Three years after the dissolution of the Horde and the disappearance of their Warchief, Azeroth has finally reached a tentative peace. Jaina's arrival in Dalaran should have been a two-day trip discussing a trade of knowledge between the Tidesages and the Kirin Tor, but instead, Jaina finds herself caught up in the drama of the Windrunner sisters.

A misadventure which seems to have strong implications about the Light, the Void, and how far should one go for the people they love.
Chapter 1

Three years after the dissolution of the Horde, Dalaran was once again the sparkling jewel of the northern territories. Returned to its rightful place alongside the southern shores of Lordaeron’s Lake, the city’s spires stretched into the sky and glittered in the afternoon sunlight. Dalaran itself still floated within the sky, but beneath its shadow, a lakeside town was steadily growing to support the efforts to restore the Hillsbrad Foothills - and the work of the mages within the city itself. Dalaran’s streets were filled with the hawking of merchants and the daily conversation of citizens rebuilding their lives without the threat of war looming over their heads.

The people of Azeroth were finally at peace, and if Jaina Proudmoore closed her eyes and tilted her head up into the southwestern breeze, she felt transported back to the first time she’d ever stepped foot into the heart of the Mage’s City.

Then Jaina’s eyes opened, and the reality of the years between her arrival and this homecoming were stark and ever-present. The streets of Dalaran were divided still, though not as harsh as the rigid separation of the Horde and Alliance. No, instead, there was an undercurrent of tension between those who had dedicated themselves to the Army of the Light and those who hadn’t. True, as far as Jaina knew, all of the recruits within the Army had joined willingly, but the ranks of the Lightforged grew exponentially by the day, at a rate that concerned her. Still, she preferred this. It was the tension and bickering of priests and academics - the debate about how to best lead their collective people into a better era. This was not the bloody wars of Azeroth’s recent past, or the tense truce waiting to be shattered by an opportunistic Horde.

It was progress.

A jostle against her left shoulder shook Jaina from her thoughts. She scowled, stumbled off-balance as one of the Lightforged Draenei themselves materialized through the Dias - the arrival point of any magical travel into the city. The massive paladin must not have noticed her, for he continued without pause into the main street itself. Just as well, Jaina mused, she had an entire checklist to complete before the sun set; starting with the acquisition of an appropriate room for her stay. Briefly, her gaze flicked up toward the Violet Citadel; and she wondered if she walked into the entrance hall, would Khadgar offer her a place to stay? For a heartbeat, she risked the idea, but the allure and luxury of the Citadel had faded sometime around the Purge. No, she shook her head. She should stick with simpler accommodations. It would make everything easier, for everyone.

Simpler accommodations turned out to be a good quarter-mile into the city at the Legerdemain Lounge. The inn was one of the busiest human-run in the city, and if Jaina wanted to get lost in the crowd, she knew it would be the place to do so. As she was dressed in a simple travel cloak with the hood pulled tight around her face, it would take more than a simple glance to discover her identity among the throng of patrons and frequent adventurers. Sure enough, the Quel’dorei bartender, Arille Azuregaze, barely glimpsed up past the gold set upon the counter for a week’s stay before he handed Jaina the runestone needed to enter and ward her room. She didn’t even get halfway through a ‘thank you’ before he was off and focused on another patron requesting a refill.

Suited Jaina just fine. She shouldered her pack and made her way upstairs. She’d gone for one of the rooms that opened onto a private balcony that oversaw the Arcanist Gardens several hundred yards across the street. It gave her enough space to spread out the various scrolls and books she’d brought along to assist with her work without sacrificing a place for herself. The decorations were soft purples and silver over polished wood.

She busied herself with unpacking, though she had little to spare beyond the outfits needed for
diplomatic meetings, and the scattered Tidesage codexes she’d been allowed to take from the Stormsong Monastery - gifts from one of the Alliance Champions who understood that knowledge alone was not a threat to be destroyed. Most of her clothes were plain-tailored, easy to slip in and out of, and easier still to blend into a faceless crowd. She allowed herself one small luxury, the anchor pendant that stood for her house. She unwrapped it from its cloth casing and clasped it around her neck. The metal was a pleasant chill against the mild heat of the late afternoon climate.

Unpacking finished, she found herself at a loss for what to do next. She had at least an hour to herself before she needed to set out for the Citadel and meet with the Concordance that oversaw the developments of the northern territories. She briefly thought about catching up on the latest research concerning the connection between the arcane and the elemental forces of Azeroth but found the thought slipped from her mind as quickly as it arrived.

Dalaran had once been her home. A sanctuary where she’d bloomed into a promising apprentice. Once, the city at sunset brought her nothing but peace.

Now, though? She was restless. Alone, her thoughts had a tendency to overwhelm her, just as they were beginning to do.

Well, there was always the traditional method of drowning out one’s inner monologue: she plucked a glass and the welcome bottle of Dalaran Red from the cabinet and headed out onto the balcony itself. The fresh air was not filled with the cry of seabirds and the salt of the ocean, but instead by the overlapped conversations of the streets and the various activities of the nearby craftsmen. Even with the revolving populace the city’s seen over the decades, things never really changed - much like Boralus’ port, Dalaran’s streets were alive with the hawking of wares, the haggle of merchants and their too-canny customers. Craftsmen and smithies laid out their goods for perusal while tourists gawked at the splendors of life outside the small villages and outposts that most in Azeroth hailed from. Adventurers of the various Alliance races roamed the streets and fueled an economy that had evolved to exist around their constant forays into the dangerous parts of the world.

From the waist-high gnomes, the feral worgen, to the towering Draenei, the Alliance was more non-human than human now, but it stood united and strong, and the unity and peace it brought to the people of Azeroth was one of Jaina’s dreams realized.

