant. But nothing approaching the hue of his eyes. Too much violet in the sapphires. The diamond too light and not quite clear enough. How could she, the Dark Lady, the Banshee Queen, ever have been brought to this point? Alone in a tent on a cold wet Kul Tiran beach, missing her husband so badly that all she could do was sit there and stare at a ring while waiting for her Champion to return from culling the Heartsbane which stood in their way. How had she ever allowed things to happen like this? Allowed herself to lose sight of her goals of war and conquest in exchange for a soft smile and warm arms. Arms she missed more with every passing moment.

How had she ever allowed herself to fall in love?

What was she going to do, now? That things had come to this? That she’d become so compromised by Anduin Wrynn, whom she’d never intended to be anything more than a brief distraction; a fool to be toyed with and thrown aside once his time was done, that being away from him like this—knowing he was in the hands of the enemy, could be killed at any moment and that she was powerless to stop it—was crippling.

She’d spent so long fostering a reputation as ruthless. Brutal. A woman not to be toyed with in any form or fashion and whom tolerated no stupidity or incompetence. Whom could never be considered anything but cold. Somehow Anduin, soft naive and too warm for his own good, had managed to undo all of that. To leave her shattered. Reduce her to this. Stronger together meant weaker apart, something which their enemies could only benefit from, and with Anduin’s tendency to act recklessly and the track record of his guards to not always manage to quite keep track of him meant it was also something they could exploit to their whims as well. How in the name of all that was Holy, and Unholy as well just for good measure, had she fallen to this? To the same weakness which she’d so viciously attempted to wring out of Koltira? How had she found herself in Thassarian’s position, assaulting—eventually—a fortified city to get him back?

How had she come to the point where she didn’t regret it?

“What have you done to me, Anduin?” Not the first time she’d asked this question. Not the first time she didn’t have an answer. Outside footsteps scattered the gravel as someone approached. Swiftly slipping the ring back onto her finger and securing her gloves back into place the Dark Lady rose to her feet, fully aware that there were only a small handful of people whom would be seeking an audience with her especially at this time but refusing to be seen showing weakness no matter how she felt.
Moments after she’d properly assured herself that she was indeed radiating a foreboding aura of the proper temperature the flap of the tent was pushed aside and Nathanos stepped inside from the darkness. His quiver was half full as usual and a smear of blood was streaked across the hollow of his cheek, stark against the pallor of his skin.

“I take it that the Heartsbane Coven have been dealt with?” she demanded.

“With prejudice. He toppled their cairns. Burned their constructs. Slaughtered every witch we found.” He said. “I wouldn’t doubt there are a few survivors within Drustvar but the Crimson Forest is clear.”

“Well done, Nathanos.”

“There’s more, my Lady.” He said, attracting a demanding gaze. “It would seem that Drustvar’s inhabitants have been fighting back against the Heartsbane as well, forming some manner of coalition. We’ve captured one of the ‘Inquisitors’ of this ‘Order of Embers’.”

“Captured them?” Sylvanas repeated. “They’re alive?”

Nathanos’ lip curled up into a savage sneer which revealed far too much canine to be anything short of frightening. “For now.”

“I’ll speak with them.”

“Of course.” Without having to be told her Champion turned and exited the tent, leading Sylvanas across the scattered gravel to where her Dark Rangers held the supposed ‘Inquisitor’ at arrow point. A tall woman with black hair done back into a tight bun, dressed in pewter armor with a sword at her side. Sylvanas was fully aware that all the Human could make out of her through the darkness of near dawn was a black shape and red eyes and took full advantage of the matter. Stalking forwards. Able to smell the fear the woman was able to visually hide.

“Where did you find her, Blightcaller?” she asked, watching the stringent tones of Gutterspeak make the woman shift in discomfort.

“In the Crimson Forest, to the south near a town called Falconhurst.” He said. “The Heartsbane were raiding the town and taking prisoners. Civilians. We released them. Turned them loose into the forest to find their own way back or die. It would seem that this Order of Embers is in sore need of aid from Boralus. Aid they’re not receiving.”

“So it would seem.” Sylvanas agreed. “Her sword.”

Nathanos stepped forward and roughly drew the weapon free of the scabbard at her side. Though it was plain that she wasn’t pleased their prisoner made no effort to resist, no doubt due to the handful of arrows still trained on her. He handed it over to Sylvanas a moment later.

The Banshee Queen turned the weapon in her hands, watching the faint light play along the edge. A different metal than the rest of the blade. A metal which she recognized immediately from the extent of its use in the Gilneas War. “Silver.” Switching to Common, she addressed their prisoner at last. “You come from up there? From Arom’s Stand?” Silence. Grey eyes stared her down, doing a good job of holding her gaze. “I’ll warn you only once, ‘Inquisitor’, not to test my patience. Do you come from Arom’s Stand?”

Pride and distrust weighed against the arrows surrounding her and the threat clear in Sylvanas’ voice. Finally, their captive spoke. “Yes.” She said. “I do.” Stilted. Defiant. Bordering on hostile. Regardless of how much it irked her in the moment, Sylvanas could respect as much. It reminded
her of herself, after all. And of Anduin.

“Marvelous.” Sylvanas’ black lips curled up into a vicious grin. “You’re going to escort us back to Arom’s Stand, ‘Inquisitor’. And when we get there, you’re going to inform your leader, whomever they may be, that they’ve a royal audience.”

That defiant glare never wavered. “Yes, ‘Highness’.”

Her feral grin grew wider. “My fondness for defiance only stretches so far. Mind your tongue.” Shifting her grip from the hilt to the blade Sylvanas thrust the weapon back towards its owner. “This is yours.” Cautiously, looking for all the world as if she expected the matter to be some sort of trap, the black-haired Inquisitor accepted the blade. “Lead on.” Reluctance rolling off her in a suffocating cloud the Inquisitor never the less turned and started back up the beach. “Retrieve my mount, Vorel. We followed her.”

“Yes, my Lady.” Vorel swiftly flitted away, returning with both Geryon and Nathanos’ horse, Diomedes. Mounted, the Banshee Queen and her Champion quickly fell in with the rest of the party of Dark Rangers just at the base of the road which led away up the cliff. The uncomfortable tension which hung about them in a miasma only intensified the closer they drew to the clifftop village and Sylvanas couldn’t help but revel in it.

At midday, with the sun at its apex, they stepped at last into Arom’s Stand to find no signs of the civilians that lived there-likely hidden in their homes-and an assembled force of armed and armored men and women awaiting them.

“Welcome party.” Nathanos drawled, his unblinking red eyes set ferociously upon them. “Charming.”

“Well, Inquisitor,” Sylvanas said, “why don’t you inform your friends why we’re here. They’ll be more inclined to believe you, I’m certain, that we mean no harm unless we’re met with aggression first.”

There was no immediate effort to comply. The Dark Rangers hissed and Lyana went so far as to draw her bow again. “Do not keep our Lady waiting, Human!”

“Dark Ranger Lyana!” Sylvanas’ snarl made all present in both parties jump. “Did I not just pledge to meet aggression rather than incite it? Put that bow away!”

“I…apologize, my Lady. It’s just that…” returning he bow to her back Lyana looked away. “Every moment we delay is a moment our King spends in Greymane’s custody. At Bloodfang’s mercy. None of us are as close with him as you are but he embraced us all as people rather than monsters. To lose that…”

“We will not lose him!” Nathanos snarled. “Don’t suggest such things, Lyana. You upset us all without reason.”

“If this ‘Inquisitor’ will not handle introductions than I will!” The Banshee Queen snapped. “I am Banshee Queen Sylvanas Windrunner, Warchief of the Horde and High Queen of the Alliance. My husband, the High King, is currently being held captive in Boralus and as such I’ve decided business with the Proudmoore Admiralty who have dared to aid and shelter the perpetrators. We waste time with each settlement we’re left no choice but to storm so we’d prefer a peaceful resolution be reached. However, if you, Kul Tirans, would prefer a fight my Forsaken will eradicate your ‘Order of Embers’ as assuredly and completely as we did the Heartsbane Coven before you. Now, I demand an audience with your leader. Whomsoever they may be.”
The Inquisitors exchanged glances and then, reluctantly, one stepped forward. A balding man with a falconer’s glove on his hand. “You’ll surrender your weapons for the meeting? And attend it alone?”

Sylvanas smirked as her Champion growled beside her. Reaching up to pull her quiver from her shoulder, handing it and her bow and sword to Nathanos before sliding lightly from the saddle. “I’ll acquiesce to your requests, Human, but do not make the mistake of thinking this renders me in any way less dangerous.” Switching back to Gutterspeak she said “if I give the signal, kill them all.”

A ripple of nervousness spread through the armed party anew but the man still began making his way towards one of the largest buildings. “Lady Waycrest will see you.”

“Lady Waycrest?” she repeated, a cruel smile on her lips. “I certainly hope that this one proves to possess such problematic ideas regarding love.”

Candles, old tomes and documents of all sorts littered the room, reminding her painfully of the prevailing state of Anduin’s study back in Stormwind Keep. Memories of him hunched forward over the heavy desk or passed out amid mounds of half-finished paperwork fading in behind her eyes.

“So this is the reason behind the most recent disturbance.” A young woman with black hair and brown eyes said from the foot of the stairs, taking in the sight of her pointed ears and fine armor with a cautious curiosity. “Thank you, Notley.”

“Of course, Lady Waycrest.”

“You Kul Tirans don’t know how to conduct yourselves in the presence of royalty, do you?” she snapped.

“Not really, no. But we don’t have royalty so it’s no small surprise.” The Waycrest girl said. “I’m Lucille Waycrest, your Majesty. Might I ask why ‘royalty’ has decided to pay us a visit, and quite unannounced as well? Drustvar’s in a bit of a state at the moment.”

“Because the Proudmoore Admiralty is sheltering the rabid cur who kidnapped my husband.” Sylvanas snapped. “Anduin Wrynn made the choice to pursue peace between the Alliance and the Horde through diplomatic channels rather than war but Genn Greymane didn’t agree with his choice to marry me. He sent hired criminals after us on our wedding night in an effort to prevent the marriage from going through and when that failed, he went himself to kidnap Anduin from the shores of Westfall while he tried to help his people.”

Reflexively, it seemed, Lucille had begun to fiddle with the ring on her finger: silver, tarnished badly by exposure to the elements and looking as if it was either very old or had been left outside for an extended period of time. An expression Sylvanas couldn’t quite decipher passing briefly across her face. “Your husband was taken because this ‘Greymane’ didn’t support your marriage, you said?”

“Genn Greymane is convinced that my people are irredeemable monsters due to what happened some years ago during war. Anduin wished to pursue peace rather than wipe us out, against his advisory.” She said. “I’ll admit my original intent to destroy the Alliance once I’d had my fun but I’ve found…an unexpected happiness with Wrynn at my side. He’s managed to poison me with his ideals of life and unity between the Alliance and the Horde. But Kul Tiras is a part of neither and your Admiralty has made a dire mistake in crossing me this way. Choose your side.”
“What do you intend to do once you have him back?”

“My first instinct is to wipe Boralus, along with everyone in it, off the map. And with the fire power my people wield doing so is easily possible.” She sneered. “However, I’ll be content to leave the matter of punishments and sanctions up to Stormwind’s discretion. It was their much beloved King, after all, whom your nation has so rudely kept captive and given his bloodline I’m certain their bureaucracy has some manner of protocol for this.”

“But that’s after the fighting’s over” Lucille said. “You’d kill anyone you ran into during the battle if given the chance.”

“Smart girl.” The Banshee Queen said. “Depending on your decision now that would include you. I’ve lost far too much, my very life included, to be robbed of him as well and I will do whatever I have to in order to ensure that I don’t. No matter how brutal.”

And she knew brutality well. All of the Forsaken did.

“When all of this madness started, months ago now, we sent word to Boralus for the Admiralty’s help. No one came. They abandoned us to attend to the situation ourselves and where even still I cannot commit the Order of Embers to aiding your march we won’t impede you. And we’ll show you the quickest route into Tirigarde.”

With how small the forces of the Order of Embers seemed to be further aid than what she’d been offered wouldn’t be of much help anyway. “Very well. Lady Waycrest. The Forsaken accept your offer.” Sylvanas said. “Don’t think for a moment that you’ll get away with stabbing us in the back.”

“I’ve no intention to do so. So long as your people uphold their word that none in Drustvar will be harmed.” She said. “And I hope that you succeed in getting him back. I can take some comfort at least, however small, in knowing I helped prevent someone else from going through what I did. Now, I’m sure the party you came in with will be wondering about you about now.”

It was a well-dressed dismissal and Sylvanas knew as much but she decided to allow it this time. Would give it to this ‘Lady Waycrest’ just this once.

“I think you’re right in that much. My sisters, whom I left behind at our beach head asleep, are no doubt awake by now and wondering where I’ve gotten off to.” Sylvanas said, making a point of turning elegantly and exiting the building. Nathanos and the others were right where she’d left them as were the Inquisitors, hostile stares and all. “Our dealings with the Order of Embers has proven more fruitful than our efforts at repour with the Coven. We’ve been granted aid in reaching Tirigarde as quickly as possible and full freedom to move through Drustvar.”


“Perhaps.” Sylvanas said. “We return to the beach head and begin preparations to move our forces. It’s now that our march on Boralus truly begins.”

No doubt in an effort to further impede his ability to pull any further escape attempts, on top of ordering him locked into his room and the manor and replacing the Greyguard with two members of the Boralus City Guard whom Anduin could get no reaction from no matter what he tried, Jaina
had refused to replace his cane. As such, owing mostly to badly shaken nerves and severe pain in his leg, the young King of Stormwind found himself lying on his back in the bed staring up at the ceiling. Attempting to focus his mind on the dust motes swirling in the shafts of sunlight which slanted in through the salted windows; the grain of the wood on the ceiling; the sound of his breathing; anything but the unexplainable crawling feeling of eyes on him at all hours. Eyes the source of which he couldn’t determine no matter how hard he tried to look.

By that point he’d fallen into an almost meditative state and nearly leapt out of his skin when Tess suddenly materialized at the side of his bed.

“What the bloody hell were you thinking, Anduin?” the Gilnean Princess demanded. All he could do in that moment was blink at her in surprise. “Running off into the woods alone? Into Drustvar of all places? There have been rumors about that place that would make a Death Knight’s skin crawl, not to mention substantiated proof that the area is dangerous! Never mind the fact that you knew Ivar would go after you the instant you were unguarded. And then there’s the matter that there was already a plan in motion to get you back home. Don’t you trust us?”

“After everything that’s happened because I trusted Jaina and your father do you really expect me to answer that question with ‘yes’?” he asked. “I agreed to allow the lot of you to go through with your plan. I handed over what may well be my only lifeline here to you. I never agreed to sit pretty and wait; to not attempt to get myself out of this in any way I thought I could.”

“Anduin-.”

“Have your plans to help me been called off?”

Tess pulled up short. Now it was her turn to look at him in incredulous surprise. “No. Of course not.” She said. “And I didn’t really come here to lecture you either. I just wanted to make sure you were ok.”

“I wouldn’t say that I’m ‘ok’.” He said. “But I’ll live.”

“Are you in pain?”

The young King heaved a heavy sigh. “It’s been a long time since I haven’t been in pain. Why do you ask?”

“Because finding you lying down like this rather than attempting to climb out the window and escape across the rooftops leads me to think it’s a bit worse than usual.”

“The cold doesn’t help, but the main impediment is the fact that Ivar broke my cane. Well, that and the fact that I most definitely strained something running around Drustvar.” Anduin said. “It’s been a few days since it happened and no effort to replace it has been made so I must assume I won’t be receiving one. Lying around like this is just about all I can manage to do at the moment.”

“Makes matters a margin easier on us.” Tess said.

“I suppose.” Anduin slung an arm over his eyes to block out the light.

“The Proudmoore Admiralty has begun considerations of locking down Boralus.”

Blue eyes peered out at her from beneath his sleeve. “Why?”

“Things have been strange in Drustvar for months so I’ve heard so I’m not quite certain what exactly it is that led her to the suspicion but Jaina thinks the Forsaken, if not the entirety of the
Alliance and the Horde, will be making landfall here soon if they haven’t already. And that Drustvar would be the most likely place they’d choose.” She told him. “I’m heading out tonight to look for them. With any luck we should have you back in Stormwind by week’s end.”

“That’s a relief,” he said.

A knock came on the door and both looked over. “Who might that be?”

“Hey Stormwind, might we have a word?”

Tess raised an eyebrow. “Stormwind?” she repeated. “Friends of yours?”

“I’m not certain if they’d appreciate me calling them that at this point.” He said. “Yes, Flynn, you can come in. Taelia as well, if she’s with you.”

The door opened and the pair stepped into the room. Anduin quickly examined their faces as he hauled himself up onto his elbows, seeking any signs of hostility or anger. All he found was the neutral concern which could be expected from parties only recently acquainted, becoming all the more prominent at the sight of him bed bound and in obvious pain.

“Anduin,” Taelia said, stepping forward despite Tess’ cold and level stare, “are you alright?”

“Right enough.” He said. “I hope the two of you didn’t fare badly.”

“We aren’t the ones who ran off into Drustvar in the middle of the night, mate.” Flynn said, folding his arms. “I already told you, Stormwind: reformed pirate. You don’t end up a captain of that kind of crew without knowing your game. Ostensibly looking for a guide. Actually looking to bolt. I tried to steer you in the direction that wouldn’t lead you to coming face to face with witches but no one listens to the superstitious old sailor, do they?”

“I thought I recognized the both of you from somewhere!” Tess said. “You two are the Harbormaster’s goons!”

“Goons?” Taelia raised an eyebrow.

“This one’s friendly.” Flynn drawled. “Don’t think I’ve seen you before, though you’ve apparently seen me. Friend of yours, Stormwind?”

“Since you seem to be calling people by their Kingdoms, I guess you can refer to me as ‘Gilneas’.” Tess sounded, at least in Anduin’s mind, a margin more hostile than was really necessary and, after switching to Orcish so badly broken it was almost indecipherable, asked “is it a good idea to trust them?”

“I’m not quite certain, to be honest, but I’m going to at least give them a chance.” Anduin admitted. “Also, ‘Nok’ar’ is the word you’re looking for. ‘Lak’tuk’ means cactus.”

“Easy mistake to make. ‘Trust them’. ‘Cactus’. Similar enough if you ask me, and not a plant you really want to trust in most cases what with the spines and all though they can be a life saver on a desert island. Mind you I’m just taking a wild guess at what the pair of you were saying, Stormwind, but just so you know Tae and I didn’t report you missing or send Jaina after you. By the time we got back from Drustvar you were already locked up here.”

“And we got quite the lecture for it.” Taelia said. “The next time you plan to run off, have someone check you for tracking charms first.”
“The Proudmoore Cadet is right about that much.”

“There’s no need to constantly remind me of her position, Tess. Proudmoore Cadet or not, she’s Bolvar’s daughter.”

“A Fordragon?” Anduin nodded. “Naturally you’d manage to find your way to the only Stormwind born Kul Tiran in the city if not on the entire island. Have you invited her to visit?”

“Of course.” He said. “We’ve a lot of stories to go over. And Flynn’s welcome as well; he’s never anything but amusing company to say the least.”

“Provided we can get you out of here in time to prevent this city from being leveled.” Tess said. “I should be getting back. At current Lorna’s convinced she’d going with me and I still need to talk her down. I’ll see if I can do anything about getting you a cane as well.”

“Thank you, Tess. Good luck. I hope you won’t need it, but…as much as I love Sylvanas I’m sure you can imagine-.”

“More than imagine. Light willing, I won’t come back full of arrows.”

The door closed behind the Gilnean Princess with a quiet clink and Anduin found himself alone with the pair. Somewhat uncomfortable he cleared his throat. “I do apologize. Truly. Desperation is no excuse for what I did.”

“That may be true but we can’t exactly blame you, Anduin.” Taelia said.

“Not to mention that what I’ve no doubt you ran into out there in Drustvar in the dark was probably punishment enough.”

“Oh, don’t be absurd, Flynn! There’s nothing out there!”

“The witches are real, Taelia. One of them almost killed me.” At the memory of the frozen town and horrific wicker construct he’d almost been bound to Anduin shuddered. “Fletcher’s Hollow was frozen under some sort of dark charm. The witch responsible…I mistook her for an innocent child and my efforts to get her to safety nearly got me turned into a life-sized wooden doll.”

“Blimey.” Flynn said. Taelia simply stared at him, wide eyed. “Bet you were happy to see Jaina, then.”

“Very.” Anduin said. “Sad to say it’s likely the last time I will be.”

“It looks like they’ve really got you under lock down now.” Taelia said.

“Seems so.” The young King attempted to smile but was rather certain it fell flat. “And I thought Brea and Terrance were taciturn.”

“Well I think we all know what they say about Gilneans. And Kul Tirans used to be Gilneans. 3000 years apart, or near about, haven’t really made it any better. What can I say, Stormwind?”

“Come on, Flynn. Cyrus will be expecting us back by now.” Taelia said around a snicker. “The poor King of Stormwind’s probably had enough of being badgered.”

“By all means, Tae, I appreciate the company.” Anduin said, relaxing back against the pillows with a huff and a sigh. “Come back any time. Please.”

“Phrasing like that, we might just turn up at two in the morning with a pint.” Flynn said. “Don’t
strain yourself, mate. We’ll show ourselves out.”

Closing the door firmly behind them and sparing the posted guards polite nods which went ignored the pair descended the crumbling stairs. Almost the instant they were out of the line of sight of the men Taelia grabbed Flynn by the wrist and dragged him backwards into the nearest room.

“Ah! Tae, what-!”

“What are we going to do, Flynn?”

“What?” he repeated, clearly confused. “Tae, I’m not certain what you mean. Do about what?”

“About this! All of this! It isn’t right. The Proudmoore Admiralty is complicit in holding someone against their will. In sheltering fugitives. Not only that, but Katherine’s risking all our lives over pride. Because she likes the thought of the Horde squirming.” She said. “Before now maybe that wouldn’t have been so dangerous. Maybe, once, even isolated as we’ve made ourselves, Kul Tiras could have rebuffed the Horde with our fleet. But now the Horde has some manner of super weapon and the Alliance wouldn’t have given up fighting tooth and nail if that super weapon wasn’t an honest threat. And from what I’ve heard of the Banshee Queen, that shark is one whose mouth we don’t want to stick our hands in. If we don’t do something ourselves, once the Horde gets here Boralus might end up in ashes.”

“So you mean we have to do something to save Boralus?”

“Yes!”

“We’d be going directly against the Admiralty. You do realize that, Tae?”

“Of course I realize that!”

“Do you realize that’s the long way to say ‘treason’?”

“You. Were. A. Pirate! Not just a pirate but a bloody pirate captain!” Taelia snapped. “Now is not the time to develop a sudden respect for the law, Flynn!”

“I was a pirate captain, yes. And I reformed, among other reasons, because of you. You’re a Proudmoore Cadet, Tae. The Harbormaster’s Squire.”

“But I’m Stormwind by blood. A Fordragon. And our legacy is one of service to the House of Wrynn! My father all but raised him, Flynn. In everything but blood, he’s the brother I never met.”

“By the tide mother, you’ve adopted him.” Shaking his head, Flynn heaved a heavy sigh. “Alright, there are a number of choices we have now. The wiser two would be to either stick with Kul Tiras or make like barnacles and blend into the nearest wall when the breakers roll in. As for the choices you might consider to be ‘doing the right thing’ we could try and get Gilneas to trust us enough to let us in on what they’re planning, but I think we both knew she’d sooner kick us into the Sound, or we can bide our time until things inevitably go belly up-seeing as he seems to be something of a portent for disaster-and then swoop in like a siren on a cast away to save the day.”

“Right. That’s what we’ll do then.” Taelia said. “Continue to act as normal for the time being and keep our eyes open. But the most important thing is to make sure we don’t get linked to anything that’s going on in case it falls through.”

“Right. Head down and eyes open.” Flynn said, letting his head fall back against the melting wall. “And I thought the threat of swinging was over once I hung up my hat.”
“Every path has puddles, Flynn. We’ll make it through this.” Taelia said. “That said, we really should be getting back to the Harbormaster’s office.”

“We’ll have to move to Stormwind after this, you know? The weather’s different there. Warmer. A lot less snow.”

“Flynn!”

The former pirate raised his hands in defeat. “Just making sure you were aware.”

Resolved on their course of action, the pair left the decaying room behind and exited the manor. Setting off back down Boralus’ narrow curving streets.
Tess found Lorna in the courtyard behind the manor where she’d been staying with her father, Donovan already groomed and saddled and waiting expectantly at her side.

“Going out to fly?”

The Commander of the Gilnean Brigade turned to face her, looking entirely unimpressed. “With all due respect, Tess, you know exactly why Donovan and I are out here.” She said. “I’m going to the same place you are: Drustvar. Presumably for a meeting with the Dark Lady, High Queen of the Alliance and Warchief of the Horde.”

“Lorna-.”

“I know what you’re about to say and I suggest you save your breath because it isn’t happening.” Lorna said. “I was in Stormheim. Was a part of the retrieval party when your father and the Grand Champion went after her at the Vault of Eyir. You’re not going alone, even if you do have that magical telepathy bracelet.”

“Loran, please.” Tess said. “I can’t risk appearing hostile when I approach the Forsaken. If I don’t go alone-.”

“Windrunner totes Blightcaller around like a Stormwind lady totes around a crockalisk skin purse!” Lorna cut in. “I’m coming with you. And that’s the end of it.”

“But-.”

“You can argue about this with me all night, Tess, or we can go get Hesperus and head out. It’s up to you.”

The two women both stared at each other for a drawn-out moment before the Gilnean Princess finally sighed and backed down. “Alright. Alright, fine. But we’re not there to fight, just keep that in mind.”

“I’m aware.” Lorna said.

“I know that you and my brother were close-.”

“This has nothing to do with Liam.” She told her. “I miss him. I’m sure we both do. And I’ll never forgive Sylvanas for what she did but we’ve had revenge now and there are more important things with which we need to concern ourselves. The simple fact of matters is that Anduin made the right choice.”

“And father made the wrong one.” Tess said with a heavy sigh. They both knew it was true. “I’ll collect Hesperus and meet you above the city. Hopefully Jaina’s little suspicion is correct and the Forsaken are in Drustvar. Hopefully this bracelet works and we don’t wind up shot out of the sky.”

The picture her friend had painted of the woman he’d so clearly fallen hard for was very different from her memories of the terrible tyrant who’d destroyed her city and killed her brother. Tess had no way of knowing which one was the real Sylvanas Windrunner, or which one she’d find herself running into that night, though she could guess. Light help them if the Banshee Queen didn’t believe they were there on Anduin’s behalf.
Hesperus clicked his beak in greeting at the sight of her approach and accepted the bridle she slipped over his head. Clambering up into the saddle once she’d strapped it to his back, Tess prodded her mount up into the air and out over the city’s sprawl. Boralus’ green tin roofs glinted in the orange light of the setting sun, and the ocean beside it was painted with tones of red and violet and gold. Lorna was already pathing loose circles above the city wall and fell in on her left as she set a path towards the West.

The decision to consider locking down Boralus was already able to be clearly seen in the number of guards present on the roads outside the city. Braeden’s Bridge, in the shadow of Daelin’s Gate, was swarmed with mounted forms clad in green and gold and armed with weighted pikes. None of them spared even a glance in their direction and the two Gilneans flew by without trouble.

“They’re definitely expecting something.” Tess said.

“Let’s hope the Forsaken won’t need another earthquake to bring down this wall.” Lorna said.

“We’ll be in Drustvar in another few seconds. Anduin said that the bracelet should work within that range, didn’t he?”

“So far as I recall.”

Braeden’s Bridge came to an abrupt end, Tirigarde falling away into the jagged stone and dark trees of Drustvar. Almost the instant they were over the boundary the bracelet on her wrist warmed and Tess nearly leapt out of the saddle when a disembodied voice sounded in the back of her head.

“Anduin!” She’d heard Sylvanas angry, she’d heard Sylvanas snide, but she’d never heard the Banshee Queen sound like that. Slightly agitated, no doubt due to the presumption that the young King had done something incredibly reckless and dangerous to slip his bonds in order to escape Boralus, desperate and almost breathlessly relieved. It was almost unbelievable that the voice belonged to the Dark Lady, but the metallic undertone of Undeath beneath her words made that reality undeniable. “How did you get out of Tirigarde? Are you hurt? Stay where you are! Even with our Forsaken having taken care of most of the Heartsbane Drustvar isn’t safe!”

Her surprise must have shown on her face because Lorna looked over in concern. “Is it working?”

“Yes.” Tess said. “Problem is I don’t know how to use it to respond. He didn’t tell me.”

Apparently, she didn’t need to do anything in particular once the link had been opened from either end because Sylvanas heard her. “Greymane!” There was the frigid promise of a painful death which Tess had expected to hear. “How did you get your hands on that bracelet? Where is my husband? If anything has happened to Anduin-!”

“He’s fine!” The Banshee Queen hissed furiously at being interrupted but Tess plowed onwards regardless. “Anduin is fine. He gave me the bracelet so that I could speak with you at a distance… because he figured you’d shoot me before I could open my mouth otherwise.”

Seething silence was her only response.

“Not everyone in Gilneas agrees with my father. Some of us think that Anduin made the right choice and just want to go home. And most agree that kidnapping him wasn’t right.” She said. “We want to make sure he gets back to Stormwind safely, and would rather not see Boralus burned to the ground. Please, I’d like an audience.”

Another moment of drawn out silence before the Gilnean Princess received a response. “Who are you with, Greymane?”
Tess had the creeping suspicion that, with the link between the bracelets open, attempting to lie would only lead to her digging herself a hole that would be difficult to get out of. “I’m with Lorna. But only because I couldn’t talk her out of accompanying me.”

“Brave of you to think to come alone.”

“Coming alone would have better proved I’m only here to do as I’ve said, Warchief. Besides, Anduin is my friend and I trust him when he’s says you’re not quite the monster you’re made out to be.”

“Pushed far enough everyone becomes a monster, Greymane.” A harsh reply. “Continue to fly until you come to a forest beyond the mountain range which cuts Drustvar in half. You’ll see a fire burning. Land there and wait.”

“For what?” But the link had already been shuddered, the borrowed bracelet on her wrist once more inert.

“Well,” Lorna called over the rushing wind, the sky around them growing steadily darker as night drew near, “where are we going? Or is it a wash?”

“I don’t think so, though I doubt we’ll be receiving a very friendly greeting when we do arrive.” The Gilnean Princess said. “I was told to look for a fire in the forest beyond the upcoming mountain range. We’re to land there and presumably wait for our guide.”

“’Guide’?” Lorna snorted. “Right.”

The towering snow-capped peaks forming Drustvar’s jagged spine rose rapidly in their path, forcing the pair to guide their mounts higher. Bracing in their saddles against the powerful chilling sidewinds which shrieked along the gleaming peaks before dropping lower again once on the other side. After passing over the clifftop village of Arom’s Stand the Crimson Forest opened beneath them; a sprawl of red leafed trees which stretched from the base of the cliff on which the village sat to the edge of the sudden drop off which led down to the beach. A handful of provisional buildings scattered about beside the anchored forms of Forsaken ships.

“Look for a fire.” Tess said, scanning the hissing trees below them. “That’s where we’re supposed to land.”

“There.” A flickering orange light could be seen winking up at them through a break in the canopy. The Commander of the Gilneas Brigade looked over her shoulder as they circled around to prepare for the descent. “Are you sure about this? For all we know we’re walking straight into a trap.”

“We don’t have much of a choice, Lorna. If we’re going to do the right thing. If we’re ever going to have a chance to go home. If we’re going to get Anduin back to Stormwind before he either regains the ability to walk without crippling pain or gets fed up enough to take matters into his own hands again regardless. “Tess said. “You don’t have to go down with me.”

“Yes, actually. I do.” Lorna said firmly. “Anduin may well trust her and you may trust him, and he may well be the High King, but he’s far too trusting in many regards. I’m not letting you walk into a Forsaken holding alone.”

“Well, we can’t linger up here all night, can we? Come on.” Tess guided Hesperus down towards the red trees and Donovan fell in behind the other griffon a moment later. After a brief struggle to get through the branches of the trees the pair touched down and dismounted.

The small fire had been left untended within only a small ring of stones around it and little could be
seen beyond the circle of light that it cast. Tess scanned the darkness around them, squinting in an
effort to make out anything through the gloom, but her vision refused to adjust.

“It would be just like the Banshee Queen to leave us stranded out here all night.” Lorna said.
“There’s no one here. And no sign beyond the fire that anyone ever was here.”

Underbrush crackled not far behind them, sharp and deliberate in the surrounding quiet. “I could
hardly call myself Dark Ranger Lord if I wasn’t able to hide signs of my presence from my prey, Crowley.”

“Blightcaller.” Lorna drawled. “The last time I saw you was the night King Greymane and the
Grand Champion lobbed you off the Skyfire. I must admit that seeing you again is about as
pleasant as I’d have expected.”

The Banshee Queen’s Champion made a rather vindictive point of pretending she hadn’t said a
word. “Neither of you move. If you so much as twitch I’ll shoot you—somewhere painful but not
fatal—and tell the Dark Lady you acted in a manner which could be construed as hostile.”

“We’re not here to cause trouble.” Tess said.

Her statement earned them a disbelieving snort before a harsh grip wrenched her arm backwards.
“This belongs to my Lady’s witless husband. So, what are you doing wearing it, Greymane?” he
growled. “Wrynn better not have come to harm.”

“Anduin is fine. He leant this to me so that I could speak with Sylvanas.” Tess said. “Because, as
I’m sure the Banshee Queen told you, we’re here because we want to help.”

From the sour twist of his expression, barely visible out of the corner of her eye, the Gilnean
Princess knew that the Dark Lady’s Champion was only just holding his tongue on informing them
their help was neither wanted or needed. “Drop your weapons where you stand. Both of you.”

Tess complied immediately, once he’d released his punishing grip on her wrist, dropping the
blades on her belt onto the ground and removing the dagger which she usually kept in her boot.
Lorna was much less willing to do so, but in the end her sword joined the other blades on the forest
floor.

“Going to turn us out as well?” Lorna snapped.

Baleful red eyes ran her through, brimming with unconcealed hatred. “Continue pushing my
buttons, Gilnean, and I’ll ‘turn you out’ with my skinning knife.”

“Lorna, please!”

“Umbric!” Nathanos snarled, looking about as eager to get away from them as they were of him.
“Portal!”

A void portal, courtesy of Alleria’s forces, went a long way towards explaining how the Banshee
Queen’s Champion had gotten there so quickly. Tess had never taken one before, and had only
ever seen one briefly; the experience of taking the intimidating black gateway, despite how
uninviting it appeared, was thankfully little different than that of taking a Mage Portal.”

They found themselves inside of a building presumably somewhere in Arom’s Stand, the village
they’d passed over some minutes before, pinned under the blue green and red gazes of the three
Windrunner sisters. None of them looked particularly friendly and all had their bow resting close
at hand against their chairs.
“Their mounts and weapons have been relocated outside for ease of exit once this meetings been adjourned.” Umbric said calmly. In the face of the Banshee Queen, form cut in black by the burning hearth behind her, Tess hadn’t noticed he was there until he spoke.

“Thank you, Umbric.” Alleria said. “You may go.”

“Of course.” The Void Elf Magister swiftly disappeared, leaving the Gilnean pair pinned between the sisters and Nathanos who paced behind them like an agitated attack dog.

“Sit.” Sylvanas’ voice finally broke the silence, stringent and demanding. Though Tess didn’t dare to check she could have sworn it was enough to make frost start to form along the window panes. “Both of you.”

In no small part because both were rather certain that Nathanos would have forcibly folded them into the only empty chairs if they didn’t, Tess and Lorna complied.

“You claim that some among Gilneas realize your father’s case of rabies had finally begun to rot his brain. That you want to ‘help us’.” The Banshee Queen said. “Who exactly are these ‘some of us’ and just what ‘help’ do you expect to offer?”

“Tess, along with myself my father and his pack.” Lorna said, staring the Dark Lady down. “We want to see the King returned with the least amount of lives lost as possible. Rightly, we believe the best means of achieving that is to offer our assistance to you.”

“And what,” Vareesa piped up from Sylvanas’ left, “do you want in return?”

“Gilneas.” Lorna said. “We want our lands back.”

“And assurance my father’s punishment will be left in the hands of the Alliance.”

Behind them and under his breath Nathanos snarled. The Banshee Queen considered them for a long while before she spoke again. “If you cooperate and what you play a part in succeeds in returning Anduin to me then you can have your lands. And I’d gladly surrender muzzling the mutt into my husband’s care. He won’t be my headache that way. And to be quite frank he’s long past the days he’d be able to make an attractive pelt rug.”

“Pelt rugs?” Vareesa repeated. “Sylvanas those went out of style a decade ago! It’s pelt bedspreads now.”

The Banshee Queen seemed horrified by the suggestion. “I have sex with my husband on that bed, Little Moon. Even peripherally, Greymane will never be a part of that!”

“Oh Light.” Lorna buried her face in her hands, Tess tried desperately not to allow an image to form in her mind and Nathanos muttered something in Gutterspeak which sounded disgusted.

“Shall we return to the matter at hand?” Alleria asked evenly. Thank goodness there was someone present willing to act as a voice of reason. “According to communications between us and those of my Void Elves whom remained with the Alliance, a combined force from Stormwind left just over a week ago from the Eastern Kingdoms and met not long after with a similar force from Orgrimmar; complete fleets of war ships as well as air support from both sides. Though they’ve been considerably delayed both by the patrolling Kul Tiran Navy and a rather vicious set of run ins with both the Zandalari and a group of pirates calling themselves the Ironside who have somehow managed to get their hands on primitive Azerite weaponry, they should be arriving with the next two days.”
“By that time,” Vareesa said, “with the help of the Order of Embers in defining our routes and allowing us unfettered passage through Drustvar we’ll have reached Braeden’s Bridge.”

“Good timing,” Tess said. “That’s right when you’ll need them. Though if you plan on getting any real use out of those reinforcements, you’ll have to blow Daelin’s Gate off its hinges.”

“We’ve more than enough Azerite for that.” Nathanos snapped. “For the Harbor Gate as well. Kul Tiras will regret the day they woke the Dragon; we’ll make sure of that.”

“Nathanos,” Sylvanas warned, “calm down.”

“I apologize, my Lady.”

The Banshee Queen dismissed the matter with a wave of her hand. “Regardless of whether the Horde and Alliance arrive on time to assist us in breaching Tiragarde you, Gilneans, will distract the Boralus City Guard. Light fires. Use this.”

A small draw string bag hit the tabletop with a thud and Tess picked it up. Opening the neck and peering into it met with the recognizable sight of gunpowder. Fine grained and black but carrying a strange blue-gold sheen Tess didn’t recognize. “Is this-?”

“Azerite laced gunpowder. A very low concentration, the only balance we’ve been able to safely test. A fire lit with what will be difficult to put out and will keep the Kul Tirans distracted.” Sylvanas said.

“Distracted from what?” Tess asked.

“My retrieval plan.” The Banshee Queen leaned back in her chair, the old wood emitting an eerie creak. “Signe will escort my husband out of their accursed city, and once he’s been brought to safety my Forsaken-along with the Alliance and Horde coalition should they have reached us in time-will push into the city and arrest both the mutt and Proudmoore. Provided the Admiralty cooperates I won’t use Boralus as a ballistics test site.”

“And after?”

Sylvanas fixed Lorna in a sharp stare. “Those of your people whom cooperate with us will be allowed to return to your lands. Further consequence, be they in the form of sanctions or something else, will be left in my husband’s hands. I suggest you speak with him, Crowley.”

“Thank you, Sylvanas. With all sincerity, I hope that this all works out as planned.” Tess said, getting slowly to her feet as if expecting the Banshee Queen to suddenly leap across the table at her if provoked. “We’ll be leaving now, if that’s alright.”

“Not yet, Greymane.” The Dark Lady rose from her seat opposite the table and approached. Each deliberate step a menacing thud against the floorboards. Stopping only once they were nearly nose to nose, reaching beneath the folds of her tattered cloak and pulling out…

“A flower?” The Gilnean Princess looked up at her with a raised eyebrow. Was this some sort of joke?

“For my husband.” Sylvanas informed her stiffly. “He’ll understand. Speaks flower. Give it to him when you return the bracelet. Now you may leave. In fact, I suggest that you do. No point overstaying your welcome after all.”

“Yes. No point.” Lorna said stiffly, watching Tess reach out with some reluctance to take the dark
blue flower. “We’ll show ourselves out.”

Though Nathanos wasn’t purposefully blocking their path he had made a point of positioning himself so that they’d have to squeeze by him in order to leave. Despite having a wall between them, once outside the pair could have sworn, they could still feel the glare of red eyes running them through.

“Far from the friendliest bunch, those walking corpses. And far from the most pleasant company. But they’ve kept their word about not causing trouble, at least for now. Tides willing, they’ll move along before that changes.” A red headed woman in pewter armor eyed them from where she leaned against a nearby doorway. “Your mounts and weapons are over by the city limits. Head back now and you should be able to make it back to Boralus before dawn.”

“Thanks.” Tess said, heading down the cobbled path towards the entrance of the village. “We’ll head out now.”

All they received was a rather disinterested grunt of acknowledgement. Exchanging glances, the pair sped their pace and soon found where their mounts and weapons had been left. Unfortunately for them it wasn’t the end of their contact with the Forsaken as a man with fingers rotted through to the bone and a permanent rictus for a grin was waiting for them.

“Ah, I’m glad that I managed to catch the two of you before you flew off.” He rasped. “My name is Marius. Marius Slimelight. A Necrosurgeon of considerable renown in the Undercity and-.”

“We’re not interested in replacing any limbs.” Lorna snapped. “Or donating for that matter.”

“Oh, no. No. Ms. Crowley you misunderstand. I’ve something for the King which I think he’d appreciate in the coming days and I’d like to ask that you deliver it.” Reaching into the front pocket of the bloodied smock he wore the Forsaken, Marius, produced a small glass bottle of cloudy liquid. “Tell him to drink it when the Val’kyr comes for him. It will not magically make it so he’s no longer crippled, but it will take away enough of the pain to make running bearable until he reaches safety.”

Tess stepped forward and took it before swiftly retreating again. Barely able to repress a shudder. “Thanks.” She said shortly. “I’ll let him know.”

“Well don’t allow me to keep you. Do tell King Anduin I said hello and hope he’s well; Worgen are nasty things after all. Oh, and remind him my offer still stands. Perhaps Stormwind would be a better venue for the procedure than my shop in the Undercity. More sanitary. The living are susceptible to such things as septic shock and exsanguination after all. And I wouldn’t want to be responsible for…”

“He’s never going to stop talking!” Lorna hissed, securing her sword back into place. “Let’s just go.”

They didn’t really have much choice if they’d make it back before someone thought to come looking and discovered them gone. Sliding the last of her daggers into place and nodding, Tess climbed up onto Hesperus’ back and Lorna mounted Donovan. Leaving Marius standing there, continuing to prattle on about the finer points of Necrosurgery and how it might be less dangerous for use on the living the pair kicked off and rose into the night sky.