The Kirin Tor still stood guard, but among the spellweavers, Jaina noticed that some bore the telltale golden brands of those who had been Lightforged. They stood among their fellows, wearing both the Violet Eye of the Kirin Tor and the crest of the Naaru. Since when had the Army of the Light begun to recruit outside the Draenei?

Jaina continued to people-watch for a while longer. After her second glass was near empty, she spotted a familiar mane of white-blonde hair exiting the craftsman’s circle. Even at a distance, the slender, elongated ears of an elf were noticeable. She grinned and Blinked down to land several feet from where Vereesa’s Windrunner’s path led.

Vereesa, for her part, barely blinked. Her ears twitched and swiveled back against her skull momentarily, like a cat spooked by a sudden noise, before they pricked forward and genuine interest and fondness twinkled in her arcane-touched eyes. “Jaina!”

Vereesa looked no different since the last time Jaina had seen her. The elves were ageless, beautiful and timeless. Jaina wondered how the years changed her in Vereesa’s eyes as she crossed the distance and embraced her old friend. Vereesa returned the hug without hesitation, and the two swayed slightly as the crowd moved around the reunion without pause. “Vereesa! I didn’t know you were in Dalaran still - I thought you’d --”
“Return to Silvermoon?” Vereesa finished for her, pulling back just enough to make eye contact. She paused, and rested her forehead against Jaina’s for a second, then pulled away. “I haven’t taken the offer yet. The twins have finally settled into their training, and I don’t want to pull them from one style of teaching to another halfway through their first year.” Her ears twitched as she spoke. “I’m surprised to see you here, though.”

Shame briefly twinged over Jaina. She supposed a good friend would have written ahead to inquire and inform Vereesa of her arrival. If not for the wine lowering her guard, she probably wouldn’t have done anything to catch the ranger’s attention. “I’m here on business, actually. There are some old Tidesage texts we uncovered at the Shrine of the Storm, but they’re untranslatable with any cipher we know about. I’m to ask Khadgar if I can borrow some from the Kirin Tor --”

“Which he’d gladly offer you, I’m sure.”

Jaina wasn’t as sure. Unlike Veressa, Khadgar had never understood, nor condoned any of Jaina’s recent activities, and their differences in opinions in the last several years had eroded much of what had been a growing camaraderie. Add in Jaina’s lack of support during the Final Invasion - as the Legion’s advance was now being called - and the Kirin Tor themselves had grown cold to their ex-Archmage.

“Your brother? I thought you had been given the title of Lord Admiral?”

“I had - I am Lord Admiral - I just … we rule jointly. He’s a beloved Fleet Admiral and …” Jaina trailed off. She didn’t need to explain the frustration of residing in an older sibling’s shadow to the youngest Windrunner. “… Kul Tiras is all the more healthy for it, and that’s what matters.”

“Of course,” Vereesa answered diplomatically. She tilted her head up and sniffed at the air. “Now, I can practically taste the Dalaran Red you’ve opened. If you’re free, can we continue talking over a glass or two?” She grinned, exposing her delicate fangs, “or a bottle or two, I should say?”

Jaina hesitated, then shrugged off her worry. This was Vereesa. Even after the horrors of Theramore where Jaina’s choices had doomed Rhonin to a pointless death, the elven woman had never stopped extending companionship. Their lapse in communication was on Jaina’s shoulders, not Vereesa’s. She cracked a sheepish smile and gestured for the ranger to follow her back towards where she’d observed the city.

While the inn relatively ignored Jaina, Vereesa’s passage through the ground floor was met with interest, of both the good and ill sort. The few Quel’dorei in the room offered the elven ranger a fair greeting, and Vereesa smiled at them in return, but the human patrons - and the oddly numerous Ren’dorei stared at Vereesa with something akin to suspicion. Jaina waited until they were upstairs and behind the warded door before she broached the subject.

Vereesa’s laugh was a brittle bark. “You noticed, did you?”

Jaina winced, but the other woman waved off her apology before she could begin to form it.

“It’s … complicated, Jaina, and trivial, really.”

“It doesn’t seem trivial.”

Vereesa’s ears pinned low, and she crossed the room towards the balcony and the open bottle. “How much do you know about the Ren’dorei?”

“Very little, I’m afraid.” Jaina followed her friend outside. She leaned against the railing, turned to watch Vereesa pour them both a glass. “Just that they’re a sect of elves that are entwined with the
Void, somehow.”

“You make it sound so harmless,” Vereesa’s nose crinkled as she took a drink. “Like they’re on an afternoon’s dalliance.”

“I do hail from an island nation where our strongest magic users have been quietly listening to the void for a while now, apparently,” Jaina responded. “I suppose the whole affair is a little flippant for me.”

Vereesa gave her a look. “Magic affects elves differently than humans.” Her voice took on a droning air like she was giving a lesson to a fresh-faced squire, and not Jaina. “Your … Tidesages … might listen to the Void, but they don’t … how do I explain this? They don’t absorb it - become one with it. Give an elf a strong enough influx of a magical source, and they’ll adapt to it …” she trailed off, her expression morphing from a droll explanation, to confusion, to sheepish apology when she finally noticed the look Jaina fixed her with.

“Really?” Jaina drawled, tucking a hand underneath her chin. “That sounds utterly fascinating and I have never once seen it in action. Tell me more about this strange, mysterious ability --”

“Shut up, Proudmoore.” Vereesa stuck her tongue out but took the ribbing gracefully.

“No no, please, go on!” Jaina waved her free hand for Vereesa to continue. “It’s not like I’m an archmage or anything, with far too much research about the theories of magic under my belt.”

Vereesa’s ears pinned back, but her grin was playful and her eyes twinkled with amusement. She’d also gone stock still, and Jaina’s suspicions grew when Vereesa’s expression shifted to completely transparent innocence. It was like watching a cat decide when it wanted to pounce. Jaina waited and waited, and when she figured that whatever Vereesa’s look implied wasn’t going to come to pass, she yelped as her propped arm was swiped out from beneath her.

Vereesa cackled merrily as Jaina struggled to regain her balance without looking like a fool.

When Jaina was upright and her dignity was somewhat restored, Vereesa offered her a refilled glass.

“So, that means you’d understand if I mentioned the current state of Silvermoon and the lovely debate on if the Sin’dorei need to be recategorized yet again. Last I checked, it’s a strong tie between ‘Alar’dorei’ and ‘Belore’dorei.’” Vereesa waited for a beat, took a long gulp of the wine. “I personally support the ‘Enough’dorei.’”

Jaina didn’t know how to answer that, so she waited. She didn’t have to wait long.

Vereesa sighed, “of course if it’s not an argument about what to call Light-Elves, there’s always the Void. Alleria’s gone for years, left Quel’thalas when --” she cut herself off, flashed Jaina a bitter smile, and drained the rest of the cup in one swig. “Give it another ten years Jaina, and the Quel’dorei will live only in depressing stories and war memorials.”

“That’s --”

“We’ve been friends for a while, Jaina, so I know you’re smarter than whatever you were about to say.” Vereesa fixed her with a look, then poured herself a second glass. She fixed a happy smile on her face, then changed the subject. “Sorry, the ren’dorei are a touchy subject. I tend to forget the little manners I’ve learned when they come up.”

Jaina took the offered out gratefully. “You learned manners when I was away? I’m impressed,
Vereesa’s laugh was far more light-hearted this time. “Let’s start over, shall we? Hello Jaina, I’m incredibly happy to see you again. The boys and I missed you terribly.”

“I missed you, and your boys. They’re - goodness, they’re teenagers now?”

“They’re troll-spawn is what they are,” Vereesa muttered, though her voice was fond. “They’ve hit that age where I embarrass them just by breathing in the same room.”

Jaina smiled. “They love you dearly, I’m sure.”

“Oh, I know. I was the same way at their age, so I hope they age along the human axis through this part of their lives all the same.”

“Not interested in going through what your mother did?”

“Belore, no! I was an absolute brat!” Vereesa stared at her, aghast at even the implication of what Jaina suggested. “One, I had two older sisters who essentially took all the burden of responsibility off of me,” she ticked off on her fingers, “two, I had a little brother who was the perfect partner in crime, and finally an entire forest to run havoc through. Any aging my mother did was caused by her children. She fought on the front lines to get a break.”

“Vereesa!”

“I wish I was exaggerating.” Vereesa grinned. She flopped gracefully into one of the chairs and stared pointedly at Jaina until she followed suit. Jaina did, and the conversation flowed between them as if the years apart had never happened.

They stayed away from the heavier topics: things like Theramore, new family matters (especially concerning certain sisters), and the political state of the elven people. Instead, they discussed arcane theory and the archeological research that Vereesa had found an interest in a year or so back. While relations were still tense, Vereesa did split her time between Dalaran and expeditions into the untouched sections of Silvermoon where the elven city gave way to a troll temple-city complex that seemed built on an even earlier foundation. Some of it was Titan-inspired, but the rest was from an unknown era.

Vereesa off-handedly mentioned that she’d opened up channels of communication with the Farseer of Azeroth - a Darkspear shaman. The woman had more knowledge about the elemental planes and the bizarre history of their kingdoms that perhaps there could be answers found there.

As the afternoon faded into a gentle evening, and then to a star-studded night, the first bottle was replaced by another, and by the time that the first patrons of the inn made their way out onto the street to return to their homes, Jaina felt lighter than she’d been in years. Her reflexes were shot, and she was pretty confident that her current defense of the summoning of a water elemental by a frost mage versus the summoning of elementals by shamans was mostly on-the-spot speculation fueled by a hefty dose of alcohol.

Vereesa’s out of her chair and half-balanced on the railing when Jaina finally registered the commotion down below. She leaned up carefully to see what had snagged the ranger’s attention.

A crowd had formed a loose circle around a prone, convulsing figure. It was hard to make out who it was due to the shadows of the Lounge, but the strange pallor of the skin, the dark, twisted tendrils of the void that cracked through the cobblestone, and the gibbered Thalassian told Jaina that she was watching one of the ren’dorei fall apart.
Just like the Alliance feared.

Was this the first time? Or had there been similar collapses over the years? She turned her head to ask Vereesa, but the ranger was entirely upon the railing now, and her bow unslung from her shoulders. She lifted it up, an arrow already nocked upon the string as she pulled it back to her cheek. “Jaina,” she said, her voice surprisingly steady despite the wine they’d consumed all evening. “Manage the crowd.”

“Manage the -- Vereesa, what are you talking about?”

The arrow’s let loose. It flew over the heads of those in the crowd, towards two encroaching Lightforged Draenei. The two blazed as bright as lighthouses, their brands gleaming against their alabaster skin. They had weapons unsheathed, and were utterly focused on reaching their target. So the sudden bind at their hooves threw them even more off-guard. The right one, a male Draenei with a broken horn, stumbled to his knees as the magical webbing threw off his balance. He snarled as he hit the cobblestone, looking around for the unexpected attack. He found it when Vereesa let loose another warning shot. Her arrows were blunt-tipped, meant for concussive force and deterrence than true harm. Jaina’s been on the opposite side of a ranger wielding them - she knew the bruises they left well.

“Jaina - please!”