The ride back to Boralus was cold and quiet and when they landed in the courtyard behind the manor where the Crowley’s were staying, they parted ways. Lorna with the Azerite infused gunpowder and Tess with the bracelet the pain draft and the flower. Sending Hesperus back to his
usual perch the Gilnean Princess crossed the street and, aware she wouldn’t be allowed in to see him at that hour, scaled the face of the building until she reached the appropriate window and slipped inside.

“I didn’t expect you back tonight, Tess. Thought you’d wait until morning, when they’d let you in.” Anduin said, keeping his voice low so that the men stationed outside his bedroom door wouldn’t hear.

“I’m a rouge. We don’t wait for people to let us in. We find our own way in.” Tess said. “Even if it means breaking and entering.”

“And, at least according to my wife, only those without finesse break to enter.”

“That sounds like something she would say.”

“How did it go?”

“How bad?”

Anduin blinked at her from where he lay slumped against the pillows. “Is that a question?”

“Maybe?” Tess walked over to his bedside and handed the bracelet over. Watching the young King slip it back on with a small sigh of relief. “She agreed to let us help. Has us creating a distraction for when she sends a Val’kyr in to escort you out of Boralus.”

“‘Escort’ or ‘fly’?”

“Escort until you reach the wall, and then fly. Too much risk you’d be shot down otherwise.” Tess said. “There are a lot of cannons in the city.”

Anduin made a small noise in agreement. “How long?”

“They’ll reach Tirigarde in about two days, around the same time reinforcements should be arriving from both the Alliance and the Horde.” Tess said. “Once they’ve secured Braeden’s Bridge and blown down Daelin’s Gate your rescue should be coming.”

“Light damn it.” Anduin said. “I won’t be able to stand by then, Tess. Let alone walk or run. Even with a cane.”

“This might help.” Producing the vial, she handed it over. Watching him turn it in his hands and squint in confusion. “According to one Marius Slimelight,” Anduin snorted in amusement at the name “it’s a powerful pain draft. Drink it when the Val’kyr comes. It should at least make things bearable.”

“Marius.” The Priest shook his head, golden hair splaying out in wild disarray against the pillow under his head. “He tried to chop my leg off while I was in Undercity.”

“What?!”

“He meant well.” He said. “It’s normal for the Forsaken. It wasn’t an effort to hurt me. He was honestly trying to help. A cultural misunderstanding.”

Now it was Tess’ turn to shake her head. “I was also asked to give you this.” She held out the flower.

With some struggle Anduin hauled himself upright and took the flower from her. His expression
shifting to a soft smile. “Blue Salvia.”

“Does it mean something to you?”

“All flowers have meanings, Tess. Their own language. It’s a subtle way to pass messages and I found hours of entertainment becoming fluent in it while I was young.” He said. “Tansy: I declare war on you. Hyssop: Sacrifice. Hemlock: You’ll be the death of me. Lavender: devotion.”

“And this?”

His face softened further. “Thinking of you.” Noticing the look that she was giving him he raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“Nothing.” Tess said. “Just…I never would have pegged her as a ‘romantic’ person.”

“There’s far more to her than she allows others to see. I feel very privileged to be one of few who are permitted to.” He said. “You said it would be two days?”

She nodded. “About that, provided her confidence in the Forsaken’s ability to steamroll the Kul Tirans is well founded.” Tess said. “I’ll let you rest.”

“Thank you, Tess.” He let himself crumple back against the pillows. “Hopefully, the next time we speak, I’ll be free.”

“Light willing.” She said, clambering back up onto the windowsill. “Should I close the window?”

“Leave it cracked, please. But try not to make it noticeable.” When Anduin looked over at her again his blue eyes were sad. “When it’s quiet at night I can hear the ocean. Pretend I’m home.”

Knowing that nothing she could say in that moment would improve his situation so Tess kept silent. Closing the window behind her, though leaving it cracked just enough to allow the sighing of the waves to seep through, she dropped back down onto the city’s cobbled streets and slipped away into the shadows.
Hey guys, this note is a bit more of an important one than usual so I’d appreciate everyone reading it over if they wouldn't mind. Coming from the HP fandom as I did, I’ve had a lot of experience in fandom Discords and where normally I wouldn't have wanted to be the person to pioneer something like this in the Warcraft fandom (if others exist I’m not aware of them so I could be wrong) but given how much better it made the small corner of the HP fandom that centered around the pairing I wrote for through allowing people to bounce ideas off each other, find beta readers and just shoot the shit all in one place, and since in the wake of everything going on with Blizzard at the moment I think it would definitely be beneficial for both creators and readers to have a place to go where we can all hang out together, talk things over and maybe even organize in game activities if enough people are interested in M+, PVP or even raiding (I don't know how many of you all still play with the state the game is in of late). Ultimately I think it could be a fun thing to do, so if you're at all interested in checking things out a link to the discord will be in my profile. All pairings welcome, and open to both creators and readers.

Under normal circumstances they’d have reached the island nation of Kul Tiras days before, but unfortunately for the Spymaster’s nerves the universe seemed to have an odd way of making anything which concerned a single drop of Wrynn blood intrinsically overcomplicated.

Maybe there was something to the old superstition that the Royal House of Stormwind was cursed.

After the Alliance fleet had rendezvoused with the Horde fleet just off the coast of the Eastern Kingdoms-leaving the majority of the Darnassian force behind to defend Alliance holdings from a possible Horde ambush, which Tyrande’s paranoia insisted would happen-they’d had a few days of clear skies and blue seas before they ran into their first, and only expected, snag: the Kul Tiran navy. Though their numbers were superior, vastly so, the magics of the Tide Sages heading each massive galleon and the superior construction which had always been a closely guarded secret of the Admiralty had quickly forced them to turn tail and retreat in hopes of doubling back and sneaking by.

In hopes of shaking their pursuers the combined fleet had traced south and westward and almost immediately run face first into the Zandalari.

Engagement with the Trolls had been brief but brutal, and in addition to the three ships the Kul Tirans had sunk they’d lost two more to a rain of burning spears. An additional Orcish cutter was badly damaged, though not sunk, and forced to return to Orgrimmar for repairs.

Unlike the Kul Tirans the Trolls at least didn’t care to chase them once they’d left their islands’ waters.
At that point Mathias had made the mistake of thinking that, barring another run in with the Kul Tiran navy, they’d have no further trouble. And then the Iron Tide Pirates had appeared from between the waves.

They’d closed in on them quickly only to have the pirates open fire and reveal, quite spectacularly, that they’d somehow managed to get their hands on Azerite and transform it into powerful, all be it primitive, weaponry. They were only run off once the air ships closed in.

If Shaw were a betting man, he’d have put his money of Gallywix as being the responsible party. They’d had no further troubles after that, but hadn’t been presented with the necessary chance to make another shot at slipping passed the Kul Tiran’s navy patrols until now.

“The fog is thick tonight.” Saurfang’s gravelly voice rumbled from behind him. “Little chance those ships will see us now. Without the Void Elves we wouldn’t be able to keep track of our own!”

Mathias folded the retractable spyglass in his hands before turning from the bow of The Sword of Dawn. “The weathers on our side and we’ll be taking full advantage of it.” He said, and then with a tint of mild amusement asked “you didn’t have trouble getting here from The Tempest’s Roar, did you Overlord?”

“By ‘trouble’, Spymaster, you don’t mean almost ramming into the side of the airship, do you?” Mathias’ snicker earned him a highly unimpressed look. “This fog can’t be natural.”

Quite the contrary. Thick fog like this is very much natural. You see it all the time, living beside the ocean.” He said. “Stormwind nights without fog are rare nights indeed.”

“Orgrimmar is by the ocean.”

“Something tells me Durotar doesn’t have quite the right climate.”

The Orc grunted and changed the subject. “Since you’re clearly better versed in fog why don’t you tell me how long you estimate it to be before we reach Kul Tiras.”

“The fog bank will weaken over land.” Mathias said. “According to communications between us and Magister Umbric it shouldn’t be much more than another half an hour before we reach Daelin’s Gate. Sylvanas’ forces, by all accounts, will be engaged with the Proudmoore Admiralty there. Though the Gate will impede our ships enough they won’t be of much immediate aid-one of the air ships will likely have to fire on it to bring it down-we will be able to offer air support.” He looked back over the railing. “Not as quite of an entrance as I’d like but it’ll get the job done.”

The Overlord scoffed. “Rogues.” He said. “All the same, no matter what race you belong to.”

Mathias lips twitched. “Something of the same could be said for Warriors. Sometimes, it pays to have a brand.” He said. “You’ll be returning?”

“That may be best if we’re really so close as you say to making landfall.” Saurfang said. “The aircrew ought to be alerted. Good luck…watching the mist.”

Shaking his head, Mathias watched the massive Orc pull himself back up onto his Wyvern and take flight, his form quickly vanishing into the chilling veil. Pulling the spyglass back to its full length and stepping onto the Griffon shaped prow, the leader of SI:7 resumed his earlier task of scanning the horizon. All he saw was mist for what seemed like a small eternity, and then…
“Land sighted!” Though, as an infiltrator and assassin, Mathias preferred to do things as silently as possible that didn’t translate to an inability to be loud when he needed to and his voice echoed across the airship’s deck. The sounds of rushing footsteps swiftly joined the constant thrum of engines as marines rushed to take their stations. The vague darkness of land below them rapidly solidified; an ambiguous black shape transforming into the hard lines of the Kul Tiran coast and the towering form of Daelin’s Gate.

“For King Anduin!” The harsh shout of triumph rang like thunder as The Sword of Dawn bore down on the Admiralty’s lines.

‘Tolerance’ had been a big ask of the Order of Embers, all of them knew it though no one dared voice the matter lest it cause the tension to boil over, and it was by no means a secret that the residents of Arom’s Stand were pleased to see the back of them. Many of the Forsaken held the feelings to be mutual. The last of their provisional buildings had been packed up in the late hours of the prior night and the ships they’d taken sent around towards Tirigarde Sound to rendezvous with the joint fleet, staffed only by a skeleton crew, and in the early hours of dawn the rest of their assembled forces had departed the alpine town, headed east towards Braeden’s Bridge and, beyond it, Boralus.

For many hours after the only sounds had been the clattering of the chain bound wheels of the catapults, meat wagons and supply carts, the heavy plodding of the abominations and the clopping of the hooves of their mounts but Nathanos still kept himself on high alert. Bird calls, though foreign by comparison to what he’d come to be used to back on Kalimdor and the Eastern Kingdoms, had by now ceased to raise notice but even still he stiffened in his saddle every time the distant howling of a wolf rang out across the darkened trees. Red eyes harshly interrogating his surroundings each time a twig snapped in the gnarled forests to either side of the rutted cobblestone road they followed.

Sylvanas, astride Geryon, marched at the head of their lines with her hood fallen back and her long hair left to spill down her back in golden coils. Her sisters trotted to either side, Vareesa’s head on a swivel with her blue eyes narrowed and suspicious and Alleria’s hand never far from her bow. Nathanos’ grip of Diomedes’s reigns was white knuckled. The plague hounds stalking around him would occasionally let out low growls, far down deep in their throats.

“My Lady.” The Banshee Queen didn’t turn her head from the ancient road before them but the twitch of an ear in his direction was enough to let him know he had her attention. “According to the Waycrest woman Braeden’s Bridge lies just beyond that rise. It may be best to take a small force forward to gather the lay of the land without risking being seen by the Admiralty’s Sea Scouts.”

Sylvanas halted her mount, the cessation of motion rippling backwards through their ranks like a wave. “You’re right, Blightcaller. Accompany my sisters and I. Belmont!”

The Deathstalker Commander’s attention immediately shifted fully to his Queen. “Dark Lady?”

“I leave you to manage things in the meanwhile. See to it they remain here.”

“As you wish, My Lady.”

“Nathanos.”

“My Queen?” Sylvanas prodded her mount forward, Vareesa and Alleria following, and the Dark
Ranger Lord swiftly fell in behind them. The small party of four continued up the road for a handful more yards before diverting into the trees and up a shallow rise. The horizon opened before them before fading into a choking bank of fog which had rolled in from the Great Sea like a creeping specter.

“Well, with fog like this we won’t have to worry about being seen en route.” Vareesa said. “Unfortunately it also means we won’t be able to accurately judge the size of their force even after we’ve engaged them.”

“Their size matters little. The Forsaken have overcome greater foes, greater odds, before.” Sylvanas said. “And I will not be kept from my Husband. Certainly not by these fools.”

“From what we were told by Tess Greymane, Crowley’s pack is awaiting our signal to launch their part of the distraction.” Alleria said. “Will they be able to see it in this?”

“We may have to add a bit of Azerite to the flare, but they’ll see it.” Nathanos said.

“Is that safe?” Vareesa asked. “We know so little about the substance. What if it explodes?”

“We’ll have a footman hold it.” He said gruffly. “If they get blown up Marius can sew them back together again. Unlike the Living, the Undead are little fazed by being blasted to smithereens.” The Champion of the Banshee Queen ignored the way the Ranger General of the Silver Covenant stared at him in alarm. “Shall we splinter off, My Lady?”

“Yes. Surrounding and crushing their forces quickly will be the best means of taking control of that bridge.” Sylvanas said. “Alleria, Vareesa, each of you take a third of our forces and flank them to the north and south. Nathanos, remain with me.”

“Of course, My Lady.”

“No delays. No quarter. I want that bridge secured by dark fall.” What little watery sunlight managed to filter down through the mist reflected off Shalamayne’s pommel where the hilt of the Great Blade of House Wrynn protruded from its repurposed wrappings. “I want Anduin back by midnight.”

“I’ll take north.” Alleria said. “Vareesa, can you take south?”

“Yes.”

Stones clattered softly as the hawk striders her sisters were mounted astride retreated from the rise. Sylvanas didn’t follow immediately, lingering a few moments more on the top of the rise before descending herself. Nathanos, at her side, didn’t remark on the matter nor did he miss how her gaze had lingered in the direction of Boralus.

Now at the head of only a third of their forces the Banshee Queen and her Champion continued forward down the road. Rapidly becoming consumed by the clouds of frigid sea mist until all they could see were vague shapes. The clattering of wheels and the thudding of feet rose around them into a thunderous echolalia as they approached, joined by shouts from the other side of the bridge as the Kul Tiran forces stationed there rushed to prepare to meet them at the shore.

Just at the dividing line where solid earth gave way to sand Sylvanas stopped. The Forsaken halting behind her and the sounds of war dropping off, leaving only the panicked voices of their blinded prey to continue ringing out before eventually fading into a tense silence.

Beneath the brine of the sea and the chalky smell of wet rock the sharp scent of fear curled heavy
in the air. They were afraid. The superstitions common among sailors and the knowledge they were soon to face the living dead no doubt bringing up thoughts of the Lich King and his Scourge in their pitiful minds. Perfect. In the end it would all work to their advantage.

Unable to see at such a distance through the veil of mist the Banshee Queen turned to an old means of keeping into contact with her Rangers while afield. The crystalline call of a bird found only in Eversong Woods ringing out through the cold, immediately answered by identical calls from both the north and the south.

Pulling the curling war horn from where it hung at her belt the Dark Lady gave the signal to advance, the same haunting trumpet which had called the Horde into retreat on Vol’jin’s order at the Broken Shore.

“Forward!” Nathanos’ harsh snarl cut through the ambient sigh of the waves and spurred foot soldiers shock troopers and machines all into motion. “Push them back to the walls of their city and take that bridge! For the Dark Lady!”

“For the Dark Lady!”

Dread Guards in dark armor rushed passed them towards the bridge, accompanied by the rotting forms of geists and ghouls. Dark Rangers vaulted into the fray, their limited sight relegating them to their blades. The ground shuddered around them as abominations thundered down the hill, followed by the blade adorned meat wagons. Her Val’kyr rose from behind their lines, their winged forms lighting the haze around them as catapults clicked back in preparation to fire.

Geryon’s hooves sparked against the uneven ground, throwing up sand in wide arcs behind her as Sylvanas drove forward with Nathanos at her side. Leaping from the saddle and onto the stone arch of the bridge. Her blade coming down on the plate armor of an Admiralty Guard who wasn’t swift enough to move clear.

The blade glanced of the blued armor and the Banshee Queen coiled back. Rapidly delivering a second strike which slipped between a chink in the plates and brought the guard down.

“My Lady!” Nathanos’ warning left just enough time to leap free of the range of a pole arm thrust in her direction from out of the mist. The responsible party received a close-range arrow to the neck from her infuriated Champion.

The Plague canisters launched by the catapults-highly watered down so as to be extremely painful, though not fatal, to the living-exploded against the worn bricks with loud cracking sounds. Tainting the mist around where they landed with a bright green.

They’d pushed halfway across the bridge when the Kul Tiran began to fall back, though it quickly became clear that it wasn’t a retreat. The explosive sounds of cannon fire rolled across the water, the weighted balls landing with loud thuds around their feet, forcing them to give up most of their newly gained ground.

“They’re using the mist to mask the location of their cannons and carpeting us with fire! They may be looking to destroy the bridge rather than let us take it!” Nathanos said. “Shall I send my Dark Rangers to dismantle them?”

The swell of engines came in answer, a dark shape rapidly growing closer until it was clearly discernable for what it was. The Alliance gunship cut the mist around it as it pivoted midair, lining up the deck guns along its flanks and opening fire on the far end of the bridge.
Another black shape which Sylvanas could only assume from its wider stance was a Horde gunship slid through the haze like a shark through dark water. Emitting a series of loud bangs and blinding flashes as it joined the ocean bound fleet in blowing Daelin’s Gate off its hinges, many of the flashes from the sea tinted with the distinctive blue-gold of Azerite. Debris rained down from above like mortars, swamping the bridge with a tide of frigid water.

“Quickly! Take the bridge before they can regroup! Chase them back behind their walls!”

Paratroopers in Stormwind blue and gold landed all around them as they rushed back over the bridge, adding their blades to the effort the moment their feet hit the ground. The sound of waves lapping against the wooden hulls of ships growing louder as the fleet approached. The Horde gunship and a second Alliance gunship joined the first in circling overhead like giant birds of prey.

The Kul Tiras made a second attempt to push them back but their cannons now proved of little use, and the forces of the Proudmoore Admiralty soon abandoned the effort, racing back behind the towering city walls two miles away no doubt to spread word of the arrival of war upon their doorstep.

As ought to have been expected out of the Spymaster, Mathias Shaw materialized before her with such suddenness it were as if he’d simply manifest out of the rock. “Extensive delays aside, My Lady, it would appear we arrived at precisely the right time.” He said. “Joint Alliance and Horde forces have gone ahead to secure the settlement just beyond this bridge; between the two of them we’ve established a strategic holding close enough to Boralus to effectively launch strikes against the city while remaining out of the range of the fire of their cannons. We await word to push into Boralus and put an end to this, though I’d advise first removing the possibility of this devolving into a violent hostage situation.”

“Experts as SI:7 may be in your craft,” Nathanos’ tone was venomous, “we don’t require your input on matters, Shaw. An extraction plan for the High Moron is already in place.”

“One of my Val’kyr will be retrieving my Husband. Once Anduin has been safely returned our forces will wholly dismantle Boralus and bring the Lord Admiral to their knees. Kul Tiras will regret this for generations to come, and if their nation ever recovers it will be by a miracle of the Light alone.” Sylvanas hissed. “I do, however, have a job for you Mathias. Decorated and capable assassin and infiltration expert that you are.”

Brown eyes calmly observed her. “Lady Windrunner?”

“When our forces push into Boralus, eliminate Jaina Proudmoore.”

“Eliminate?” he repeated. “Do you mean apprehend or destroy? For completion’s sake.”

“No hesitance or concern for your former colleague in arms?” Sylvanas sneered. “It seems you really are as cold as they say.”

“Jaina Proudmoore is nothing more in my eyes than a traitorous deserter. Had it not been for the madness with the Legion, the following threat of the Horde prior to the resolution of tensions, the situation with the Wound and the King’s continued, if dampened, familiar affections for her I’d have done this long ago. The crimes she’s committed against Stormwind and the Alliance as a whole are unforgiveable, and as she won’t submit to being court marshaled the least she deserves is a blade in the back.”

“I’d love nothing more than to fill Proudmoore with arrows though that, no doubt, would distress my Husband who’d no doubt rather have her locked up in the Violet Hold-like the only prison on
Azeroth capable of holding her for the rest of her life. But we can’t always have what we want.” She said. “As I’d prefer my relationship not suffer, I must keep clean hands. You understand.”

“This wouldn’t be the first time I’ve covered my hands in blood so that House Wrynn wouldn’t have to.” He said. “Only a part of the oaths I took to the service of the King. And, at least this time, a personal pleasure.”

Sylvanas nodded and then turned her attention to her Champion. “Nathanos, have the flare lit. It’s come to the edge of evening. More than high time for Crowley and his animals to do the job.”

“Of course.” The Dark Ranger Lord swiftly made himself scarce, vanishing into the mist.

“I should be returning to The Sword of Dawn, if only to inform them to be prepared to move on the city soon.” Mathias said. “And perhaps to switch my poisons to something which targets mana.”

Mathias was easily as vicious as any of her Deathstalkers, and it was a small mercy to the Horde that the Spymaster had only rarely taken the field himself. Hopefully he’d prove skillful enough to bring down Proudmoore on his own because explaining why his best assassin had been turned into a Roguesickle wasn’t on the list of activities she planned to engage in upon her Husband’s return.

“Dark Lady?” Sylvanas turned as Signe fluttered down onto the broken stone beside her. “The signal has been given. We can now only presume that Crowley’s pack has seen it and done as promised. I’m to retrieve the King?”

“Yes. You are.” Sylvanas untied the wrapped blade from the back of her saddle. “Arm him. Though most of the city guard should be preoccupied by the fires I don’t want him defenseless.”