Jaina’s attention snapped back to the crowd. They were closing in upon the unarmed ren’dorei. Some had taken the Lightforges’ approach as their own, and weapons were being pulled out. Magic crackled along staves, and the creak of another bow-string eased into the night. She blinked down, and as she felt her feet connect with the solid stone, let out a wave of frost that locked the crowd in place. Arrows whistled overhead. There was a whisper of magic, and Jaina noticed the ice weaken about the knees of a paladin. She lifted her gaze to meet his own. Human. Like her. He had the burnished skin of someone born in Stormwind, or perhaps Stranglethorn. He bore the medals of someone who fought the Legion, fought in Northrend. She vaguely recalled him standing in the crowd honored as the vanguard into Icecrown.

Now, again, he stood opposite of her. Only this time, she stood between him and his duty. She whispered an apology, then flicked a ribbon of magic toward him. She had wine in her system, and it slowed her down. But he’d been drinking too, and he had to swing his weapon to reach her actively.

She just needed to will her intent into being.

His hammer clattered to the ground as a sheep studied her from where the paladin stood.

Above her, Vereesa was shouting. “Fetch Alleria - now!” Who --

A ren’dorei further out from the mess, turned on her heel and opened a void rift. She disappeared within an instant.

“Stay back! My next arrows won’t be blunt!”

The Lightforged were close enough now that the glow from their brands broke through the throng like streaks of sunlight through clouds. Even at a distance, the Draenei were tall enough to be observed over the heads of the people between them. The one with the broken horn scowled at Vereesa as she loosed another arrow his way.

“They have succumbed to the Void! It is a light-given mercy to put them down before the madness
infects others --”

“You don’t get to make that call,” Vereesa growled. She pulled the string back against her cheek once again and waited. True to her threat, Jaina could see the razor-edge of the nocked arrow. It would penetrate through plate mail without trouble.

The other Lightforged tried for the less-aggressive tactic. Like his counterpart, his brands flared with the Light, but he held out his hands placatingly. “Lady Windrunner, it is not a duty we take lightly --”

“I’m pretty damned certain it is not your duty at all to be judge and executioner of a citizen in the street.” Vereesa’s voice shook with emotion. “Especially an elf. You do not get to choose how my people die.”

“Be reasonable, woman!” Broken-Horn snapped, and surged forward, ignoring his companion’s hand upon his shoulder. He strode to the edge of the frozen crowd and pointed his axe toward the ren’dorei behind Jaina. “We let this one live, and we will have Voidspawn in the streets! One death versus many more -- ARGH!”

Scarlet blossomed in the space between his shoulder pauldron and his breastplate, vivid and bright against the crisp white-gold of his armor. Vereesa already had another arrow ready and glowered down. “Stay. Back.”

Broken Horn didn’t stay back. He snarled, ripping the arrow from his shoulder to toss it down onto the street. Blood dripped along his arm, and he lifted his axe up to point it toward Vereesa. “It is too late - the void’s madness has touched her as well! First, the abomination - then you.” Broken-Horn then met Jaina’s gaze, and she felt chilled by what she saw within them. There was only zealotry. He cracked his neck and offered her a grim ‘move’.

Move?

Broken-Horn roared and charged forward. The ice shattered as his momentum threw people from their feet, knocked others to the ground as he shouldered past them quicker than she expected from him. More arrows peppered into him, now to hold him off of Jaina and the trembling ren’dorei, but warriors had a way of ignoring pain.

All Jaina could see was the keen edge of the axe catching the light, and the rush of air as the massive weapon swung high in an arc meant to end somewhere behind her - or in her if she didn’t - there wasn’t time to think. She had a second, maybe two to decide her fate. She readied the blink spell, desperate to avoid being cleaved in two.

Time warped and slowed around her.

Sounds became distant. She heard Vereesa shout something indistinguishable, her voice cracking with emotion; she heard the crowd gasp and screams of terror pierce the night. She heard the sibilant whisper of slithering voices from fissures that were splitting through the ren’dorei’s arms, chest, neck. He was going to die, and something else was going to live.

“I’m an idiot.” Jaina turned her back on the oncoming axe. She flung herself at the ren’dorei, stumbled and scraped her knees on the cobblestone as she awkwardly gathered him to her.

A white-hot flash of pain ripped through her shoulder as ice flurries exploded into existence around her and her newfound charge. She tasted copper on her tongue and felt cold emptiness steal into her bones as her hands closed around the ren’dorei. She looked down out of instinct and found herself
staring into an abyss that was opening up underneath split flesh.

She wasn’t Khadgar or one of the Nightborne - she couldn’t manage time the way she needed to right now!

So she did the next best thing.

She teleported them to the only place in Dalaran that could stop time.

The world wrenched around her, and this close to the Void, it disorientated her. The last thing she saw before blackness overtook her was the shimmering bars of the stasis-cell.

And all she could think was: good.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thanks to those who commented! Here's the second chapter, and the last bit of the set-up needed to really kick the plot into gear where our leading ladies will begin their collision course. Enjoy!

“- possible to separate them now - “

Voices came into Jaina's awareness through a thick fog of unconsciousness. There were three she could make out, then those three turned into a cacophony that drowned her thoughts, only for silence to sweep back into control.

“She didn’t have another choice!” That was Vereesa, voice high-pitched and emotional.

“She could have allowed the Lightforged their duty,” that was an unfamiliar male voice, though she’d sworn she’d heard the speaker somewhere before. “The elf had become a nexus.”

“Alleria - you of all people should understand why I did not allow two random passersbys attempt murder of one of our own.”

“Our own?” Alleria’s voice was honeyed smoke. “Last time we had this conversation, you were accusing me of stealing them from you, but she’s right, Turalyon; we cannot allow the precedent of the Lightforged striking down folk in the street --”

“Thank you --”

“Even if this situation potentially warranted it.” Alleria pressed on despite Vereesa’s interruptions.

Jaina looked down to the ren’dorei still in her arms, only to find that she couldn’t move. Her muscles refused to obey even the simplest of requests. The stimulus had nowhere to go, fizzling out somewhere between her intent and the action. She had her mind, though, and her thoughts raced along the conversation on the opposite side of the stasis-barrier.

She couldn’t make out more than light and shapes. A beacon of light stood in the direct center, close enough to the barrier that she could trace out the massive shoulder pauldrons and the hilt of a massive two-handed sword. Turalyon, she assumed. Behind him, slightly to the left, a tall figure clad in emerald and gold stood distant to the barrier itself. Then, another figure further away still, in the soft blue and silver that Vereesa favored so well.

When they stopped talking, that was when Jaina heard the other voices. It immediately made her think of Thros - of those agonizing months in the Blighted Lands listening to all of her doubts, hatreds, and fears manifested, but these weren’t the hissing hatreds of bitter souls.

These whispers came soft, scratching at her ear like a many-legged thing that wanted to come inside from the cold. They spoke of a thousand different offers; obscure knowledge, power, and the ability to walk the endless cold. Jaina was grateful she couldn’t move because she feared that if she looked down into that split-flesh so close to her own that there’d be an imploring, hungry gaze that she wouldn’t be able to resist.
Then, there’s a shriek. A chorus of pain rose up in her ear before the voices went, mercifully, silent.

Alleria sighed. “Well, we have an answer on Jaina’s status - she’s alive, and conscious enough that the Void whispers to her. Which means they’re not completely fused.”

Completely what, now?

“Fused?” Vereesa echoed Jaina’s thoughts.

“Mm. Lieutenant Sinclair was it not?”

“Aye, ma’am?” Lieutenant Sinclair was the mage in charge of the Violet Hold. She’d led the troops in the face of two breaches into the prison, and was one of the few people still alive that knew that more than a couple of the cells within the Hold held prisoners of the Sunreaver Purge. Officially, all of the prisoners had been released when Khadgar had retaken control of the Kirin Tor back for himself.

Unofficially --

“Reestablish the sedation protocols in the cell holding Lady Proudmoore - I think we might have a chance to … extract her from the situation without any lasting side-effects, but that means reducing the opportunity for whatever is trying to step through to try and strike a deal with her.” Alleria ordered, and the emerald and gold figure stepped down and towards Jaina’s prison.

“I don’t think Lady Proudmoore --”

Like before, Alleria pressed on despite the interruption. “Lady Proudmoore is currently locked in a cell with the potential awakening of a rather nasty creature from the void just centimeters away from her own body. I think you’ll find, Lieutenant, that the Lady Proudmoore might find this to be her best option.”

“…yes, Lady Windrunner.”

She heard the hum of the arcane channels. Blackness swallowed her once more.

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Pain brought her back.

There were more figures on the other side of the barrier, she counted six or seven. They were animated, ducking and weaving around each other.

Something was moving in the cell with her too, or instead, the whisper of movement kept brushing against her ears. It was impossible for anything to move in the cells, but the sensation that something was scuttling right along the nape of her neck would not go away.

Jaina wanted to call out to the people on the outside to hurry up, or fix this, or put her back under because the implication of what was attempting to breach through into the world right underneath her chin was starting to terrify her beyond rational thought.

One of the shapes moved in front of the barrier. They weren’t familiar, neither were the colors they wore. “Lady Proudmoore, we’re almost ready for the extraction. We’re just doubling down on a few precautionary measures.” The voice was male, gruff but unknown to her.
Jaina waited. What else could she do?

Alleria stepped into hazy view. She had taken on the void guise, her shape now a swarming coil of purple and black. “Lady Proudmoore, I trust you’re more than eager to finish this. I’ll be bringing you through the barrier itself while Sinclair activates it.”

What.

Alleria pressed on. “It will be painful, and the beast that’s in there with you will do everything possible to prevent you from stepping forward, but if you resist - there’s a strong possibility that you die in there.”

“Before, Alleria, you don’t need to be so blunt,” Vereesa muttered.

“Don’t I?” Alleria’s gaze shifted from her sister back to Jaina. “When I reach you, you will hear … things. Do not listen. Go back to the training of an apprentice and clear your mind of all thoughts. Don’t open your eyes, just follow me. When you feel my hands, walk.”

How could she walk? The stasis barrier would send her directly back into oblivion? This sounded less like a plan, and more like an elaborate way to wind up dead - or ripped into pieces.

The barrier shimmered purple-black. The void sliced through the arcane wall and opened into an abyss that had hundreds of thousands of twinkling stars in its depth. It was beautiful and drained away the colors of the magical barrier around it. The void ate at the arcane until the gap was large enough for someone to step through.

Alleria Windrunner appeared in stunning clarity, a vision of purple, black, and a bone-white so stark that it reflected the colors within and around her. She was tall and muscular for the typical elf and moved with a sinuous, predatory grace.

Despite the stasis-spell, Alleria easily reached forward and grasped at Jaina’s arms, the void shimmering along her skin. Her hold hurt; like Jaina spent too long without actual contact. With careful motions, Alleria unfurled Jaina’s arms from the ren’dorei and then spent longer unwrapping something long and whip-like from around Jaina’s own form. When Alleria pulled, Jaina felt her body following, but then --

**KILLHERKILLHERTAKETHEPOWER!**

That wasn’t a whisper. It was a screech that pierced Jaina’s eardrum and left her gasping. When she inhaled, her lungs squeezed down and refused to expand. A band cinched tight at her ribs. She gasped again, more from the pain, and lost another inch of air.

This close, the void poured from Alleria and left her touch ice-cold as she guided Jaina forward. Jaina struggled to remember the instructions: keep her mind blank, keep her focus ahead.

Another vice-grip, this time around her thigh. It bit down until Jaina couldn’t feel her leg beneath it. Had it torn through --

“Don’t look back,” Alleria warned.