Signe took the weapon. “I’ll see him back safely.” The Val’kyr spread her wings and lifted off from the bridge, rising higher into the mist choked night and rapidly approaching Boralus. The district nearest to the wall was in flames, flickering with the blue-gold of the Azerite infused gun powder used to light them. Admiralty guards were rushing about in a doomed effort to put them out, assailed whilst doing so by the black forms of lurking Worgen.

The manor in which the King was held captive stood alone in the abandoned Merchant’s District, denoted by the single candle placed on the sill. Descending to the window, she tapped on the glass. Anduin had been curled beneath the threadbare covers when he heard the tapping at the window and pushed himself up into a semblance of upright, squinting through the dark in the direction of the noise. “Signe.” Quickly recovering the pain draught from the drawer in which he’d hidden it and pulling the cork free, the young King downed the contents—though not without making a heartfelt effort to immediately bring it back up and rose.

Pain radiated up through his brittle bones but, for the first time in days, it was manageable. Tossing the emptied bottle down onto the sheets he toddled over to the window and hauled it open.

“My King.” The Val’kyr greeted him gravely. “The Alliance and Horde have arrived and our forces have taken Braeden’s Bridge. Once I’ve brought you to safety the Proudmoore Admiralty will be brought to heel. I was instructed to give this to you.”

Anduin didn’t need to unwrap his father’s sword to know immediately what it was, and from the subtle warming of the blade beneath the fabric—which he suspected might once have been one of the curtains hanging in the Keep—it didn’t need his direct touch to recognize him either. He quickly unwrapped the weapon and hefted it in his hands, the familiar weight an unexpected comfort. “I’ll meet you on the street, Signe.” He said. “I need to take care of my guards.”
“Of course, My Lord.” The faint light of the Val’kyr vanished from the window and Anduin, newly armed but still with a pronounced limp, crept towards the door. Slowly pushing it open.

The two guards stood with their backs to him, unaware of the lion in the weeds just behind them. Drawing on the Shadow, Anduin imposed his will on one and watched him round on his unprepared companion before bringing him down as well with a swift thrust of Shalamayne.

Stepping over the bodies and stumbling on his crippled leg the young King descended the stairs and stepped out into the streets. Signe had no comment towards the blood on his blade.

“Crowley’s distraction is on the west side. The majority of the City Guard are focused on the effort to put out the flames.” She said. “I’ll take you over the wall there.”

“The west quarter.” Anduin said. “Getting there may be difficult. It’s a long walk and Boralus is confusing. Even with the pain killer I may need to rest.”

“I will get you to safety regardless.” Signe said. “You’ve come to mean too much to the Dark Lady to be left behind in the path of danger.”

They could only hope the distraction would hold for long enough to reach the wall. Steeling himself the best he could and with the Val’kyr behind him Anduin began to run. Left turn. Right turn. Left again. The mist eliminated the ability he might otherwise have had to use the smoke of the fires as direction.

And then, just when he was all but certain things couldn’t get any worse, a harsh Kul Tiran voice demanded “halt!”

Cursing, Anduin bolted in the opposite direction. Aware that he was headed in completely the wrong way but with little choice. Hearing multiple sets of plated footsteps rapidly closing in. Seeming to multiply with every desperate turn he made. Left. Left. Right. Left again. Dead end.

Anduin’s efforts to backpedal came too late, the shadows of approaching figures plain against the alley walls. “Go, Signe.”

“King Anduin-.”

“Go Signe!” He said again, harsher this time.

“I was ordered by the Dark Lady-.”

“I’m not worth a Val’kyr! Go!” Though a part of him regretted resorting to it, and another part was clawing in terror at everything it could reach, he rounded on his companion and forced her into the sky with a blinding Penance.

The Kul Tirans who were pursuing him had turned the corner now. Anduin barely allowed himself the time to register the fact that none of them were Admiralty Guards before he lunged, the suddenness of his attack catching the first few unprepared, leaving one more dead and another wounded on the cobblestones. Shalamayne threw sparks as it locked against a halberd, a Shadow Word forcing the man to reel back with a yowl. Anduin pivoted, balanced almost entirely on his stronger leg, and flung a Smite in the general direction of another man in a dark overcoat. Another, far more fatal Shadow Word poised on the tip of his tongue.

A scream came out instead when a bullet tore into his knee from behind, his body hitting the
ground hard and Shalamayne skittering away out of reach. Pain, white hot and blinding, wracked through his form. Blood drenched his pants and the cracked stone beneath him as he struggled back up onto all fours. He didn’t need to look to know his leg was broken beyond hope of supporting his weight.

Question was, who had shot him?

“Oh, there’s that awful boy!” He recognized the voice immediately as belonging to that hag Priscilla Ashvane. Seems she’d taken more exception than he’d thought to the only interaction they’d ever had. “I knew that he’d run off again, or at least make an attempt to, the moment an opportunity arose. Snakes are all the same. A real pity those wretched mutts and the Greymane girl made it over the wall before we could get our hands on them, and that whatever that winged horror with you was fled away, but it ultimately matters little.” Still wearing the fine furs and rich fabrics he’d last seen her in, the Lady Ashvane-smoking gun clutched in one stubby, ring adorned hand-circled around to stand before him. Watching with dispassion in her dark piggy eyes as he worked to remain on all fours, defiant despite being unable to stand and with his face trapped in a rictus of pain. “We have the means of getting what we want right here.”

“You won’t get anything out of Sylvanas. Not like this.” Anduin’s jaw was set and straining against the urge to whimper. “If you don’t let me go, the Proudmoore Admiralty is history.”

“Yes, you royal brat! That’s exactly what I want! For Katherine and her weak worthless family to be history so Kul Tiras can pass into capable hands.”

“Your hands?” he spat.

“Of course my hands, you imbecile! Who else? Lord Stormsong? The Waycrest brat? No! It’s time for House Ashvane to have our day! Originally, I’d planned to use the Iron Tide to burn Boralus to the ground so I could rebuild it better than it ever was under them. But the ‘Warchief’ will serve just as well. Maybe I’ll take Stormwind next. I should have a right to the throne by then, what with my having your blood by then. On my hands.” The hammer of the pistol crackled as it was pulled back. The muzzle of the barrel hot as it pressed between his eyes. “I’ll be sure to have your ashes delivered as a courtesy. I doubt even the ‘Dark Lady’ will be able to reanimate any part of you from that much.”

Every part of his body tensed up. Eyes squeezing shut as he braced for the pain of a bullet, and then the darkness that would follow. So this was how he was going to die?

“Priscilla!” All present jumped, Lady Ashvane so badly that she dropped the pistol in her hands. The bullet in the chamber ricocheting off into the night. The young King heaved a sigh of relief. “We do not shoot criminals in our streets.”

“Criminals?” Jaina sounded aghast from where she stood beside her mother, flanked by two of the City Guard. “Mother-!”

“He’s a murderer, Jaina! Has killed at least three of our men and rampaged through our city. There is no order, no meaning to law, if they are not enforced equally.” Katherine said. “He hangs.”

“But Mother-!”

“But nothing, girl!” The Lord Admiral hissed. “Do not try to interfere. You brought him here. Brought this down on us. He brought them and they won’t take him back. Not alive. You have no place outside Kul Tiras anymore. Meddle with this and you won’t have a place here either!” She turned to the guards and ordered “take him to the holding cell beneath the Keep. Tol Dagor is too
far to take a prisoner who hangs at dawn. And see to it the Harbormaster’s men insure Genn Greymane likewise makes no effort to interfere. Kul Tiran justice is no business of Gilneas.”

The two men stepped forward and seized him by the arms, ignoring his whine of pain as they hauled him upright and began dragging him down the uneven street.

“Priscilla.” Katherine turned away from the blood which had pooled where the young King had lain. “A word.”

The older women walked away, headed in the opposite direction, and the Ashvane Company enforcers soon meandered off as well. Left standing alone in the street, giving the blood between the cobble stones a respectful distance, the former Archmage lifted Shalamayne from where it had fallen.

“I won’t let them do this.”
“So, to recap, the Forsaken forces moved on Braeden’s Bridge and met with the Admiralty’s guard there. The Admiralty’s forces might have stood a chance at pushing them back, but then the Alliance and the Horde-at once-appeared out of the mist to reinforce them and the bridge was lost. Gilneas and company put their distraction into motion and then absconded over the wall. The Banshee Queen sent some sort of glowing flying thing to rescue Stormwind by setting him loose on the streets with a sword and he killed his guards then ran around until Ashvane shot him in the leg. Now he’s being held in preparation for the pirate treatment and we’re stuck babysitting a wolf in the shape of a man. A very, very angry wolf in the shape of a man.” Attempting, and largely failing, to appear calm Flynn leaned against the wall behind him. The sound of something breaking echoed from the room beyond. “Would you classify this as ‘belly up’, Tae, or should we wait for the eleventh hour and heroically swoop in on Galeheart to cut him down in front of everybody?”

“Cutting it that close would be irresponsible.” Taelia said. “We need to speak with someone in the Alliance, if not the Banshee Queen herself, and I think Genn Greymane might be willing to help us.”

“He put Stormwind here in the first place. What would stop him from trying to spirit him off somewhere else?”

Taelia shook his head. “What he did was wrong but it was for the right reason. He cares about Anduin and doesn’t want him to die.” She said. “Not to mention that until recently he was a part of the Alliance himself. Would know who to speak to. We can’t just go running off without him.”

“If you’re really sure that’s such a good idea.”

“What I last heard has their fleet closing in on the Harbor Gate.” She said. “There’s too much risk they’ll shoot Galeheart out of the air on sight so we’ll need a boat we can fly a white flag on. Preferably one that’s outside the locked down Harbor Gate.”

The former pirate Captain shifted about, somewhat uncomfortable, before admitting “well, I might have a solution to that problem.”

“Flynn.” Her eyes had risen passed her hairline. “Don’t tell me that you still have the Siren’s Call.”

“You don’t just throw away a perfectly good ship, Tae!” He said. “I left her in a well-hidden tidal cove. In case…well, in case I ever needed her again. I doubt she’s still fit for the open seas but will be more than enough to get us to their fleet. Whether or not they blow us out of the water-.”

“If we have a white flag, they’re not just going to blindly sink us!”

“I certainly hope not.” Flynn said, then jerked his chin back towards the room in which they’d left the enraged Worgen some half an hour earlier, “so, uh, you want to try and reason with him or should I?”

Taelia just shook her head and muttered “so much for the ‘fearless scourge of the seas’” before grabbing the knob. Hesitating for a moment herself before turning it and pushing it open.

The room was in ruins, the curtains hanging in clawed ribbons from over the windows, the desk overturned and its contents scattered in pieces overturned and its contents scattered in pieces across the scuffed wooden floor. The King of Gilneas himself was no longer the poised silvered aristocrat she’d seen on rare occasion walking Boralus’ streets. The royal overcoat he wore strained around
the muscular arms and massive shoulders of the Worgen, more wolf than man, that stood before her. Dark pants torn around the powerful canid legs which ended in paws the size of dinner platters. A guttural snarl thundered in his chest as his head turned in her direction, ears flat against his skull and black lips pulling back over savage teeth. Beady yellow eyes held a feral warning at the same time as they reflected a very Human rage.

Every instinct in that moment screamed at her to run, Flynn’s quivering hand on her shoulder suggesting much the same, but Taelia dug in her heels and held her own. Clutching white knuckled to the door with anticipation to slam it shut should the beast lunge. For all the good the old, dried out wood would do.

“I don’t want him with her.” The words were difficult to make out through the vicious growling. The Worgen’s grip on control tenuous at best. Jaw clenched so hard that drool was beginning to pool at the corners of his mouth and drip down his jowls, making him look even more like a vicious angry dog. “I don’t want him with her but they can’t do this! Katherine can’t do this! He’s too young! Has been through too much! It’s not his fault! If someone must be punished for this than let it be me!” One paw thudded against the floor as the Worgen King lurched forward, Flynn’s grip tightening spasmodically and Taelia clutching the door tighter to stop herself from flinching. “Let me out. Let me out, damn you both! I need to speak with Katherine!”

“Speaking with the Lord Admiral won’t do you any good, King Greymane.” She said. “With all due respect it doesn’t matter what you have to say to her. The Lady Jaina already tried.”

“You’d have me sit here?” the snarl shook the manor to its foundations. “No. No! I will not! I’ve already failed my own son! I made a promise to his father to protect him! Get out of my way. Get out of my way or I’ll move you out of my way!”

“Look mate, nothing against you or anything, but giant raging wolf monsters aren’t exactly subtle. Even at this time of night you’ll stick out like, well, a fog light.” Flynn did a good job of keeping his voice steady but never the less stood with half his body shielded by the doorframe. “Even if you didn’t, like Tae said your plan won’t get you anywhere except maybe locked up yourself. I’d suggest talking to Stormwind’s purportedly quite lovely once you get to know her undead wife since she and her Forsaken are supposedly all just misunderstood and in need of cuddles.”

“What Flynn means to say,” Taelia cut in when it became clear the Gilnean monarch, along with all his teeth, wasn’t amused, “is that he and I are friends with Anduin, excepted something like this to happen and figured their plan wouldn’t turn out well. We always had a plan to go to the Banshee Queen and alert her to the fact that her husband’s gotten himself into trouble. Flynn here used to be a pirate Captain, he’s reformed now mind you but he still has his ship hidden somewhere beyond the Harbor Gate. If you’d like you can join us; it’ll be cutting it close but the Alliance and Horde, once alerted to their need to hurry, should be able to affect a gallows rescue.”

“But why?” the Worgen asked. “You’re Kul Tiran. Why would you betray your country for a ‘friend’ who really can’t be more than an acquaintance for such a short time that you’ve known him.”

“Actually, Anduin’s more of a long-lost brother considering that my father all but raised him.” Taelia said. “I’m a Fordragon.”

“And, like she’s already mentioned, I’m a pirate. You know, the rum drinking, shanty singing, ship robbing scurvy dog sort.” Flynn said. “It wasn’t love of country that had me reformed.”

The Worgen made a huffing sound, more of understanding than dismissal, and a moment later shifted back into a man before their eyes. “Very well.” He said. “We haven’t the time to waste. Just
give me a moment to speak with my wife.”

“Right.” Taelia said. “We’ll be in the front room.” Half dragging Flynn behind her, the raven disappeared down the nearby flight of stairs.

Genn didn’t have to go far to find her, standing at the window looking out over the streets.

“Mia.” She turned at the sound of his voice, a smile on her face that didn’t quite reach her eyes. Genn stepped forward and lightly took her hands. “After what happened to our people and our family, I lost myself to my anger. Let myself be consumed by revenge, especially after Varian…” he shook his head, “I realize now that Anduin was right, or at least more right than I even with the wisdom which comes with age, and that I’ve made a terrible mistake. A terrible mistake that I’m going to make right. I just wanted to make sure you still had it. That you’d be safe should something happen in my absence!”

Her smile warmed and she drew a small charm in the shape of the Gilnean crest from beneath the collar of her white dress. “Even after we lost almost everything, I never took it off. I’m sure our manor is in much more than a state with all the time that’s passed, but should a matter of concern arise it will still be safer there.” She said. “Don’t worry about me, my love. And tell Tess the same. I’ll be fine. Just get Anduin back home where he belongs. With Sylvanas and his son.”

“I’ll do my best.” Genn released her with some reluctance and stepped away, exiting the room.

Flynn was waiting in the front room, as promised, but Taelia was nowhere to be found. Noticing his expression, the young pirate, former pirate rather-really, he couldn’t have been much older than Anduin himself-shrugged. “Tae went to grab Wonderbird from the stables.”

The Gilnean King raised an eyebrow. “Wonderbird?”

“Galeheart. Her griffon.” He sighed. “I’m going to be stuck dangling from her talons like a salmon but it can’t be helped. We only have so much time and Stormwind would probably prefer not to get the pirate treatment. Not that I can blame him really, had to make a few narrow escapes from that myself.” The clatter of talons on stone from outside. “That’s her now. Shall we?”

“As you said, we don’t have time to spare.” Both sharp and demure. Under normal circumstances the rough around the edges Captain would have made some sort of comment on the matter but now he simply settled for opening the door and trotting out onto the bowing porch.

Taelia perched astride a Proudmoore Sea Scout which regarded them both with dark eyes. “You’re welcome to the backseat, King Greymane. Flynn-.”

“I know. I know. Really I ought to be used to it by now.” After sending the griffon a suspicious side eye and crossing his arms the former pirate added “don’t drop me this time.”

“That only happened once!” Taelia said over Galeheart’s indignation squawk.

“Hopefully it doesn’t happen again.” Genn said it more out of a desire to get things moving than any real sympathy. “Let’s go. Dawn is in just over an hour.”

It was obvious from the familiarity of the griffon’s actions that Flynn hadn’t been lying when he said that Galeheart’s talons were his usual ‘seat’. With the former pirate dangling below them, Boralus fell away and they sailed out over the misty harbor. Crossing over a raised stretch of land to the left of the locked down Harbor Gate, they turned away from the gathered fleet and started up the coast.
“It looks like they’re preparing to blow the Harbor Gate off its hinges.” Taelia said. “Given what I heard of the destruction caused by doing the same to Daelin’s Gate they must be trying to avoid hitting anyone with the debris.”

“Well,” Flynn called up to them “we’re just going to have to tell them to hurry up, won’t we? Because that looks like it’ll take well into the afternoon. Down here, Tae!”

Galeheart swooped down towards what at first glance appeared to be a stony coast but opened into a jagged cave. They landed on the lip of the entrance and dismounted, quickly following Flynn up the uneven rock into the cavern.

“Ah, there she is!” He said, gesturing grandly to a towering ship which had once likely cut an impressive figure against the waves but now looked less than inspiring. With the tattered greying sails and barnacled, cracked hull it wouldn’t have looked terribly out of place among the Forsaken fleet, Genn couldn’t help but think, though without the assurance of dark magic keeping it afloat. “The Siren’s Call. Used to be the Queen of Freehold, up until I met Tae and went legit and my first mate ran off to form the Iron Tide. Now that I think of it, she might still have rum in her galley.”

“Maybe rum that’s been sea pickled.” Taelia said. “I thought you said she was seaworthy, Flynn! We’ll be sunk before we reach them!”

“Sunk? No, Tae. Taking on water, sure, and maybe mostly sunk but we’ll make it.” Flynn tested the integrity of the rope which hung from its side and began climbing towards the decks. “I brought the pocket Tide Sage so we won’t need to bother with the sails.”

The state the decks were in didn’t make Genn any more confident but if risking a sinking ship was necessary to save Anduin than he was willing to do it. Galeheart whistled and eyed their surroundings in much the same way as Taelia was. Flynn picked up a tattered hat and settled it on his head, then trotted over to the other side and hauled up the rusted anchor. “Now, let’s get going.”

The ‘pocket tide sage’ as the reformed pirate had referred to the magical device that he’d brought with him—it was probably best, Genn thought, that he didn’t ask where he’d gotten it—pushed the ship, creaking and groaning all the while, out of the cave and into open water. Turning towards the Harbor Gate and the gathered fleet that waited there.

‘Taking on water’ ultimately wound up being a severe understatement, and by the time they made it within sight of the fleet Galeheart was fluttering overhead and all three of them were precariously balanced atop the yard mast.

Nathanos’ unimpressed face, flanked on either side by Vareesa and Alleria both of whom were attempting to look serious while trying not to laugh, was greeted by Flynn’s perhaps overly chipper “ahoy!”

Genn resisted the urge to face palm.

“Permission to come aboard?” he asked. “If you haven’t noticed, we’ve taken on a bit of water.”

Red eyes glared down at them for long enough that the water began to lap at their feet, then he scoffed and barked something in Gutter Speak. A rope ladder dropped down to them. When Flynn reached for it, Genn pulled him back.

“Let me go first.” He said gruffly. “They won’t be concerned with either of you that way. And I’m certain we’ll be met with the Blightcaller’s arrows on that deck.”
“Let’s just hope he isn’t quick to fire.” Taelia said as Genn began to climb.

They were indeed met with arrows from three sides when they made it up onto the deck; one each from the sisters and from Nathanos.

“Greymane.” The Banshee Queen’s Champion spat. “To what do we owe the…displeasure?”

“I need to speak with her, Blightcaller.” Genn growled, fighting a losing battle to remain polite.

“I’ve made a mistake. This is of dire importance?”

“Dire importance?” Sylvanas’ metallic drawl from behind them drew their attention as the Banshee Queen approached. “And what might that be, mutt? Sniveling for forgiveness at my boot, or perhaps, at my husband’s instead? Or maybe you’re hoping to make a needless petition for the safety of your daughter and the rest of your people who are smarter than you? I’ve little time, Greymane, so make it quick.”

“I’m not here for myself. For my people. I’m here for Anduin’s sake!”

“For Anduin?” she hissed. “Oh, yes. I’m sure that you’ve done much for my husband already. Left him while he mourned the death of his father and struggled amidst the Legion’s invasion to find his way as King. Used your place as ‘adviser’ to manipulate him. Abducted him from his home, his people and his family in a refusal to respect his autonomy, authority and ability by instead suggesting that I’d bewitched him.” Nathanos made a sound similar to one of his hounds and several of the nearby Forsaken hissed. “After all that we went through at the hands of the Lich King, the Forsaken would never take another’s free will! Why are you really here? I’ll only warn you once not to test my patience.”

“I’m here because I made a mistake! I was wrong! And now Anduin’s in danger!” Genn snapped. “I’ll never forgive you for what was done to Gilneas, to my son, but I’d sooner see him with you than dead!”

Sylvanas’ ears pinned back. “What do you mean, dead? Signe failed to extract him but the Admiralty is only holding him Captive. They wouldn’t dare-.”

“They would! And they are! He’s going to be executed at dawn!”

“My Lady! The sun!” All present turned to stare in horror as the horizon, tinted pink with daybreak. Nathanos’ grip strained the bow in his hand. “They’re still trying to remove some of the charges they set; with the number of them attached to the Harbor Gate if we blow it now-.”