They passed through the actual barrier, the void gliding over her while the barrier struggled to keep everything still. The static raked along Jaina’s skin, scoured her flesh like she’d been caught in a Tanaris sandstorm. She lost the last of her breath.

Air, crisp and fresh caressed her face. She could make out details now, her gaze could dart
anywhere she willed herself to look. Alleria repeated her warning just as Jaina’s attention skirted off to the left, at a strange coiling movement just outside her field of vision.

She had the feeling of staring into some vast empty space. Alleria tugged her attention back, and she felt cold and bereft.

“Jaina!”

Vereesa lurched forward and stopped only a foot or so away. She idled from foot to foot as another elf, this one from Silvermoon judging from the golden eyes that peered over her. Two humans priests followed, each held their battle-staff loosely in their grip, and the illusion wasn’t lost on Jaina. They would have wielded their magic and their weapons without a thought if the extraction had gone wrong.

They were also not among the living.

The first was a man she knew from reputation more than personal encounters. There had been a time when Jaina was younger that the name Alonsus Faol was known to nearly every subject within the northern kingdoms of Lordaeron, Gilneas, and Kul Tiras. The champion of the light and the mastermind behind the Order of the Silver Hand, Alonsus Faol had brought Lordaeron’s legacy of knighthood to new heights, and it had been his vision that the Order had followed. When she’d learned of his death at the Scourge years later, it was as if a piece of Lordaeron’s past itself died that day.

To see him now, though, meant to endure the slow mummification of the Forsaken condition. Jaina remembered one of his sermons, recalled how he had stood proudly upon the podium as he preached unity and dedication to the ideals of the Arathi Alliance. He hunched now because his spine was unable to support his broad stature. His hair was straw, stuck to the dry, frayed edges of his face. His skin was taut, pulled along his muscles and bone like a scarecrow in the fields. His eyes were the same, she thought, a powerful gaze that seemed to stare straight through her.

“Lady Proudmoore,” he rasped and bowed low. She returned the bow with a shaky incline of her head.

“Hello, Jaina.”

Jaina turned to the second undead. She was no forsaken, brought back by the necromantic arts. At first glance, the woman still looked alive - though paler than perhaps would be healthy. A second glance revealed the subtle clues that gave her condition away. She didn’t breathe, and she was so still.

Nothing like the girl Jaina had spent days in the countryside with.

No, Calia Menethil was a whirlwind of energy and youthful zeal in Jaina’s memories. This woman was a statue charmed to move with eyes that were blank pools of gold, a direct mirror into the Light that infused her very core. Calia Menethil was no more than a marionette that moved only at the mercy of a will far stronger than her own.

Jaina supposed that was unkind, but she’d never forgiven her old friend for the decades of silence - for letting her think Calia had died, for leaving Jaina to fend through the aftermath of the third war alone.

“Queen Menethil,” she said with a neutrality she didn’t quite feel. Jaina fell back on years of diplomatic training and time spent in war rooms surrounded by enemies eager for the smallest
window of opportunity. “I didn’t realize this was supposed to be a viewing?”

Archbishop Faol chuckled. “While I’m glad for your safe extraction, High Priestess Menethil and I are here to oversee the nullification of the creature you managed to trap in the cell - clever thinking, that.”

Alleria released her once the eldest Windrunner was finished with her own check-over of the mage, and sidestepped Jaina to approach the cell again when Jaina called her name. “Yes?”

“The -- the elf I teleported,” Jaina didn’t turn to face Alleria. She looked straight ahead and used one of the torches as a focal point to steady her vision. “What’s going to happen to him?”

“A quick death if fate’s merciful,” Alleria responded.

“Death?”

Alleria hummed, noncommittal. “You did the right thing, teleporting him. If he’d remained on the streets, we would have had some unwanted guests to take care of.”

Jaina tried to exchange a glance with Vereesa, but the youngest Windrunner stared at her sister with an unreadable expression. Her ears constantly fidgeted, giving Jaina an insight into Vereesa’s mind - but without a translation guide.

“I couldn’t let him be put down like a dog in the street,” Vereesa managed, finally. She sounded, well, Jaina wasn’t sure how to categorize it, but heartbroken felt close enough. The youngest Windrunner watched Alleria head back to the barrier before she looked and gave Jaina a wan smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

Jaina stared back, unsure of how to proceed. She reached out and squeezed Vereesa’s hands in her own. After a second, Vereesa returned the gesture.

Archbishop Faol and Queen Menethil both met Alleria at the barrier and were joined by Turalyon and the Lieutenant. The only occupant beside Vereesa that hadn’t gone to join them was the sin’dorei priestess.

Fair of feature, and timeless like all the elves, the priestess had soft copper hair and a lean cast to her facial expression that came off a bit too sharp with the torchlight. The shadows grew long over her, and though her eyes gleamed with the Sunwell’s holy energy, Jaina swore she could see something darker swim through that gaze.

Vereesa made the introductions. The priestess was Merridath Swiftarrow - the champion that had managed to contain a dangerous artifact of the void. Sure enough, at the elven woman’s hip was a pale sickle-shaped dagger. It held a central gem cut in the appearance of an eye, and as Jaina looked at it, she felt a cunning, cold intellect staring back.

Swiftarrow shifted, breaking the contact with an apologetic smile. “I’m fairly certain you’re all right, but I’d like to bring you somewhere a bit more conductive towards healing and observation if you wouldn’t mind?”

Jaina glanced to Vereesa, who gave her a tight-lipped smile that gave away nothing.

Behind her, she heard the hum of the arcane wards come to life.

“Lead the way.”
Swiftarrow led them out from the Violet Hold. A crowd had gathered around the entrance, bodies packed tightly along the bridge for the chance at peeking into whatever had sent the prison into lockdown for the third time.

As they passed the initial throng, the open space at the back hosted several bands of adventurers checking over gear and preparing various tinctures that tickled the senses. Someone must have leaked information - Jaina just hoped that Alleria’s assertion that they could handle the breach without outside assistance kept true.

Their journey wasn’t too far after leaving the Prison district. There was a nearby flower and herb shop, with an older gnomish woman as the proprietor. The place smelled of dried herbs, magethorn and fadeleaf were predominant among the scents. The small shopkeeper grinned up at the three of them.

“Lady Swiftarrow, that bouquet for your daughter is almost finished, but I’ve got like,” she tapped out on her fingers, “four questions to ask … you …” the gnome woman trailed off, voice fading as she noticed who Swiftarrow had brought with her, and the way Jaina swayed on her feet.

The shopkeeper launched into a flurry of action, hopping down from her stool and ushering them into the room itself. She flipped the sign to ‘closed’ and waved them into a back parlor. That done, she disappeared through the door again, and Jaina heard the clinking of cups.

Vereesa’s glance around the room was polite, but her focus ultimately returned to Jaina. She sat down on a pile of cushions opposite a day couch and looked very much like a tense, coiled cat as she oversaw the priestess guide Jaina to sit on the couch next to her.

Swiftarrow reached and undid the clasp that held her dagger to her belt, and as that eye was exposed again, that cold, distant intellect returned to Jaina’s awareness. It studied her just as she noticed and studied it in return.

Swiftarrow frowned, and tucked the dagger upon a nearby table, out of view. “Is she speaking to you?”

“She?” Jaina blinked, her attention moving towards the priestess.

Swiftarrow pointed toward the dagger. She didn’t look convinced as Jaina shook her head. “Xal’atath. If she whispers, try your best not to listen.”

Xal’atath. The name clattered in her skull like a rattlesnake’s tail.

“Like the whispers that the ren’dorei deal with?” Jaina inquired. Swiftarrow considered a moment before she answered.

“In a roundabout way. I have one agent of the Void trying to corrupt me. She whispers, beguiles, and makes lovely promises. The ren’dorei battle hundreds at once, and have to manage being halfway corrupted as it stands.”

Jaina thought back to that horrible, gaping maw of nothingness that she spied in the flesh of the writhing elf. “How do you control it?”

“Control is such a curious word. How exactly does one control chaos?” Swiftarrow arched a brow and brought up a hand to cup over Jaina’s forehead. “Now, if you allow it, I am going to see through your mind - skirt along the surface so to speak, and see if you’ve kept any lingering effects
from the time in stasis.”

Jaina balked. While she understood that a visit to a priest after such an encounter would be the best course of action, having a priest scour through her mind - and an ex-member of the Horde.

Not just the Horde, but one of the Sin’dorei themselves. She might have had friends within the Sunreavers, and the last thing Jaina wanted were those memories to be dragged into the light.

Swiftarrow’s hand hovered there, her lips curved into a bemused smile as she waited out Jaina’s hesitation. “If you feel the need to confess, Lady Proudmoore, I’m afraid you’ll need to find another priest. I have enough of my own burdens to be concerned with whatever ghosts are buried in your past.”

That … wasn’t reassuring at all.

Vereesa broke the stalemate, “Jaina?”

Jaina looked her way, then back to the Priestess. “Is this the only way?”

“Perhaps if I explained exactly what I’m going to do?” Swiftarrow lifted her hand slightly. “I’ve heard that you’re one of the few humans actually interested in the theory behind the magic.”

Jaina considered, then shook her head. “No, I’m just -- no,” she coughed. “Please, go ahead.”

Swiftarrow waited for a beat longer, then nodded. She curled her right hand around the pale, sickle-dagger, and her left hand fell directly upon Jaina’s skin.

The assault was immediate.

The priestess was an inferno. A scouring blaze that seared away shadows. Somewhere distant, there’s another voice - a seductive, feminine voice that mocked and crooned words that slip through Jaina’s comprehension.

She responded to it.

No.

A strange, hollowed-out portion of her responded to it. A part of her that feels intimately like what-if and regret and desire. The part of her that still wondered if her choices were the right ones, or that still longed to fix and adjust and change the world around her.

That blaze skimmed the surface of Stratholme, and Jaina plucked painfully at the temptations that still clung to that day in her mind. The blaze continued, touching on the purge of the Sunreavers, over the way the overwhelming power of the Iris held the entirety of Bladefist Bay’s water at her fingertips. Over other, more private memories and wants. Vereesa’s face flitted to the surface, her eyes bright with affection before the image faded.

And the priestess withdrew.

Swiftarrow’s brow was drenched in sweat, and Jaina was surprised to find hers was as well. She touched a shaking finger to her forehead. She was warm.

“Well,” Swiftarrow busied herself with reattaching the blade back to its place upon her hip. “You’ll have some interesting dreams for a while, and I daresay a few nightmares, but your thoughts are still your own.”
Jaina flicked a quick, secretive glance to Vereesa, then back to Swiftarrow. “So, I’m not going to turn out like …”

“Kivan?” Swiftarrow clipped the dagger with practiced ease. “No. You might be a little more aware of what the void’s capable of, but you’re still you. No threat of becoming an abomination and destroying all that you love.”

Jaina blinked. Vereesa sucked in a painful breath that sounded like a hiss.

Swiftarrow shrugged with all the nonchalance of someone who’s taught themselves the art of indifference to survive. Jaina understood that well enough. Sometimes to survive, you needed to cut away the softness - and sometimes, being nice got people killed.

Vereesa slumped back on the cushions, despondent and frustrated. She worried her hands, her knuckles white as she twisted her fingers over again and again. “What we saw outside the Lounge - that will happen to all Ren’dorei?” She ventured, lifting her gaze to the priestess.

Swiftarrow opened her mouth, paused and must have reconsidered how blunt she’d liked to be, then nodded. “That’s the running theory. Eventually, the corruption will win. It’s a matter of ‘when’ for them.”