“Burn it!” Sylvanas snarled with such force that even the Blightcaller shrank back, a momentary look of shock flashing across his face. “Damn the city! Blow that gate down! Send in everything! I’m not going to wait for Shaw to finish! They won’t-I can’t lose him too!”

Recovering, Nathanos turned to the gathered crew. His voice echoing across the water. “Open fire!”

The concussive sounds of cannon blasts rolled across the waves, eliciting shouts of alarm from the airships above who’d been prior told to maintain holding position. Several rounds of cannon fire thudded against the gate before one collided with the handful of charges they’d set.

The blast of blue and gold was blinding even at distance, chunks of gate sailing high into the air and crashing down onto both the harbor and the city beyond.

“Forward!”
The sails dropped with the crackle of thick fabric, catching the gusts of wind cast by the pelt wearing Shaman at the back of the ship. The massive boat lurched forwards in the water, the waves crashing against the bow, and with the full fleet behind them they sailed into the Harbor.

The cell beneath Proudmoore hold embodied all the doom and despair of a dungeon from a child’s story. It had no windows only a barred door, and there were no furnishings in it what so ever-no metal framed cot; no basin of water; no chamber pot-leading him to suspect that it had been decommissioned as a place of common use once Tol Dagor had established itself as a prison.

The night, for him, had been one of agony. The painkiller he’d taken hadn’t been able to handle the devastating break and had faded not long before. Stress and lack of sleep had left his mana critically low and so the young King had only been able to stop the bleeding from his wound, not seal the flesh-with the bullet still inside-let alone mend the bones beneath. Every time he moved, he could feel the sharp shards tearing into his flesh. Anduin could imagine, far too easily, severed arteries and severe internal bleeding.

The aching of his lamed leg helped convince him that the merciless cold he felt wasn’t a sign of fatal blood loss.

Slouched in the corner with his cheek pressed against one of the frigid damp walls, slimy and foul smelling but better than lying on the floor, Anduin stared blindly into the dark. Awareness blurring into darting shadows and pain until he lost track of time all together. Minutes and hours and days and years expanding outwards into decades and centuries alone in the consuming blackness even though logically he knew that it couldn’t have been more than the handful of hours spanning just after midnight to dawn.

Dawn. When he was sentenced to die.

The artificial eternity had served him well in that it had allowed his mind to cycle through all the myriad of emotions necessary before he could settle into accepting numbness. Not of death, which he’d come to terms with long ago, but of dying. With the last pain he’d have to endure. With a breaking of promises and severing of ties, leaving everything behind.

In some ways he was grateful for the inevitability of the sentence. Dawn. Five hours. Four thousand eight hundred breaths, approximately. Eighteen thousand heart beats. Then a brief time on the noose before all of it was over, provided the drop didn’t break his neck outright. It gave him the time to resign himself to his end. Time that his mother and father, who’s deaths had been so sudden, couldn’t have had before meeting their ends. A thrown stone. A Warlock’s magic.

And now, for him, a rope.

Lirath would group up as he did, lacking a parent, only this time a father rather than a mother. He was too young, now, to remember him. What would he be told? Would he notice the hole in his life his absence left, or would it be filled by someone else who could serve as a father figure? Turalyon? Nathanos, even, though that one was difficult to imagine. Would he resent him, as he briefly had his mother, for not being there?

The clang and screech of hinges reached his ears as the door swung open. The light of the torch seared his eyes and he raised a hand to shield them. A key rattled in the lock. Heavy footsteps thudded up to him and then large hands grabbed his arms. Hauling him upright. Tying his wrists behind his back before dragging him out of the Hold.
Clearly the guards didn’t want to drag him, unable to walk in the state his legs were in, all the way across the city so they threw him roughly across the back of the pack mule that they’d brought there. Anduin lay where he’d been dropped, eyes watching the shift of the size and angle of the cobble stones they walked across, unable to adjust his position.

They crossed bridges and walked down winding streets and, finally, cut through Boralus’ Market District before arriving at the gallows. The heavy shaggy nautical ropes hung from the wooden frame and Anduin could already imagine the sensation of them digging into the soft skin of his throat as the footsteps of the executioner thudded down the stairs. Hands yanking him down from the animal’s back and dragging him back up onto the stage. Forcing him to balance on his lame, but unbroken, leg above the rickety trap door.

Anduin forced himself not to look at the gathered crowd. To scan the faces for Genn or Jaina. Gloved hands slipped the noose over his head and tightened it until the knot rested like a threat against his spine. Another man, well dressed in the expected Kul Tiran style and wearing the crest of the Admiralty, bounded up the stairs and took up position. Unfolding the scroll in his hands and beginning to read off the charges and sentence in a voice that reached over the crowd.

Murder. Damages. Crimes against the Kingdom and Humanity. He only got about halfway down the list before a blinding blue-gold flash went up from the direction of the harbor. The concussive blast and the following aftershocks of massive pieces of wood and stone raining down on the city shaking the earth below them. The crowd screamed, the gallows rocked, and the man with the charges fell into the executioner who in turn toppled over onto the lever. The trap door gave way beneath him and Anduin fell, the tightening rope cutting off his yelp of alarm.

His vision blurred. Instinct making him kick and squirm and strain against the binds on his wrists which in turn made the noose even tighter. Black dots and swirling colors popped before his eyes. Chest burning, the sensation of cold talons closing around him, blood pounded in his temples and his ears. Behind the veil of awareness something was laughing. As everything faded into darkness the wail of a Banshee ripped through the sounds of chaos all around him.

Anduin jerked awake on the ground, his neck rope burned and bruised and his lungs on fire. There were cold hands touching him. Cold lips on his forcing the air her body didn’t need but his starved for back into him. He gasped and shuddered. Reaching up with desperate hands to find her hair and pull her closer. Efforts at revival becoming a ferocious hungry kiss that broke too soon for either of their satisfaction.

The continued sounds of battle thundered around them, muted behind the wooden skirt of the gallows. When he tried to speak all that came out was a croak and a cough.

“Hush.” Her cold hand slid lightly to the back of his neck. An open water bottle resting against his lips. Anduin hadn’t realized how thirsty he was until he started drinking but his bruised and swollen throat rebelled. He coughed again. Drenching himself with water. He could hear her roll her eyes as she pulled the bottle back. “Slowly.”

As badly as he wanted to drain the bottle in a few draughts he forced himself to comply. The cold water soothed his throat enough that he could speak. “Sylvanas.”

“You’re a fool, Anduin, to have sent Signe away. Luckily for you Greymane finally realized he’s acted equally as stupid. He arrived with two supposed friends of yours on a 3/4th sunk pirate ship with news of Proudmoore’s plans.” She said. “If it hadn’t been for him fetching the message, we’d have arrived too late.”
“Genn?” Anduin struggled to focus through a pounding headache. “Two others? You mean Flynn and Taelia?”

“Yes, I believe that was what they said their names were.” There was dismissal in her tone. “Shaw is off dealing with the Mage. Once we’ve finished here, we’ll see to it that Kul Tiras pays dearly for this. Are you injured?”

“Yes. My leg. My good leg. Well it’s not really a ‘good leg’ anymore. Even if I get proper healers, I’m not certain I’ll ever be able to walk again.” He said. “When you say ‘dealing with Jaina’ do you mean arresting her?”

“That’s at his discretion.” Sylvanas sniffed. “But we’ve been away from Stormwind, and Lirath, for long enough. It’s time I took you back-.”

A flash of violet light from the trap door above them had Sylvanas on her feet, bow aimed. She barely had time to register the sight of Jaina, blood dripping from a sizeable cut along her cheek, standing there before she vanished again. This time taking Anduin with her.

“No!” Vaulting back onto the state of the gallows, and then leaping up onto the frame work, the Banshee Queen desperately scanned the city around them and the horizon of the Sound. Catching the third flash of Arcane from the foot of a distant cliff top light house.

“Sylvanas!” Genn flung a Proudmoore guard into a nearby wall and looked up at her, grey fur speckled red. “Where’s Anduin!”

“That bitch took him! Up to that light house!” She hissed. “I’m going after her.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“I don’t need your help, mutt!”

“Anduin does!” His golden eyes held barely contained madness. It was clear he’d follow regardless of her acceptance of aid, and likely cause even more problems in doing so. “You don’t understand. Jaina has every plan to alter his mind! She’s admitted as much! We have to stop her!”

“From the cut on her cheek, Shaw landed at least one hit. I doubt she has much mana left.” That said, a Mage as powerful as her could still prove more than dangerous. Dividing her attention was likely wise. “Very well. Keep up, dog!”

A shrill whistle was all it took to call Geryon to her, the skeletal steed trampling anyone who dared stand in its way, and she leapt down onto his back. With the Worgen on all fours beside her, Sylvanas left Boralus behind and charted a path towards the distant cliff top.
The Anchor's Sea

Everything had happened in such quick succession. The explosion-Azerite based, he suspected, both from the color of the flames and the power of the blast-which had shaken the city to its foundations, likely knocked over more than a few buildings, and toppled the executioner into the gallows’ lever like some kind of morbid Roehl Goldberg machine. Being hung, however briefly, and then revived again. Those few, sweet cutting moments when he’d awoken in her arms and dared think this might all be over. That he might yet see Stormwind again.

And now this.

Of course a Mage as powerful as Jaina Proudmoore wouldn’t need to physically touch him in order to teleport him away along with her to here. Where ever ‘here’ was. It looked to him like little more than an abandoned light house a few miles outside Boralus. Why had Jaina taken him here, well within range of Sylvanas’ reach? Had she been unable to think of anywhere else? Or had she lacked the necessary power?

From the look of her, pale and staggering with blood trickling down along her cheek, the young King was willing to put his money on the latter. He’d never known Mathias Shaw, Spymaster of SI:7, to fail in a mission set to him by the Crown, and knew that Rogues had poisons at their disposal which would target the mana of a foe rather than their body, swiftly rendering even the greatest spell casters’ powerless.

There was something in her eyes that made the hairs along his arms rise; a wild desperation beyond that of a cornered animal. Had he been in a position to do so Anduin would have retreated from the touch of cold fingers against the livid bruise which ringed his throat, but he’d been left too weak from pain and stress and blood loss to manage more than words.

“Why are you doing this, Jaina?”

His voice cracked when he spoke. Hitching slightly towards the end. The tone of someone thoroughly defeated. Who’d given up fighting. Who just wanted everything to come to an end so that he could go home and be with his family again. It seemed to hurt her, if the flinch she gave was any indication, but Jaina didn’t bother responding to his question. Likely having nothing on the matter she could say.

“We’re going to get out of here. Start over. Everything will be fine.” It sounded more like she was trying to convince herself. Anduin stared at her, certain now that she’d gone mad. “Once things have been dealt with, once I’ve recovered, we’ll leave. Go somewhere. Anywhere. Outland, maybe. Alternate Draenor, even, if we have to. You’ll be safe, then. Happy.”

“Happy?” he shook his head. Cheek scrapping against the earth. Anduin inhaled a bit of the dust kicked up by the motion and coughed, the pain in his lungs flaring up again. “I’m happy with my family. With my wife and my son. I love them. I just want to go home, Jaina. Please.”

The Mage just shook her head. “You won’t remember them. You won’t remember anything. I’ll alter your mind so you won’t have to. You’ll be free of them. Free of the burden of being King. Of all the death and fighting you’ve seen and had to go through. You’ll finally get to just be ‘Andy’, like you used to talk about wanting.” She smiled at him, or tried to. The expression was watery and as reassuring as broken glass. “Back when you were a child.”

“When I was a child.” In all his exhaustion the emphasis fell short. She hadn’t been like this when
they’d met in Teldrassil. Nor in Boralus when she’d examined him or even after she’d rescued him in Drustvar. So what had broken her so completely to compel her to act out in such a way that was only describable as insane? Was it being backed into a corner? The knowledge she’d almost gotten him killed? Or maybe he’d just been looking the other way up until then. “I’m a man now. I have responsibilities. To my people, as their King. To my wife and to my son as a husband and a father. I can’t just throw all of that away. I won’t! Besides,” she wouldn’t see reason, not now that such desperation had set in, but he still tried “Sylvanas wouldn’t rest until she found me again. That she brought the whole of the Forsaken, the Alliance and the Horde down on Kul Tiras should be proof enough of that.”

“She won’t be coming after anyone once I’ve taken care of her.” Her voice was stern as she bent to pick him up. Gently, or at least as gently as one could ever hope to, Jaina dragged him across the top of the cliff, through the shadow of the light house, to the edge. Here there stood a wooden gaffing strung in chains attached to a number of massive crab traps. Big enough to fit a man of his size, though not comfortably, as Anduin soon discovered first hand when he was shut inside the nearest one and swung over the side.

The chain was locked, thank the Light, so he didn’t go plummeting into the Sound far below—from the dark blue color of the water it was deep there, especially for being so close to shore—but the young King didn’t have confidence in the structure’s ability to hold his weight for very long. The wind and momentum left the cage, with him inside it, swinging about and the wood which held it, leaving him dangling ten feet out from the edge of the cliff, creaked and groaned, juttering with every motion.

Rogues, and their ability to sneak about and pick locks, were likely why Jaina had chosen this method in particular of keeping him contained but knowing that did nothing to calm him. All he could hear was the whistle of the wind and the hiss of the surf. All he could smell was the salt of ocean brine. All he could think of was his mentor’s warning. ‘Beware the Anchor’s sea’.

The very same sea over which he currently precariously dangled. At the mercy of the wind, the rusted metal chain and the rotted wood to which it was attached. Panic flooded his blood. His heart began to race. As his vision blurred, he could have sworn he saw a massive figure, grey and twisted like an old birch tree, staring up at him from the thin stretch of pale sand at the foot of the cliff. Between one blink and the next, with a last horrible grin which split its awful face in half, the being was gone. The sound of growling from the other side of the cliff drew his attention away. Genn, in Worgen form and arched on all fours, was snarling. Claws splayed against the stone and hackles raised. Yellow eyes set on Jaina and every last one of his teeth on full display. His silvery coat glinted in the strengthening moonlight. Flecks of dried blood dotting his fur like stars.

Anduin’s eyes scanned the scene before him, searching for signs of Sylvanas. Surely, she’d have arrived at around the same time, if not with him. But where was she? There were no trees on the top of that cliff face. No bush or brush. The only cover was the light house. Behind which something moved.

His eyes were drawn to the motion and he saw her. Bow in hand. Crouched in the shadows. Her red eyes found his, swiftly taking in his caged but safe state, and motioned for silence.

“Give up, Jaina! It’s over. We were wrong and enough has been done. It’s time for this to end.” Aggression radiated from Genn’s posture, the Worgen’s gaze continually flickering between Jaina, the King and back again. It was clear he was prepared to tear her apart if need be. “Let Anduin go. It’s time for him to go home.”
Sylvanas raised her weapon slowly, reaching into her quiver to draw an arrow from her back, but
Jaina must have seen it. Or sensed her intent. The former Archmage spun around and flung ice in
her direction, forcing the Banshee Queen to spring aside and fire. The arrow whizzed just passed its
mark. Genn sprang with a howling roar but Jaina lurching out of the leaping Worgen’s path. The
massive form of the beast slammed into the wooden frame with enough force to partially uproot it.
The chain swinging wildly. Almost flinging the cage, with Anduin inside it, against the cliff face.

The young King shouted in terror, clutching madly at the bars, but was helpless to remove himself
from the situation.

On the cliff the battle between the three raged. Arrows and ice peppered the ground. Claw and
scuff marks had been cut into the dust. Genn was huffing and snarling. Sylvanas’ arrows had
almost run out. Jaina, from the look of her, had reached the last dregs of her mana; pale and
sweating, she struggled to keep her feet.

Sylvanas took aim, stood between him and Jaina now, but before she could fire the former
Archmage struck. A massive spike of ice forming and rocketing towards her. On instinct, more
than thought, she sprung out of the way.

An echoing crack rang across the clifftop as the wooden gaffing snapped, plunging into the water
below.

“Anduin!” Genn had only taken two steps in the time it took for Sylvanas to take a running leap
from the edge. Splitting the rocking surface of the Sound like a diving bird. The Worgen followed
her off the ledge, flailing and landing hard. The cold water a shock against his rapidly soaked
through clothing and fur. He’d underestimated the depth and the salt burned his eyes. The frigid
current forcing him back.

Sylvanas was far ahead of him, unhindered by the cold and the dark and the pressure which closed
in all around them, without a need for air. Forced by his burning lungs to abandon the effort, Genn
left the Banshee Queen to continue the last fifteen feet down to where the cage had come to rest.

Still attached to the broken gaffing, the cage had wedged itself on the top of a rock. Anduin’s blue
eyes were wide with panic, hands desperately scrubbling at the unyielding wood and metal which
surrounded him. Face tinted a rapidly darkening red as he struggled to hold his breath for as long as
he could before his body betrayed him. A gasp for air inhaling water instead.

He clutch at his throat and thrashed against the bars before going limp just as Sylvanas reached
the cage. The door was stuck, the badly rusted lock finely jammed in place; refusing to yield no
matter how hard she tugged. Even with the enhanced strength of undeath, tearing the door off its
hinges wasn’t possible for her. Nor was dragging the entire cage, and Anduin with it, back up to
the surface. And with every second that passed he was dying.

Her quiver was empty. There were no nearby stones small enough for her to lift and maneuver.
Sylvanas shifted her grip on the bow in her hands and slammed the butt of the weapon into all the
force that she could muster. Once. Twice. Three times before the door finally released. Throwing it
open, she maneuvered herself in through the small door and back out again, Anduin in her arms.

Pushing off the uneven ocean floor, the Banshee Queen rushed back towards the surface and broke
back into the sunlight. Once back out in the air she expected him to cough and spit up water. To
breathe. But Anduin just lay limp against her, his head lolling back and then into the surf. Sylvanas
quickly shifted him so that his face wasn’t under water, for all the good that it would do. In that
position, his back against her front, she should have been able to feel his heart beat.
Genn, back in Human form but looking no less like a half-drowned mutt, rushed into the surf up to his knees and seized the young King’s legs. Lifting him fully up out of the water and onto the sand, away from the reach of the waves.

“Down. Put him down Greymane!” Sylvanas put Anduin’s front half down so quickly that, between the sudden shift of motion and the wet fabric, his feet slipped from Genn’s grip. The Gilnean King simply stood there, then, uncomprehending or perhaps overwhelmed.

Sylvanas fell heavily to her knees beside Anduin, turning his cheek to the sand and bracing her hands against his chest. Pressing down. Forcing water to spill from his lips, slightly parted and turning blue. She was the Queen of the Forsaken. She knew what death looked like. That this was a pointless waste of time and effort, he couldn’t be brought back, yet still she felt compelled to do it. Clutching at the soaked fabric of his shirt. Breaking ribs in an effort to beat his heart for him. Forcing air into drowned lungs in the futile hope of breathing life back into him as she had when he’d fallen from the gallows. When he’d merely been unconscious.

There was a smear of black against his cheek when she pulled away. It wasn’t until a second droplet, and then a third—both dark as ink—fell against cold skin that she realized what they were. Tears. She was crying.

Anduin was dead.

He was paler, now, than she’d ever seen him. Closed eyelids pearled over familiar blue. Golden hair scattered in the sand as it escaped its bonds, hands palms up to the sky and torn shirt-opened to aid doomed efforts at revival—splayed to either side like feathered wings, giving him the appearance of an angel struck down.

His head fell limp against her shoulder when she pulled him into her arms. Cold lips brushing against her neck. The memory of his warmth, of his laughter, seared against her mind. His scent was buried by sand and salt.

Genn was no longer the only witness to her weakness. Others had joined them. She didn’t know who or how many and she didn’t care. It didn’t matter. Her silent tears strengthened, snowballing out of control until they became wracking sobs. The embarrassment, the desire to hide away behind a familiar mask, lasting only a moment. Let them see. Let them see the truth so that no one, ever again, dared to claim she hadn’t loved him.

For what little that it mattered, they wouldn’t doubt it now.

“I’ll go after Jaina.” Genn’s voice was raw and promised pain. “She won’t get away with this. She won’t get away.”

“You’re quite right, King Greymane. Jaina Proudmoore is, at current, in SI:7 custody.” Mathias’ voice issued from the direction of the cliff. “By the time I caught up with her, after being thrown to the far side of Boralus, she’d run out of mana. All she had to say was ‘I tried to get him out’. The Rogue looked down at her, at them, with an expression of professional somberness that betrayed nothing of what he might have truly felt. “With due respect for your grief, my Lady, I must ask… can Stormwind expect the King’s return?”

‘Return’. A round about means of asking if he’d be raised into Undeath. “I’ve suffered too much at the hands of this curse to be so selfish.” Even if it meant she’d never seen him again. That she’d be dragged into that darkness, once her Val’kyr had run out, alone. “I’ll leave him his peace.”
She only wished she’d told him the real reason for her decision, rather than hiding affection behind an excuse. Maybe then he’d still be alive.

“The House of Nobles will have to be informed so that the process of naming a Regent Lord, to rule in Prince Lirath’s place until he reaches the age of ascension, can begin.” A pause. “And funeral arrangements will have to be made. You’ll wish to handle the transport of King Wrynn’s body personally, I’d assume?”

A threatening glare was answer enough.

“We’ll take the mutt as well.” Nathanos’ voice brokered no argument. He stepped forward, and Genn allowed himself to be led away without a word.

Sylvanas flinched when thin arms wound around her shoulders, Vareesa pulling her older sister against her. Alleria soon knelt beside them both.

“I’m so sorry. I never wanted you to have to go through what I did.” Vareesa’s voice cracked. “What am I going to tell the boys?”

Sylvanas shifted Anduin’s weight in her lap. “What did I ever do to deserve this? To be forced to lose everything time and time again?”

“You haven’t lost everything.” Alleria gripped her sister’s shoulder in an effort at reassurance. “You still have your son. And Anduin’s memory. He loved you, Sylvanas. Death doesn’t change that.”

“Come on.” Delicately, Vareesa attempted to coax her older sister to her feet. With Alleria’s help, she succeeded. “Let’s get back to The Banshee’s Wail. It’s time to head back to Stormwind.”

The walk was long, back around the curve of the shore towards where The Banshee’s Wail had dropped anchor beside a massive Stormwind galleon called The Wind’s Redemption, largely because Sylvanas refused to relinquish her grip on Anduin for long enough to mount Geryon. By the time they reached the boarding plank of the Forsaken ship the sun had passed its highest point in the sky.

A ship of the dead had no need for beds, Vareesa and Alleria had improvised hammocks for their use during their time aboard, and so it was a sturdy table normally used for viewing nautical maps which was given the task of serving as Anduin’s resting place for the duration of the journey. Flanked by two Stormwind Guards the leader of the 7th Legion, Halford Wyrmbane, brought aboard a Stormwind flag to serve as a veil. They saluted their fallen Monarch and, after they disembarked without a word, The Banshee’s Wail drew up anchor.

“Nathanos.” She’d been silent so long that the sound of her voice made both of her sisters jump. “Summon Signe.”

“Of course, My Lady.”

As the Blightcaller moved up a set of stairs towards the upper decks Alleria looked over to where her sister stood beside the table. Her hand resting over where Anduin’s lay beneath the blue and gold flag. “I thought you weren’t going to raise him.”

“I’m not raising him.” Sylvanas didn’t turn her head. “But I need to make certain he made it to the Light. From there, I’m sure Varian will be more than capable of running off anything that attempts to drag him off.”
“You think someone will do something to his spirit?” Vareesa asked. “We didn’t quite manage to fully eradicate the Coven, but-.”

“I’m worried about Gorak Tul himself, not his hapless minions.” Her older sister snapped, turning her head just far enough to glare. “He mentioned Anduin by name. I won’t have my Husband used to power some wicker monster!”

Any reply they might have made was put stop to by Nathanos’ return, the Val’kyr at his side.

“You called for me, Dark Lady?”

“Determine if he is able to be raised. If so, if his soul is with the Light, then leave him be.”

Signe’s head canted to one side. “And if I cannot?”

“Then I’ll have to resort to seeking help from someone I’d rather not be forced to speak to,” Sylvanas said. “Quickly, Signe! If he is in the Drust King’s hands there’s no time to waste!”

She shifted her attention again to the shrouded form and spread her spectral wings. Rising to the ceiling and channeling what almost looked like dark lightning into the body lying inert on the table. For a long moment nothing happened, and then Signe was abruptly thrown into the opposite wall. The Val’kyr crumpled, blue black energy crackling along her form as she struggled to rise.

“The fool’s been taken, then?” Nathanos asked.

“Yes.” Sylvanas did well at hiding the distress in her voice. “But not for long. We’re headed a bit further north than Stormwind. Plans have changed.”

“Further north?” he repeated.

“Yes. Further north.” She snapped. “Inform Captain Tattersail that she’s to set a course for Ice Crown immediately.”
A Sort of Homecoming

He’d never wanted it to end like this, and had doing so made any sort of difference Genn would have paid whatever price necessary to undo the fact that it had.

When Anduin had first presented the idea of ending the war, of marrying Sylvanas Windrunner, he’d jumped to the conclusion that the young King had to have been bewitched. Not because that was the truth, he saw that now, but because he hadn’t wanted to believe it. Hadn’t wanted to see her as anything but a monster; something purely evil which breathed malice and existed for the sake of spreading pain. To acknowledge the fact that she was really a woman in pain due to a curse inflicted on her by a cruel man who had been just such a monster. As a leader desperately searching for a place for her people in a world which didn’t want them. As someone who’d found love and acceptance, at long last, in the arms of another. Because then he’d have to confront the fact that the true monster of the narrative was him, consumed as he’d become by revenge; unable to let go.

Even after learning Anduin had been condemned to hang Genn hadn’t been able to bring himself to see past their history. He’d focused instead on the fact that Anduin needed his aid; had tolerated working with her, and even then only just. When they’d fought, side by side but not together, up on that cliff he’d struggled with the urge to turn on her as well as Jaina and—in spite of the fact that Sylvanas hadn’t once looked at him—he’d feared, every moment, that the next arrow would be aimed at him. Yet that hadn’t happened. Every bit of focus her focus had been on Anduin, and nothing showed that more than the speed at which she’d followed him off the cliff.

Though even that speed hadn’t been enough.

The truth hadn’t hit him until Anduin had been pulled from the surf, limp and pale. Until he’d lain lifeless in the sand, Sylvanas on her knees beside him; she must have known, even more readily than he had, that it was hopeless but she’d still tried, desperately, to revive him. Until he’d watched Sylvanas Windrunner, Dark Lady, Banshee Queen, the Warchief of the Horde, hold her husband’s body close and cry. Real, hurt cries right there in the open for all the gathered crowd to see.

He’d known that the undead retained the ability to shed tears.

It hadn’t been until that moment that the far-reaching damage he was responsible for truly hit home. If he’d simply respected Anduin’s choice, acted rationally, if he’d never gone to Jaina and brought him to Kul Tiras, than Anduin would still be alive and safe in Stormwind. Now, because of him, an entire Faction had lost its benevolent leader; a wife had lost her husband; a son had lost the father he was too young to remember and at who’s feet he should have learned to be King; nephews who’d already been forced by war to live without one parent had lost the only figure in their lives who might have come to fill that gap.

He’d wished, more than anything, that things had turned out different.

When Genn had been placed, for all intents and purposes, under arrest by Nathanos Blightcaller he’d gone quietly. Marched at arrow point to where The Banshee’s Wail had dropped anchor he’d promptly been shoved into a large, comfortable-comparedly-kennel which, from the vexed looks the beasts had been sending him ever since, belonged to his hounds.

From the point at which they’d set sail onwards the Gilnean King sat quietly in his cage.
Though his grasp on time had blurred around the edges Genn was certain that they’d been at sea for more than long enough to have arrived at Stormwind, so why hadn’t they stopped? The air had warmed after leaving Kul Tiras, but the temperature had since plummeted again and now his breath rose before him in silver clouds. The briny tang of the sea replaced with the sharp, cutting scent of ice.

The shadows twitched in his peripheral vision. Genn turned his head in time to catch sight of the Banshee Queen emerging from a staircase leading deeper into the bowels of the ship. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse with disuse. “Where are we?”

The quiet clicking of her heels against the dried-out wood stopped abruptly. Her back was to him, ram rod straight and with the tattered cloak which hung from her shoulders fluttering slightly about her heels. When she spoke, she didn’t look at him. “The North Sea.” Sylvanas said. “We’ll be dropping anchor off the coast of Icecrown soon.”

“Icecrown?” shock bled into his voice. “What are we doing here? What about Anduin-?”

“This is about my husband!” There was a bitter snap to her voice, now, but still she didn’t turn. “Dark forces in Drustvar are meddling with his spirit. I won’t have him used by the ‘Drust King’ Gorak Tul! Now, sit tight in your kennel and behave, Greymane. I’ve business with the Lich King.”

She left him, then, without a moment’s hesitation. Crossing the lower deck and ascending the staircase she came to, stepping out into the open air.

The ragged sails above her fluttered in the brisk glacial wind. Icebergs ranging in size from a horse drawn cart to a full-grown Dragon floated silently on the ocean’s surface around them, reflecting bluish-white in the cloud veiled sun. In the near distance, Icecrown glacier soared upwards from the breakers. A foreboding wall of black stone and jagged ice.

Sylvanas had never thought that she’d return to this place. She hadn’t wanted to. And though here, at the foot of that damned citadel in the heart of the north, was where everything would have come to an end for her had she had her way, she’d have been glad to never see any part of Northrend, let alone Arthas’ former seat of power, again. Yet here they were.

Nathanos joined her at the prow. “We’re well within sight of his eyes, now. He knows we’re here.”

“Good.” She said. “This way, we won’t have to march up to the Citadel and bust down the front door in order to demand an audience. Inform the Captain that she’s to drop anchor here.”

“We’ll wait for them to come to us?”

“We will not go crawling to them.”

Nathanos scanned the icy horizon for himself. “I don’t intend to question your word, my Lady, but…I’m not certain this is a wise choice for us to make. His help won’t come without a high cost to the Forsaken, not with our history. I struggle to see why he’d help us at all.”

“I doubt he would. But Bolvar Fordragon cared a great deal for my husband when he lived, if Anduin’s stories can be believed. If there’s anything of him left, now, he’ll aid us in this.”

“And if there isn’t?”

“It’s a risk we must take.” Sylvanas said. “We have no choice. I faced Gorak Tul in the basement of Waycrest Manor and only barely escaped by bringing it down on his head. Whatever corner of
the Shadow Lands he’s run to, he’ll be stronger there.”

“And so we need the aid of something stronger still.” It was plain he still didn’t like the thought but no further complaints came. “If, as the welcoming party, he sends them?”

It would be just the sort of thing that Darion would elect to do, largely out of spite, if ‘greetings’ were left to the Ebon Blade.

“Then I’ll endure what I have to.” Sylvanas turned away without another glance at the imposing ice bound coast. “I’ll be below deck, when they arrive.”

“What of the mutt?”

“Greymane can languish a few days more before he’s handed over the Stormwind’s court. It won’t kill him.”

With a final nod, Nathanos watched her retreat back across the deck. His red gaze scanned the ship below, landing on Tattersail in a silent demand. It wasn’t long before she’d ascended the stairs to join him at the prow.

“It’ll be about another hour before we reach the shore, Blightcaller.” She informed him as soon as she’d come within earshot. “From there, we’ll begin the process of searching out an accessible landing point.”

“We drop anchor here.” He informed her in a growl. “Dark Lady’s orders. His…associates will come to us.”

The Forsaken woman’s milky eyes reflected a momentary surprise, then she nodded. “Right, then. I’ll give the order. Any idea on how long it’ll take the hunk of ice to send a representative?”

Red eyes turned to the sky again, landing on a pair of dark splotches against the inky clouds. “Not long.”

And it wasn’t. Soon enough the splotches became discernable as a pair of skeletal griffons, each with the armored form of a Death Knight mounted on their backs. As they drew closer still it could be clearly made out who they were.

“Of course,” Lyana drawled from where she leaned against the railing, “it had to be them.”

“Not unexpected,” was his gruff response as he stared towards the main deck. “Come along. Emissaries, regardless of what friction may exist between us, ought to be properly greeted.”

“‘Greeted’.” She echoed, pulling down her bow. “Of course. Our King wouldn’t have us act as anything but proper hosts. It would disrespect his memory to do otherwise.”

She remained at the top of the stairs, bow armed and in hand but not aimed, while Nathanos descended. The two griffons landed on the salt scoured wood with the clatter of boney talons and the pair dismounted, Thassarian first. Then Koltira, glaring.

“Well, we can’t exactly claim this to be a ‘pleasant’ surprise.” Koltira hissed, and then added in Thalassian “where’s the bitch?”

Though it was questionable whether or not he understood exactly what had been said, from his tone and the offended snarls from many around them he could probably guess. “Koltira.” He said. “That isn’t why we’re here.”
“Oh, no. No, it isn’t. We’re here, or at least I’m here, to rub her nose in the ‘I would never fall into the weakness that is love’ puddle she’s made!”

“Mildly, Koltira.” The other Death Knight said. “At least for now. We shouldn’t keep either Darion or the Lich King waiting. Please, Nathanos, where is Sylvanas?”

“Below deck. With the King.” Nathanos said. “She refuses to leave his side for any longer than is necessary.”

“Well then, let’s start this so we can finish it.” Two pairs of lich fire eyes focused on the Blightcaller.

The Dark Ranger Lord sneered before turning towards the stairs. He didn’t look to see if they followed. Their thudding footsteps were answer enough. They descended two flights of stairs, deep into the belly of the ship, stopping outside a closed door. Nathanos pushed it open, announcing their presence with the creak of corroded hinges and a soft “my Lady.”

Her back to them, hood down and tattered cloak hanging limp from her shoulders, the Dark Lady rose to her feet from where she’d knelt beside a covered body. “Leave us, Nathanos.”

“Shall I prepare to disembark, or perhaps inform your sisters to do so in the event you’d rather I remain here to oversee things?”

“You can inform both Alleria and Vareesa that no one will be accompanying me.” The Dark Lady cut off her Champion before he could protest. “I do not require a guard, Blightcaller! As I told my husband.” Though almost imperceptible, the cracks in her voice which shot through the last word didn’t go unnoticed. “Now, leave us!”

Though he was still hesitant, the Blightcaller complied. The sounds of his retreating footsteps cut off by the close of the door. For a long moment silence reigned before Sylvanas spoke again.

“The Ebon Blade has remained strangely silent on the matter of repaired relations between the Alliance and the Horde.” She said. “I’m sure that both of you have much to say.”

“We have our differences, to say the least, but to have you go through a complete reassembling of your views only to lose your reason for doing so is more than punishment enough.”

“Enjoying the sight of your enemies with egg on their face, Thassarian?” the Dark Lady shook her head. “The Blood Elf is rubbing off on you.”

“Thassarian and I have made an agreement to take the time to properly harangue you when we’re not on such a tight time table.” Koltira sniffed. “Though I will say that I hadn’t really believed Wrynn had the patience of a saint, it must have been true for him to have tolerated marrying you!”

“Oh, yes,” The Frost Death Knight said with a long-suffering sigh, “we Humans do indeed put up with a great deal from our Elven partners.”

Koltira immediately turned to glare at him. “I thought you were on my side!”

“Something tells me that you’ll be paying for that later.” Sylvanas said it in such a way that left her wish for the possibility to still find herself in that position clear, if unvoiced.

“I’m sure I will be.” He agreed. “Darion wants to speak with you briefly before you continue to the audience you’ve traveled so far for. The Lich King has allowed it, but his patience can only wear so thin before he begins to become…insistent.”
“Very well.” It was with an almost physical difficulty that the Banshee Queen pulled herself away from the repurposed table and followed them back up onto the decks.

Neither of her sisters attempted to approach them, though from the way both Vareesa and Alleria looked on in worry it was clear neither were particularly happy with having to stay behind. Mounting her bat, Sylvanas followed Thassarian and Koltira on their skeletal griffons up into the air and towards the looming form of Acherus.

Pushing away thoughts of Naxxramas and Kel’thuzad, she dismounted on the necropolis’ lower deck and allowed herself to be escorted down to where the Highlord of the Ebon Blade and now Fourth Horseman stood before a table strewn with maps. The Death Knight’s belonging to the order hadn’t been doing much, it seemed, as said maps still bore signs of Legion invasion points.

Darion himself hadn’t changed much either, at least outwardly, since she’d last seen him on the day of Arthas’ fall.

“Thank you, Thassarian. Koltira.” He said. “This shouldn’t take more than a few minutes.”

“We’ll be on the balcony where we left our mounts.” Koltira said, rather flippantly. “Don’t get lost.”

As the pair walked off Sylvanas turned to address him. “I thought you were demoted.”

“The Death Lord is out, at current. Something about sacking some island nation or another under the mantle of a Champion of the Alliance.” He said. “Why are you here?”

“That should be obvious, Mograine.”

“What business do you have with Bolvar Fordragon?”

“Business that’s his business, not yours.”

“I disagree, Warchief. The Ebon Blade are the jailors of the Jailor of the Damned. Keeping the Scourge in line is a task which falls to us, in the wake of having all that we once were stolen from us by Arthas.” He said. “We won’t tolerate you meddling in that. You’ve already ripped away the Val’kyr, Windrunner. What are you here for this time? The Flesh Giants? The San’layn? You’ve enough monsters at your disposal as it is.”

“I’m not here for monsters, Mograine. I’m here for help.” Sylvanas said. “My husband deserved to live, but if he can’t live than he should have a peaceful rest. A beast which calls itself Gorak Tul seeks to interfere with that, and though I’m at loath to admit it I’m not strong enough to face him alone.”

“So you’re solution was to turn to him?”

“Anduin was a surrogate son to him.” She snapped. “If there’s anything left of the Paladin, he’ll help. Surely.”

“Oh, he’ll help.” The horseman said gravely. “But it won’t come for free. I hope you realize that.”

“I’m aware, Mograine. I’ll pay what I must.” Sylvanas said. “Now, are you finished ‘Highlord’ or is there something else you’d like to lecture someone of higher standing than you on?”

The Death Knight failed to rise to her comment. “If you really believe that you’ll somehow come out of this ‘deal’ on the better end then by all means return to where you left your bat and head over
to the citadel. Though I’ll warn you,” he said, “the only reason the Lich King hasn’t reasserted his control over you and your Forsaken is because he hasn’t felt a need to. Keep that in mind.”

Sylvanas didn’t dignify his parting comment with a response. Neither of the other Death Knights had anything to say to her, and left her in the antechamber of the citadel.

The damage done by the forces of the Ashen Verdict had only seen shoddy repairs. Drifts of snow had formed along ice coated walls. The yawning hall had once teemed with throngs of the undead but now stood empty aside from scattered bone shards and the frozen carcass of a Nerubian. Her footsteps echoed in the frigid stillness as she advances up the Saronite ramps and into the upper spire. Moving immediately to the central teleporter.

It must have been left active in the wake of Arthas’ defeat, as it activated immediately. Between one blink and the next Sylvanas found herself standing on the windswept pinnacle of Icecrown Citadel at the foot of the stairs which lead up to the Frozen Throne.

Which, for the first time she’d seen it, was actually frozen. The thick ice was dark and foggy. Two, flickering pinpricks of orange light sparked to life deep within it, and an echoing voice sounded in her head.

I know why you are here, Sylvanas. And I know where he’s been taken. A small corner of the Shadow Lands known as ‘Thros’. The Lich King said. He seeks to twist Anduin’s soul with Drust magic and bind it to his body; to use him as a weapon first against Kul Tiras and then the wider world beyond. You cannot face Gorak Tul alone, and so you’ve come to me for help.

“Anduin never spoke anything but well of you. Cared for you like a second father.”

And you believed that would sway my hand?

“Was I wrong, Lich King?”

In the silence which hung between them, the wind howled. You are not. He said. A gateway to Thros is embedded in the roots of the great white tree at the center of the Crimson Forest. I will meet you on the other side.

“A projection of you?”

To leave the Frozen Throne is to unleash the Scourge. I made this sacrifice for the sake of containing them. Those flame orange eyes seemed to burn brighter for a moment. Even a projection, however, will be more than strong enough to contend with this ‘Drust’.

That was one hurdle out of the way. “Your price?”

Will be extracted when the opportunity presents itself. Those ember eyes flickered out, the presence of the Lich King retreating from her mind. For all intents and purposes, Sylvanas found herself alone atop the Citadel.

The Banshee Queen continued to stand there for a few moments more, staring at the frozen body feigning at being inert, before retreating back to the teleporter. Her bat had taken to hanging from the high vaulted ceiling above and had to be called down to her.

The Valley of Fallen Heroes, once overflowing with scores of undead and the Necromancers which had raised them, now stood empty. The uneven ice passed silently below, and then fell away
before the ocean.

It became evident immediately from the pall of blue-black Drust magic over The Banshee’s Wail that something was horribly wrong.

Cursing, Sylvanas forced her mount lower and drew her bow from her back. Circling the unfurled masts and observing the decks below. The decks swarmed with hovering antlered constructs and geist-like monsters made of wood. Her Dark Rangers and the ship’s crew were rushing about in an effort to rebuff them. Nathanos was perched on one of the lower masts, picking off foes with arrows as his hounds chased a number of the monsters around, snapping and snarling. The most surprising sight, aside from the presence of the Drust King’s minions, was Genn Greymane mercilessly beating anything he could get his claws on into twisted splinters.

His pointed ears perked up when she landed nearby and he turned towards her before she could demand to know who had released him. “They took him!” He howled. “Anduin! They took his body! They took him!”

No! What the Lich King had said all came rushing back. That Gorak Tul, as the Drust himself had admitted, intended to use Anduin as a weapon. That he planned to chain his soul to his body using the same magics which bound loose souls to the constructs they’d seen. With his spirit alone he could twist him but couldn’t bind him. But now, with his body as well...they needed to get back to Drustvar immediately! “Get theses beasts off this ship! We can’t pull up anchor until they’ve been rebuffed and we must return to Kul Tiras immediately!”

“We may not have to.” Vareesa shot down another wicker beast as she bounded up to them, Alleria not far behind. “I have a hearthstone on me. It’s set to Dalaran. One of the Mages there should be able to send us to Kul Tiras.”

Nathanos dropped back onto the deck with a muted thud. “The imbecile was taken back to Drustvar, I’d assume?”

“No. He was taken to Gorak Tul’s realm, Thros.” Sylvanas said. “But the entrance to it is in the Crimson Forest, so we shall be heading to Drustvar. The hearth stone, Little Moon?”

Vareesa reached into the bag at her side and pulled the white and blue stone out. “Alleria and I are coming, of course, but the stone can take five.”

“It’s safe to assume Nathanos is the fourth.” Alleria said. “As for the fifth...”

“I’m coming with you!” Genn snarled, making all three elves jump and turn to stare balefully at him, as did Nathanos. The Worgen’s ears pinned back but he gave no other outward sign of concern at finding himself the center of attention. “I wanted to protect him but got him killed instead. Whatever monster sent these things after you, that now has him, is going to twist him. Hurt him more. Please.” His golden eyes dropped to the deck. “I have to make this right. Or at least as right as I can.”

For a long moment the silent staring continued, Nathanos making his feelings known with a bitter sneer, before Sylvanas finally spoke. Much to all of their surprise. “Very well, Greymane. Since you’ve broken out of your cage you may as well make yourself of use.” Red eyes returned to her sister. “The stone, Vereesa.”

The youngest Windrunner sister held out the hand in which she held the stone. All four of the others reached out to place a hand over it, Genn with an almost imperceptible hesitation, and the small party disappeared in a flash of Arcane light.
It was likely that the citizens of Dalaran, the city in question being a place of training for Mages, had seen quite a few strange things over the years but the sight of their party-mounted or, in Genn’s case, on all fours-rampaging out of the Silver Covenant Sanctuary and down the street had to be the strangest one in quite a while. The Guardian Mages on duty quite clearly had no idea how to react to the sight of them baring down on the Violet Citadel and the only apology they received was Nathanos’ snarled “imbeciles! Out of our way!”

If they had anything to say in response none of them heard it, as they were all too busy barreling forward to care. The Council of Six appeared, at the time, to have been in the middle of a meeting as all of them were present. Kalecgos’ yellow eyes widened in surprise, Modera jumped and Khadgar opened his mouth to speak but didn’t get the chance to before Sylvanas cut him off.

“We require a portal to Drustvar, in Kul Tiras, immediately!” Sylvanas snapped, her glowing red eyes running him through. “You don’t require an explanation as to why, Arch Mage, though perhaps I’ll consider giving you one regardless once this matter has been resolved.”

“Please, Khadgar.” Vareesa said. “The King’s body has been taken for use in a Necromantic ritual. We can’t let the monster that has his go through with its plans.”

The mention of Necromancy was enough to send murmurs of discontent through the gathered Council like a dread wind. “I think it may be best that we break for the time being; finish discussing the Alliance’s request to house former Archmage Proudmoore in the Violet Hold once we’ve sent the Dark Lady and her party on their way.” The Dragon said after a long moment’s silence. “From the sound of it their situation is serious.”

“I think you’re right, Kalec.” If the sight of Genn and Sylvanas standing in such close proximity without attempting to kill each other came as a surprise Khadgar didn’t show it. “If the five of you could follow me into the adjoining room, I can open that portal for you.”

“Thank you.” Alleria said, Sylvanas and Genn both lunging for the indicated door and Nathanos scrambling after with Vareesa close behind.

“Of course.” The outwardly aged Archmage offered a sad smile as they started towards the portal room at a more sedate pace. “I don’t think any of us expected…Anduin didn’t deserve to have things end this way. Nor did your sister. I suppose the only thing that we can hope for now is that the peace he brokered and died for will remain in place.”

“Sylvanas isn’t going to restart the fighting, Khadgar.” Alleria said. “They were only together a short time but the impact that he left on her was profound. I’m not certain that she even has it in her to be spiteful anymore. And she has their son to think of.”

“Yes, the Prince.” He said. “A tragedy he’ll have to live his life without his father.”
‘A tragedy’ for both of them. And an understatement to an extreme degree.

Four sets of eyes, two red one gold and one blue, stared at them as they stepped into the room. All, to varying degrees, demanding the same thing.

With a wave of his hand Khadgar summoned a gleaming portal into existence before their eyes. The red topped trees of Drustvar clearly visible on the other side.

Once again vying for first position both Sylvanas and Genn hurled themselves through the arcane opening, the Blightcaller pausing long enough to grumble under his breath before following. Vareesa waited for her older sister to join her before stepping through herself.

Both Sylvanas and the Gilnean King had seemingly vanished, leaving the pair of High Elves to fend for themselves beneath Nathanos’ red gaze.

“The Dark Lady and the flea ridden mongrel have gone ahead.” He informed them gruffly, turning to walk away. The implied message that they were expected to follow was painfully clear.

The two sisters hurried to catch up and were within sight of the rest of their party a handful of minutes later.

“Fordragon claimed that the entrance to Thros could be found under the roots of the ‘Great Tree’.” Sylvanas didn’t slow her pace or glance back at any of them as she spoke. “I left command of eliminating the Heartsbane in the area in your hands, Nathanos. I take it you know of this tree?”

The Blightcaller nodded. “I do.”

“They lead the way, my Champion.”

They made a sharp turn to the Northwest, up around the base of the cliff atop which Arom’s Stand was perched and passed into the tree line of the Crimson Forest.

“Watch yourselves.” Alleria’s green eyes scanned the surrounding trees but failed to pick up anything through the gloom. An arrow knocked on the string of her bow. Behind her, Genn was growling softly; the low, deep throated growl of an on-edge dog.

The twisted scenery of gnarled trees and crumbled ruins, likely Drust in origin, was interrupted only by the occasional fallen witch or destroyed construct. A few effigies lingered, silent and inert, and a handful of fetishes hung from the talon like branches overhead; the staring sockets of the skulls adorning them still glowed with the blue-black hue of the Drust magic.

At the center of clearing rose a massive tree twisted and gnarled and as pale as the belly of a dead fish. The dim glow of yet more dark magic pulsed from beneath it, and a hole led down between its roots.

“That looks like the ‘great tree’ you said he mentioned.” Vareesa said, eyeing the dark opening with bald trepidation as they approached. “This feels like we’re walking into a snake’s den.”

Without warning Nathanos whirled around, the arrow he released felling the wicker creature which had attempted to leap out at them from the dark. A horrible chittering clamor rang out around them and more figures moved in the darkness, closing in. “Though the snake seems to be lurking around outside.” Knocking another arrow, he fired again, then swung the heavy arm of his bow into a third which attempted to pounce. The blow landing with the crunch of breaking wood. “Go, my Lady!”

“He’s right, Sylvanas!” Alleria said, knocking an arrow at her own. “Vareesa and I will help the
“Blightcaller hold these fiends back. Stop Gorak Tul!”

With a last glance at the Champion and her last remaining family Sylvanas turned and bolted for the opening at the base of the tree. “Quickly, Greymane! Make yourself useful!”

To the Gilnean King’s credit he was quick to follow her, bounding down the uneven staircase built beneath the tree and into the chamber which housed a pool of dark water not to dissimilar to what she’d seen below Waycrest manor. With only a brief hesitation, just long enough to knock another arrow, Sylvanas stepped through.

A shock of cold and a dizzying inversion of her vision roared up immediately to overcome her senses. When her sight cleared, she was back in the clearing, the edges of everything around her hazed and the horizon-barely visible through the dark trees, was distorted. Genn appeared beside her, similarly stunned, and leapt almost a foot in the air upon recovering and noticing the third member of their party.

An attempt had been made at reclaiming his former appearance through illusion, all be it a poor one, and the result was in some ways ghastlier than if he’d simply appeared as the charcoaled mass the Red Flight’s fire had reduced him to. The once Paladin’s eyes fluoresced a hellish orange and his skin, beneath the Stormwind plate, was latticed through the smoldering veins of flowing magma.

“Congratulations, Fordragon, you’ve traumatized the dog.”

“I see he hasn’t quite changed you enough to resist a sharp-tongued quip when the chance presents itself, ‘Dark Lady’.”

Sylvanas felt her lip curl upwards into a vicious sneer “you’re lucky, ‘Lich King’, that we’ve need of your help or I’d be much less tolerant of such little comments!”

The fallen Paladin simply turned his back on her and began to walk away. Greymane, Sylvanas had the sneaking suspicion, would have gotten along with the bastard quite well under different circumstances. “The ‘Drust King’ is almost finished with the ritual and Anduin is growing weak. We don’t have much longer before his ability to resist Gorak Tul’s authority gives out.”

“Then what are we standing here talking for!” The Worgen snarled, his golden eyes flashing. “We have to save him! Rip that monstrosity limb from limb if need be!”

“It’s not so simple. He’s warded the area and in order to bring it down we’ll have to seek out and destroy three guardians.” Those ember eyes cut through them both. “Guardians which take the form of his greatest demons.”

What sort of horrific place was this, if that were truly the case? And what manner of horrors would they have to face? Had their positions been switched, just one of those supposed ‘guardians’ would be an entire army of Scourge!

Did they even stand a chance of making it in time?

“I take it you’ve at least some idea what we’ll be facing?” Sylvanas snapped to hide her concern.

The jagged nettles growing in thick clumps across the ground crunched beneath his feet as he walked. “I hope you came prepared to fight a Dragon, Windrunner.”

Because a standoff with an overgrown lizard capable of breathing fire, even if it was only illusionary, was exactly what they needed to be bothered with right now.
“I came prepared to fight whatever I have to.” She snapped, bow poised at the ready. “With any luck the mongrel can say the same.”

A disinterested grunt came in reply.

This was the man that Anduin, her sunny overly trusting optimistic and dearly loved husband, had looked up to as a child? The same man he’d viewed as a second father?

The Frozen Throne must have truly changed him.

Briefly, before she shoved the thought viciously away, Sylvanas wondered if this was how she appeared now to those remaining few who’d known her in life.

Thros, even more so than the Drustvar of the real world, was truly a dismal place. Though not as blindingly dark as whatever hellish corner of the Shadow Realm she’d ended up in after throwing herself from the top of Ice Crown Citadel but it reeked of horror and suffering all the same.

Her ears perked up at the soft sound of sniffling from not far ahead, the sound instantly recognizable as that of a child trying desperately to keep concealed the fact that they were crying. Genn paused not far behind her, his hackles rising, but before he could speak a harsh female voice slashed the air like a brutal lash.

“You stupid boy! You’re a disgrace to your family name and a stain upon this Kingdom! You’ll never amount to anything in your life, nor will Stormwind amount to anything with you as its King!”

Rage, unbidden, boiled up inside her and Sylvanas sped the pace at which she was approaching the rise, passing Bolvar by a number of strides who simply watched her go in silence. How dare this woman, whoever the hell she was, speak to her Husband in such a way. Say such untrue things! When she got a hold of her!

“Quit your sniffling, you wretch! Your father may have been a worthless lout but at least he had enough of a semblance of a brain to act like a man!” She’d crested the rise now and glared down at the scene before her: an unfamiliar woman tall and raven haired and dressed in the fine clothes of a noble, towered over a cowering boy with ferocity on her face and derision in her posture. She grabbed his chin harshly, cutting his jawline with talon like nails, and forcing wide blue eyes up to meet her. “A pity that he’s gone now, poor thing. And that Paladin, the ‘Regent Lord’ isn’t much use either. It’s lucky that I’m here to ensure that things get done, isn’t it King Wrynn?”

When Anduin attempted to pull away the woman slapped him, the sound masking the twang of her bowstring. The arrow flew just shy of hitting the woman, clipping her shoulder and prompting her to spin around.

The red eyes gave what the supposed noble really was immediately. “Interruptions aren’t polite, Elf!” The Dragoness spat, features twisting into a snarl. “The brats no concern of yours!”

“I beg to differ, Black.” She snarled, taking aim again. “I don’t appreciate it when I catch my valuables being mishandled! Demon of his past or not I won’t allow you to stand in the way of saving him!”

The beast lunged before she could fire, human form replaced in a puff of smoke by hard scale and mighty claws. The Brood Mother of the Black Dragonflight was a mass of violet hide sharp horns and flaring fins; her snubbed fang-lined muzzle glowed orange with heat and Sylvanas leapt clear of the following pillar of fire just in time to avoid being incinerated. Genn digging in his feet to
skid to a stop just short of barreling into it, changing directions and leaping onto the Dragon’s flank. A sweep of its powerful tail sent him flying with the ease of shrugging off a fly.

“We don’t have time to spare here.” The Lich King’s warped voice reached her ears even over the monster’s furious roar. “We have to work together and bring her down quickly.”

“I don’t need your lecturing, Fordragon.” She spat. “I can down this beast in a single shot provided Greymane cooperates!”

Narrowly avoiding the beast’s attempt to crush him the aged Worgen turned his head. “Just tell me what I need to do.” He said. “For Anduin.”

“Heart of the Beast. I’ll hold her attention while I get a good vantage point and take aim.” Casting around for just such a vantage point as she spoke Sylanas’ gaze landed on a tree which appeared sturdy enough to support her weight. “I’ll be able to pierce her hide if I charge the shot up for long enough. From there, the inevitable demise of taking a poisoned arrow to the heart will do the rest.”

Sylvanas expected Genn to protest or at least to hesitate at being asked to trust she wouldn’t simply allow Illusion Onyxia to eat him but much to her surprise the Worgen simply said “take that shot quickly! We don’t have time to waste!”

He bounded forward towards the beast on all fours, hackles raised and fangs bared. Compared to the Dragon, both in size and ferocity, Genn appeared about as threatening as an infuriated chihuahua but the Banshee Queen didn’t have time to contemplate the matter. Bolting across the short stretch of open ground, Sylanas leapt as high as she was able. Catching hold of the lowest branch of the tree and hauling herself up onto it. Pulling her bow down from her back and an arrow from her quiver, the Dark Lady turned back and surveyed the battle field she’d left behind.

The illusion magic being used by both Gorak Tul and the current Lich King were formidable indeed, if the heavy blows of talon on sword were anything to judge by. Genn was left to dart in and out and snap at the Dragon’s heels, trying desperately to avoid being crushed by its feet or sent flying again by its lashing tail. Illusion Onyxia spat another gout of fire, the blinding orange splitting apart against Bolvar’s raised shield but the force pushed the former Paladin back. Rearing up to batter him with sweeping wings, Illusion Onyxia roared in pain instead as the Worgen finally succeeded in tearing off scales and sank his teeth into her ankle.

The beast spun around and Sylanas took only the briefest moment to line up the shot. A black arrow pierced clear through the Dragon’s body and the illusionary monster exploded into shards of dark magic.

She was out of the tree and back across the clearing a moment later. Trotting to a stop a handful of paces away from the sniffling form. The child, clearly traumatized, had curled up into a ball under and overgrown bush. His face buried in his knees. A bit older, and clutching onto a destroyed compass, the sight would be a mirror image of how she’d found him that night on the Exodar.

“Stay back from it.”

But she ignored his warning and took another step forward towards the terrified boy. Hesitating briefly and then reaching towards him. “Anduin.”

He lunged at her with a snarling screech, Bolvar dragging her back by the tail of her cloak and splitting the little beast in half with a swipe of his sword. Two halves of the disguised wicker monster fell to the grass with a thud.
“do not trust anything you see here. Either of you.” Both Sylvanas and Genn were too busy staring at the decimated form to respond. “We still have two more to go.”

The found the next anchor not long after; a flat expanse of land with no cover seemed to have been modeled into a twisted sort of green, complete with the bent forms of broken training dummies and scattered targets. At its center stood two figures, Anduin—slightly older than the former illusion but still almost waifishly thin—had fallen to all fours in exhaustion, a sword much too large for him lying on the grass before him at the feet of his opponent. Varian Wrynn appeared little different than how Sylvanas remembered him: a towering bulwark of a man clad in fur and plate, clutching Shalamayne in one massive fist, but the savage ferocity on his scarred face wasn’t something the real man would ever had directed towards his son.

“Get up.” He growled, mercilessly glaring down at the fallen boy. “Don’t tell me you’re so weak as to be done already, boy.”

“Father,” Anduin’s voice sounded heartbreaking small and very thin, as if his lungs had been wounded in the training-beating, more alike—that he’d already endured. When he raised his head, his face was bruised and bloody from his split lip. “Please. I’m tired. It hurts.”

“It wouldn’t ‘hurt’ if you weren’t worthless with a blade!” The illusionary King snapped. “Get up!”

Clearly in pain and with very little strength left the boy none the less struggled to his feet. His knees almost buckling moments later. Raising the poorly weighted blade only to have it knocked from his hands a moment later with savage ease. The blow leaving him spread eagled on the ground.

Illusion Varian snarled, lips pulling back into a disgusted sneer, but before he could say anything Genn leapt at him with a howl. Colliding with the other man broadside and knocking him to the leaf strewn ground, his words almost lost amid the howls and snarls ripping out of him. “The real Varian Wrynn would never have treated his son like this! Show yourself you monster!”

“Greymane!” Sylvanas drew down on the Warrior as he heaved the Worgen off of him with impressive ease before rolling up onto all fours, eyes flashing gold as they fell on his opponents. She fired before he could lunge at the Worgen. Her arrow glancing off one pauldron with an echoing ping and redirecting his attention onto her.

Having faced the real Varian before on a number of occasions, both in full hostility and in what almost edged into taunting fun, Sylvanas was fully prepared for the bull charge the Warrior directed at her and leapt high over his head. Planting her feet on his shoulders and vaulting off his back. Firing again once she’d landed. The arrow wedging in the fur ruff around his neck.

Chains of ice sprung up from the ground as he turned, wrapping around his form and rooting him on the spot. Unable to free himself Illusion Varian could only snarl and tug worthlessly against the restraints.

Or so Sylvanas thought, until the thing behind the illusion dropped its false form and the constraints which apparently came with it.

It was much larger and bulkier than the little, geist like creatures Sylvanas had seen before. A wall of twisted wood and dark magic, its gnarled face horribly misshapen and its limbs like warped trunks. It swung at her and Sylvanas was forced again to leap away. Backwards this time. Putting enough distance between them to take free aim at the second disguised monster before it came at her again.
Genn landed on its back a moment later. Attacking the gnarled wood with claws and teeth to very little effect. The beast groaned and attempted to reach around and grab him and another of her arrows lodging in its side.

Damn it all, dealing with things made of wood instead of flesh was painfully difficult!

She needed fire.

Keeping one eye on the wooden hulk Sylvanas plunged a hand into the bag at her side. Sifting through its contents until she finally came upon what she was looking for; the combustible fuel used for making fire traps. Something which she hadn’t made use of years and the ingredients to which she still carried only out of habit.

“Down, mutt, unless you want your fur singed off!” Sylvanas didn’t give Genn much time to react before she lobbed the vial of oil. The glass shattering against the hardened wood, the fuel inside setting alight the moment it made contact with the air. The wooden monster roared and flailed, but the oil it had been drenched in and the caustic sap continued within its twisted body conspiring together to reduce it to ash.

The look the Worgen sent her was one of reproach, but he couldn’t really complain she hadn’t warned him and as such didn’t comment. Though it was incredibly difficult to tell, the Lich King seemed amused.

“One more to go, now, before we can put a stop to Gorak Tul’s plan.” Sylvanas pulled down her quiver to take stock of her remaining ammunition before returning it to her back. “Let’s make this quick!”

They continued onward through the trees for what felt like a small eternity before at last arriving at the final anchor.

All three pulled up short.

“Is that…Stormwind’s cathedral?” Genn’s tone was one of concern, and if what awaited them was what Sylvanas expected she couldn’t blame him.

“It would seem to be.” She said, wrestling with images of wedding flowers and the young King in red which threatened to overwhelm her. “And the last ‘guardian’, whatever form it may have taken, seems to be hiding inside so there’s no point in standing around out here.”

With a few long strides Sylvanas was standing at the Cathedral’s wooden doors, tall and heavy and overgrown with thorny vines. Bolvar wasn’t far behind. Genn hesitated again before following.

The doors creaked loudly as they were pushed open and the dark figure stood before the altar turned to face them. Sylvanas scanned the interior of the church in search of foes but all she saw was Anduin, looking no younger than the day she’d married him and with his eyes aflame with Shadow.

“En’othk uulg’shuul. Mh’za uulwi skshgn kar.” The Shath’yar burned her ears, the warping of his warm voice making the indecipherable words all the more terrifying. They’d faced the manifestations of his doubts in himself in the form of the Dragoness which had held him hostage as a child and of his doubts in himself in the form of inadequacy in the eyes of his father and now the final demon which remained was the only one of the three which had merit in truth.

Anduin as he’d be fallen from the Light: A Priest of the Void.
“Anduin?” Hesitance was written in every facet of the Worgen’s voice and posture but none of the same was in their opponent and it was only narrowly that Genn avoided the Shadow Crash the imposter aimed at him. The impact leaving a small crater in the stone floor.

The Shadow Priest turned his attention onto her then as she raised her bow. The Shadow Word he spoke one she only barely had enough time to recognize before the agonizing pain began wracking through her body. Undeath deadened the sensation somewhat but the pain was still severe enough to throw off her aim. The arrow colliding with his shoulder and drawing a snarled hiss.

His attention was again diverted to Bolvar as the former Paladin closed in. The focused beam of Void energy aimed at him having little affect on the Lich King’s projected image.

For the most part recovered, though still with aftershocks of pain shooting through her, Sylvanas made eye contact with Genn and both moved forward.

The Shadow Priest caught on to what they were planning however and broke the spell he’d been channeling. Switching instead to a volley of chaotic shadowy bolts which crashed down all around them. “Xith wgah! Zuq wgah qam n’lyeth!”

The whizzing rain of Void Magic forced both of them backwards but the Lich King barreled onward. Making it into melee range and forcing the Priest to throw up a blinding shield.

Snarling, Anduin retreated. Glaring at Bolvar with those violet eyes all the while. “Bal’qwari og shadar!” The Shadow Priest snarled, dark energy beginning to coalesce around him and his form rising off the ground. “Shur’nab tulall N’zoth!”

Flesh split. Bones cracked. Before her eyes Anduin’s familiar form twisted into something truly nightmarish. Sylvanas had heard Champions of the Horde who’d face the Twilight’s Hammer describe the Faceless Ones before but she’d never seen one herself before now.

With a piercing shriek the misshapen beast charged them. Swinging one club like tentacled arm in Bolvar’s direction and seizing hold of the projection in a crushing grip. The sword the former Paladin held didn’t have enough strength of leverage at that angle to pierce the monster’s hide. Nor, it seemed, did her arrows.

Correcting her aim, Sylvanas leveled her next arrow at the aberration’s face and fired. The arrow sinking to the fletching into one of its small yellow eyes.

The thing hurled Bolvar across the room and recoiled with a wailing shriek. Its wild thrashing leaving any efforts to fire again doomed to failure.

“Go for its eyes, Greymane!” She said. “I can’t hit something that’s flopping about like that!”

To the Worgen’s credit he bounded forward towards the hell beast, something she herself wasn’t particularly keen on doing. As the Faceless’ tentacled limb swung around again Genn pounced. Sinking his claws into the monstrosity’s scaled skin and clambering up onto its shoulders. Reaching around as best as he was able to get at its face. Black fluid welled up over its dark hide as he ripped and tore at everything that he could reach. Finally seizing the arrow and pushing it in as far as it would go.

With a thud that shook the twisted cathedral to its rafters the Faceless One collapsed.

“That’s three.” Ichor matted down his fur, stark against his silvered pelt. “It’s time to put a stop to Gorak Tul!”
“What awaits us won’t be easy.” Having dug himself out of the rubble which had fallen atop where he’d landed, the former Paladin retrieved his blade. “This was simple, comparatively. And it’s possible we’re already too late.”

“No!” Sylvanas leveled him in a piercing glare. “Don’t suggest such stupid things! You know his will as well as I do, having had a hand in raising him! Anduin would never allow himself to be made into such a monster!”

“Even the strongest will has limit, Sylvanas.” There was an insinuation in that phrase which she really didn’t like. “And his was worn down considerably before his death in Tirigarde. His ability to resist is not what it might otherwise have been and the Drust King will not be satisfied until he submits.”

“And with every moment we stand here discussing this that ‘ability’ may be running out!” Sylvanas snapped turning back to the doors. “If we absolutely must speak of such things we’ll do so on the way.”

Though he had no comment on the matter, or perhaps didn’t want to be caught in the potential crossfire between the two powerful undead, Genn seemed to agree with her as he skirted around the Lich King and exited the chapel doors.

“It isn’t far from here.” He said, falling in behind her as well. “Prepare yourselves. If he’s succeeded in breaking him already, we won’t just be fighting Gorak Tul but Anduin as well.”

Light help them if that was true. Fighting the illusions, the wicker beasts which projected a semblance of his form, hadn’t been terribly difficult but would that really be the case if she found herself facing him again. Knowing it was truly him, and not an illusion wearing his face. And if he’d been raised, ripped from his rest shattered and chaired to a body the tie, to which had already been cut, could she justify to herself the risk that felling him would send him into the same horrific darkness that she herself was doomed to?

She’d simply have to believe that his faith in the Light was strong enough to save him. Force herself to spare him a tortured existence as one of the undead with a swift second death at the point of her arrows. He deserved the rest that she herself had been denied and damn Gorak Tul for attempting to infringe on that.

They didn’t have to travel far from the church before stepping into a clearing at the center of the forest, looking little different from the one at the center of which the Great Tree had grown. Lying at the center of a necromantic circle, brambles coiled about his legs so tightly that the thorns studding their length bit into his ashen flesh, was Anduin’s body. Gorak Tul loomed over him, his struggling spirit trapped in the unforgiving grip of one of his massive taloned hands.

When the Drust King turned his head to look at him his rictus grin spread wider. “Ah, they’ve arrived. Just as you claimed them would, my Lion.”

“Your Lion?” Sylvanas snapped, ears straight up in the air and red eyes flaming. “My Husband is not yours! Now, release him!”

“And allow my vengeance against the Kul Tiran for stealing this land from its rightful owners again be delayed? Allow you to walk away unpunished for thwarting my plans with the Heartsbane?” The Drust snarled. “I think not. You’ll leave this place and abandon him to me or I’ll use him to destroy you!”

“No!” Anduin kicked and struggled even harder, clawing worthlessly at Gorak Tul’s wrist. “I
won’t! I won’t serve you! You can’t make me!”

“Can’t I?” the Drust sneered. “You have a strong will boy, I’ll give you that. Where I’ve yet to bow your spirit, your body will obey. And that, for my purposes, is more than enough.”

Spectral briars wrapped around the young King’s struggling form, coiling tight around his throat like a noose and yanked him abruptly backwards into the dark circle. His body arched upwards so violently that his spine almost snapped, eyes opening to reveal the blue-black haze of Drust magic. The horrified wail which wrenched free of him was drowned beneath Gorak Tul’s laughter.

“Rise!” Against his best efforts to resist his body acted of its own accord, pulling itself up onto all fours and then fully upright with a series of sharp stilted motions. Horror was portrayed in every facet of his expression. “Now, drive them from my realm. Kill the Elf. I’ve little doubt that her blood on your hands will put an end to this pointless ‘resistance’.”

“His bonds aren’t complete. Not yet.” The blonde lurched towards them on his badly damaged legs, his limbs threatening to give way beneath the brambles bracing them. “Destroying Gorak Tul will release him; his spirit will linger long enough to say goodbye.”

“And he’ll be alright?” it irked her bitterly to have to ask such a thing of the Lich King off all people but Sylvanas couldn’t contain the question. “How won’t be condemned to…there?”

“That’s beyond my knowledge, ‘Dark Lady’.” He said. “I will deal with Gorak Tul. Use the Worgen to help you keep him at bay.”

The former Paladin didn’t wait for either of them to react, either to agree or to argue, and charged forward into the fray. Anduin was on them a moment later, Shalamayne colliding hard with the arm of her bow. The once golden flame bracketed between the blades reduced to the same bruise like glow of bluish-black which lit his eyes.

“Sylvanas.” His voice was raw with pain. “Please! I can’t stop myself!” Robotically, as stilted as the rest of his movements had been, Anduin raised the weapon in his hands for another blow. Sylvanas leapt out of range, firing a dark arrow at his feet. The magic which leaked into the ground snaring him on the spot.

Red eyes darted to the battle between the Drust King and the Lich King raging at the center of the clearing. Ferocious magic whirled between them, the Frost and Blood magic of the Scourge and the twisted magics of the Drust tainting the already dread saturated air with yet more dark power. It was impossible to tell at a mere glance who was winning but she wasn’t allowed much more than that before Genn’s shouted warning drew her attention back.

Avoiding the cutting edge of the blade only narrowly, the blow never the less knocked her backwards and off balance. Sylvanas tried to catch her feet, failed and went down hard on the leaf-strewn ground. The speed of which he was capable was belied by the jerkiness of his movements and it was all that she could do to seize the blade when it came down again. The sharp metal slitting through her mail gloves before finally being stopped only inches from her face. Blood trickled down the leading edge, dripping down onto her face. Genn pathed back and forth just out of reach, hackles raised and yellow eyes wide but useless otherwise: a hound with no idea how to react to a master that had turned on it.

There was open anguish in his eyes, now, behind the pall of sorcery. He tried to pull back but bore down instead, his weight forcing the blade closer. Inch by inch. Five left. Three. One.

A ferocious roar of fury, cutting off in the middle, rang out from behind them and Anduin
collapsed. Shalamayne falling to his side with the heavy clang of steel.

Sylvanas was beside him a moment later, and those fading eyes found her almost immediately.

Though it clearly took great effort, Anduin lifted one hand to take hers. Fingers lightly tracing over the wounds along her palm. He opened his mouth to speak but she silenced him before he could.

“Hush.” Gently, Sylvanas pushed his bangs back from his face. It was clear that he was struggling to hold on to the rapidly fraying threads that bound him. “What’s happened is not your fault. And don’t be bothered with your promise, love. I’ll be alright.”

The undergrowth crunched behind her but Sylvanas didn’t turn to look. She knew who it was. His eyes struggled to focus over her shoulder.

“No.” Speaking was difficult for him. His voice was weak. “Please.”

His reaction was enough to make it clear that the Lich King had dropped his projected illusion. In an effort to quiet his protests she pulled him closer, his struggles already weakening.

“I needed his help in thwarting Gorak Tul. To spare you from being used as I was by Arthas.” Carding her fingers through his hair didn’t calm him. He was fading faster now. “I agreed to pay whatever price I had to in return. Even if it meant once more being bound to the Scourge.”

One of her sisters, surely, would take care of Lirath. He’d be better off like that than being raised by her alone.

“Then you’ll have no objection to what’s about to be done, ‘Dark Lady.”

Anduin, still ferociously clinging on, attempted to produce a further protest but could only manage a whine.

“Just wait until he’s gone.” Still, she refused to look at the former Paladin. “Are these last few moments too much to ask?”

“I never said the price would come from you.” The Lich King said. “Had Gorak Tul not come for him, I would have.”

Comprehension dawning with a sickening finality Sylvanas spun around, making a vain effort to at once curl herself around him and push his form behind hers and out of sight. Anything to prevent what she now realized was coming. “No!”

Her snarled screech and the flash of Scourge magic led the Worgen to all but leap out of his skin. Anduin went suddenly stiff, his expression twisting into a rictus mask of pain as the Drust magic was replaced with the arctic haze of Lich Fire.

She knew, too well, the pain he was experiencing in that moment. The unsurpassed agony of having his soul chained to a body no longer fit to house it. With all that she’d suffered since Arthas had torn her from what would have been a peaceful rest undeath had been the last thing Sylvanas had wanted for her husband. And though she hadn’t wanted to lose him, as she’d last everything else, she knew that this curse was the last thing he deserved.

Yet a part of her, that dark and selfish part which the young King had loved her in spite of, was glad that someone else had done the terrible act. Not only did she get Anduin back, in a permanent capacity, but her hands were kept free of blood in that sense.
Never the less she’d have turned on the Lich King with what remained of her arrows had it not been for the fact that Anduin chose that moment to regain his wits.

“My head.” He groaned, wincing despite the negligible light. “What happened? I thought…did you-?”

“In spite of your prior permission I’d never had done this to you.” Sylvanas gently propped Anduin up as he attempted to push himself upright and glared at Bolvar. “If you think I’m going to allow you to take him-!”

“I’ve no intent to take him. I didn’t exact this price to gain something for the Scourge.”

“Then why do it?” she snapped.

His burning gaze was baleful. “Because he deserves to live. To be happy. Even if he cannot truly be ‘alive’.” He said. “And I never said that this was where my price ended.”

“What more do you want?”

Sylvanas found herself in whole hearted agreement with the snarl in Genn’s voice. Bolvar’s attention had shifted entirely to Anduin and he ignored them both outright. “While you were held captive in Kul Tiras you came to be acquainted with my Shining Star. Look after her.”

Ah, yes. The chipper raven woman who’d accompanied Genn and the drunken sailor they’d picked up off a sinking-sunken, actually, at that point-pirate ship. Taelia, or something along those line, had been her name.

Sylvanas vaguely recalled it being mentioned that she was a Fordragon.

From the look of shocked realization on Anduin’s face he’d put together who it was that he was speaking with, despite the fact he’d dispensed with his earlier illusion. “Bolvar?” he spluttered. “They told me…I thought that…can I, that is to say can we-Taelia and I both-perhaps…come see you? At least once?”

“That, King Wrynn, would not be wise.” The Lich King was walking away from them now, his smoldering form growing fainter as he was swallowed up by the lingering dark. “The Regent Lord of Stormwind fell at the Wrath Gate, just as you were told. I am not the man you knew. It’s better that you stay away.”

A moment later he was gone and Anduin was left staring into the gloom choked trees. After a long moment the risen Priest sighed and hung his head before turning back to them with resignation in his newly glowing eyes. “Well,” he said heavily, “I suppose there’s nothing left to do now but return to Stormwind.”

Anduin wasn’t looking forward to the explanations which no doubt awaited them.
It had been a long and convoluted process but, eventually-after finding their way back into Azeroth and explaining an abridged version of exactly how it was that Anduin had ended up undead in spite of Sylvanas determination not to raise him-they managed to board the *Banshee’s Wail*-dispatched back to Drustvar immediately after their swift hearthstone to Dalaran in search of a portal-and set sail for the Eastern Kingdom. Though Genn didn’t complain about the matter he seemed rather put out by being shoved back into the Plaguehound cage. Sylvanas didn’t pay him much mind and Anduin wasn’t exactly in any sort of state to notice, as even with the brambles bracing them putting weight on his ruined legs still caused him extreme pain so pacing about the various decks weren’t even the faintest glimmer of a thought in his mind.

Though he was all but desperate by this point to return home to Stormwind—even knowing the uncomfortable reception which was doubtlessly awaiting them—they made a brief stop in Tirisfal Glades to visit Marius in his office.

The risen King doubted he’d ever seen anyone so outrageously happy to be contracted to do anything before in his life. The Necrosurgeon immediately ran off to the Apothecarium after dropping him into the same chair he’d been all but thrown into before in order to, in his words, ‘procure the best replacements’ for his King.

Anduin did his best not to think about where, exactly, his new legs were coming from. Or, for that matter, who.

The procedure itself didn’t take terribly long and wasn’t anywhere near as painful as it would have been had such a thing been done while he’d still been alive, though watching bone saw bite through his legs at the hip, and then a massive needle dig into the flesh left behind, left him feeling ill enough that he had to divert his attention to something else.

Sylvanas was happy to provide the distraction, though the mood was considerably killed by Marius’ jaunty whistling and overrunning commentary regarding his work, so they just ended up discussing what had happened since his kidnapping.

They’d boarded the boat again as soon as the ‘surgery’ was finished-Anduin was still slightly unstable but better able to walk than before and rapidly becoming steadier by the moment—and arrived back in Stormwind’s harbor in the dead of night.

With a hooded cloak pulled up over his head to hide his hair and features, Anduin peered out over the railing of the ship towards the darkened city’s familiar form. He didn’t speak and wasn’t looking at her but Sylvanas could plainly read the hesitance in his posture. Feel the tension in his muscles when she rested a hand on his shoulder.

“I thought you’d be pleased to be home.” She said.
“I am.” The shadowed cowl hid any expression he might have had concern was plain in his voice. “Stormwind is my home. The city that I love. The people that I love.”

“Yet you’re worried. Why?”

“Because I fear the reception I’ll receive from the Alliance’s other leaders, from the House of Nobles, from Stormwind’s citizenry, when it comes out what’s happened.” He said. “That their King, who they’ve by now been told fell in Kul Tiras, is actually undead. Not only undead but undead at the hands of the Lich King. Surely, they’ll be dubious, to say the least, of trusting me now.”

Naturally that would be his concern. Given what they’d faced in Thros, and his precious voiced insecurities, Sylvanas should have known that his discomfort would come from something like this.

“Perhaps they will be, at first.” Sylvanas allowed her hand to slide down his shoulder and across his chest. Tracing her fingers along the curve of his collar bone. “But they’ll see soon enough that you haven’t changed from the man you were in life. That though your heart has stopped beating it hasn’t stopped bleeding. They’d be fools to raise any sort of uproar.”

His hand covered hers, the touch of calloused fingers familiar though now lacking the warmth they’d once had. His thumb beginning to rub a gentle circle into the back of her hand. “I’m sure they would warn up to me again, given enough time.” He said. “My worry is that I won’t be given enough time. That the Nobles will demand I step down in favor of a Regent Lord until Lirath can take my place. That the other leaders won’t accept me back as High King and I’ll be ejected from the Alliance.”

“If they’re fool enough to do so, you know by now that the Forsaken would gladly have you in the Under City full time.” She said. “And the Horde would gladly lay claim to you.”

The blatant possession in her tone made him smile. Sylvanas could hear it in his voice when he spoke. “I’ve no doubt of that.” Anduin sighed. “But I don’t want to risk a rekindled war.”

“Nor do I, Little Lion. We have Lirath to think about.”

“Light’s mercy, we certainly do.” He turned his head to look towards the keep. “It’ll be incredible to see him again. And to finally have a proper night with you. A proper night in which I won’t have to sleep.”

Sylvanas’ own smile was plain in the darkness, holding a satisfied curve. She reached into the darkened cowl to take his chin lightly in her hand. “I’m certain I’ll be perfectly capable of distracting you, dear husband. At least until the morrow. But that will have to wait until we get back in.” She said. “Luckily for you, we won’t have to wait terribly long. Nathanos should return with Shaw any moment now.”

Though with some reluctance both returned their attention to the sky. Spying the winged forms of a griffon and a bat a moment later. Watching both grew larger as they approached before finally landing on the decks. Nathanos bowed in Sylvanas’ direction and afforded Anduin a curt nod. Mathias dismounted from the griffon, failing at keeping surprise entirely off his face.

“King Wrynn? This is…a surprise to say the least.”

Anduin inclined his head, aware the Spymaster couldn’t see his nervous smile. “I doubt this was the outcome that Sylvanas intended, given her reaction, though in truth we were lucky. Things
could have been much worse.” He said. “The Lich King could have taken far more than he did.”

“The Lich King, my Lord?” Mathias’ eyebrows disappeared into his hairline; seeing that much surprise on his face.

“It’s a long story, Mathias. One I fully intend to explain in detail at a later time.” He said. “For now, I’ll simply say that Kul Tiras housed old demon and one of them held formidable necromantic powers while moving through Drustvar the Forsaken forces thwarted its plans and it targeted me in revenge. Even powerful as Sylvanas is she needed assistance to-ouch!” Anduin turned wide eyes on her only to be confronted with a wholly innocent expression. “Did you just pinch me?”

“I’m aware of my limits, Little Lion, but that doesn’t mean I like them advertised.”

The Priest just looked at her incredulously. Ridiculous as the exchange was it seemed to put the Rogue at ease.

“The House of Nobles can be convened in the morning, King Wrynn. The other leaders a bit longer, though many are nearby as we’d expected for funeral preparations to begin.” He said. “I’m sure at this point you’re certain to want to retire to your Chambers. And to see the Prince.”

“Badly.” He said.

“The mongrel is on the lower deck.” Nathanos informed him in a growl. “If you’d assist me, Shaw, we can properly kennel him in the stockades.”

As the two men descended into the bowls of the Banshee’s Wail Anduin followed Sylvanas over to the gang plank and the pair disembarked onto the docks. Taking a middling route-not the longest way back to the keep but not the quickest either-through Stormwind’s streets, the Banshee Queen watched Anduin stare around at the white stone buildings as if he’d never seen them before.

Varian’s statue cast a shadow over the fountain at the castle’s foot, burbling softly in the dark as they passed it by and entered the keep. Turning away from the doors of the throne room and climbing a flight of stairs.

Anduin made an immediate beeline for Lirath’s room, hesitating briefly before opening the door and stepping inside. The room was dark and quiet aside from soft breathing and the distant sighing of the harbor through the slightly open window. Valeera had passed out beside the crib, her head propped against the wooden bars and tears dried in tracks on her face.

Lowering his hood, Anduin crouched beside her and gently shook his sister’s shoulder. The Blood Elf stirred but didn’t wake up until he shook her again. Her green eyes focusing in on him and staring for a moment before sitting bolt upright and throwing her arms around his shoulders. Almost yanking him over on top of her.

“Watch it, Sanguinar!” Sylvanas couldn’t quite keep a territorial snap out of her voice. “That’s my Human. Find your own.”

Valeera didn’t even acknowledge what the Banshee Queen had said. Burying her face in the crook of his neck. “They told me you were dead!”

“Well,” Anduin cleared his throat softly, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb the sleeping child, and pried her off him enough to sit up, “they weren’t exactly wrong.”

Valeera stared at him for a moment in surprise, and then reached out a shaking hand to touch his
face. Wide eyes taking in his ashen skin, Lich Fire eyes and lightened hair. “You’re-.”

“Perfectly alright. Beyond that it’s a long story and though I intend to tell you it, it won’t be tonight.”

Valera looked from Anduin to the sleeping infant in the crib and back again before nodding. Hugging him tighter before letting him go. “I’ll hold you to that, little brother.”

“I’m sure you will.” He said, pulling her to her feet as he rose himself. “Good night, Valeera.”

“And I’m sure I don’t need to encourage you to have one.” Had Anduin still been alive he’d have turned cherry red on the spot. Snickering, the Rogue left the room.

The risen King didn’t waste a moment in reaching down into the crib and lifting Lirath’s sleeping form from the blankets. Settling him in the crook of his arm, careful not to wake him. Sylvanas wrapped her arms around his waist from behind and rested her head between his shoulder blades.

Though even know she’d never admit it to anyone there wasn’t anything she wouldn’t have given for the chance to have more moments like these.

“More than anything,” he said quietly, tracing gloved fingers softly along the curve of Lirath’s cheek. “I’m grateful to have this chance to watch our son grow up. And I feel incredibly privileged to be able to spend more time with you.”

“I’d never have done this to you. You didn’t deserve a share in this curse.” Sylvanas didn’t raise her head from his back or loosen her grip on him. “But I won’t lie to you and claim that I regret it.”

“I could hardly ask you to regret it when I don’t.” Extricating himself enough from her grip to turn and pull her in with the arm that wasn’t holding Lirath, Anduin said “and now everything makes sense.”

“Everything?” she tilted her head back to look up at him. “What do you mean?”

“Do you remember when we visited Quel’thalas? The day you spent with your sisters while I visited the Sunwell?”

“I was all but tormented by my dear siblings,” Sylvanas drawled, “how could I forget?”

“While I was there I had a vision. And for a long time it bothered me, as I misinterpreted it as an omen of my death rather than a glimpse into my future.” Lightly, he traced his fingertips along the shell of her ear. Smiling as it flicked against his hand. “Let’s hope the fact that it took place in Stormwind’s throne room means I’ll retain my crown as well.”

“We can hope.” She said. “But that is a concern for tomorrow. Come to bed.”

“Allow me to put our son down first, my dear, though I understand you’re eager.” Wincing around a smile and a laugh as she pinched him again Anduin returned Lirath gentle to his crib. He barely had the chance to turn around again before she seized him by the wrist and dragged him back to the royal chamber.

The heavy doors creaked as they swung open and then shut behind them, their hooded cloaks falling from their shoulders and allowing pale hair to spill down their backs. His shoulders thudding against the mattress as Sylvanas pushed him down onto it. Her hands slipping into his shirt. His burying themselves in her long hair. The press of their bodies together a silent agreement to set aside their concerns until the dawn.
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