“Even Alleria?” Vereesa’s voice went soft.

Swiftarrow shrugged one shoulder, but her voice was gentler than before. “It’s her theory.”

Vereesa scowled. “She never mentioned it to me.”

“I need to protect my baby sister somehow.” Alleria spoke up from the entrance to the room, followed by the gnomish shopkeeper who carried a tea-tray.

Vereesa’s scowl didn’t leave as her sister entered, but she tracked Alleria’s movement without blinking. “So what happened?”

“What needed to be done.”

Vereesa’s ears twitched, her eyes narrowed, and she was certainly not amused by Alleria’s flippancy. Alleria, for her part, slumped with a sheepish apology and halted her approach. The indomitable aura about her faded under the glower from her youngest sister.

Alleria smiled politely. “I’m glad you’re all right, Lady Proudmoore.”

“Thank you for rescuing me.”

Alleria’s ears twitched down, and the smile she gave was a little more genuine. “Don’t mention it.” She glanced back to Vereesa and looked like she wanted to speak more.

“Vereesa, I’d like to talk with Priestess Swiftarrow?”

Vereesa blinked but caught onto Jaina’s idea. “Of course.” She stood up, brushing her leggings off. She seemed to have her own course of action in mind because when she spoke next, her voice brooked no argument. “Come on, Alleria. I demand something stronger than tea for what you’re about to tell me.”

Alleria was pulled off-balance as Vereesa clamped a hand around her sister’s forearm. “What am I about to tell you - and didn’t you already work through a bottle of wine -- gaah!” She stumbled to
keep upright as Vereesa continued pulling her. “Uh, have a good evening, Lady Proudmoore?”

Jaina watched the sisters leave quietly and thanked the shopkeeper when she set a cup of steaming tea before her. She prided herself on keeping her hand from shaking too much as she picked up the cup to bring it to her lips. “Now, Priestess… what is the theory behind your mind-scour?”

Swiftarrow, who’d been a quiet observer since Alleria had entered, turned to Jaina with a curious tilt of her head and launched into the beginning of a magical theory. If Jaina’s luck held out, she’d end the night on a progressive note.
Chapter 3

A day late, but here we are regardless!

The first four nights after the incident, Jaina couldn’t shake off the sensation that she’d missed a vital clue somewhere. A clue to what, she wasn’t sure of, but every morning found her waking up drenched in the cold, clammy sweat of night terrors and her focus during the daily meetings was trained more on trying to suss out what kept her anxiety ramped up than the actual events. Jaina had kept up contact with Swiftarrow, having found the priestess just as eager to delve into long hours debating theory and the implication of magic in the lives of the average Azerothian as she herself was. When Jaina mentioned the dread on the third day, Swiftarrow suggested a small tincture of peacebloom-infused tea to lull Jaina to sleep, and then fadeleaf and dreamfoil to keep that sleep dreamless. By the end of the first week, Jaina chalked the entire bout of restlessness to the aftermath of being locked in a cell with a void creature and renewed her investment in the diplomatic proceedings.

Not that the diplomatic proceedings were ultimately healthier for her mindset. What had begun as an honest attempt to restore the hierarchy and heritage of three ancient kingdoms had turned into a series of petty squabbles as the histories and entitlement of nobility and royalty clashed together in only the ways the social elite could manage.

The borderlands of Gilneas had been rendered almost entirely useless for large-scale agriculture thanks to the upheaval of the Cataclysm which hadn’t overly affected the Gilneans too much due to the way the curse of the worgen now spread through their blood and their lineages. The old farms and estates had gone fallow and overrun with wild game which was a boon to the worgen. However, with the capital city still blighted, the idea had been to move north into Silverpine to rebuild the communities of Pyrewood and Ambermill. Directly countering the needs of the few living Lordaeron who did not want to subject themselves to Greymane’s rule. The Gilneans might have become one of the integral pieces of the High Alliance, but the survivors of the plague had not so easily forgotten (or forgiven) the isolation and abandonment by their southern neighbor.

That didn’t even touch the prospect of the Lightsworn, made of both the undead risen by the naaru, and those forsaken who had committed to (and survived) the Ordeal by Holy Fire - a secretive rite that the Lightforged offered to those damned into undeath.

Jaina was there mostly to serve as a neutral party, due to Kul Tiras remaining relatively self-sufficient even after the Zandalari Wars; she remembered the days in Theramore where the political environment made her long for the solitude of academic study.

As the first week wore out, Jaina noticed Alleria’s growing presence as a sideline to the proceedings. Officially, it was Magister Umbric who represented the ren’dorei, but Alleria was one of the old heroes and Jaina believed it must have felt natural for Silvermoon to look to one of the Windrunners for guidance.

Vereesa had been present for the first week as well but had disappeared by the time of the Arathi treaties. The youngest Windrunner often did not have the temperament for human politics, and Jaina first thought nothing of it as Vereesa seemed glad to leave the negotiations to the humans.
It was around the end of the second week that Jaina started to consider that the initial feeling of dread should not have been - as she’d first done - brushed off as the aftermath of trauma, but as an early warning.

After a grueling session that laid out the recent amendments to the land rights along the southern foothills of the Hinterlands, Alleria caught up with Jaina as the mage started down the stairs to the street outside the Citadel. The elven ranger stood out even among the eclectic, showmanship attire of the various adventurers, dressed in a simple loose-fitting tunic and bay-colored leggings. The emerald and gold that Jaina associated with the eldest Windrunner was evident in the cloak that Alleria wore to acknowledge the chill of the encroaching autumn.

“Lady Proudmoore,” Alleria greeted. “I trust I didn’t snore so loud this time around in the meeting?”

Jaina blinked but took the unexpected conversation in stride. She broke pace just for a second, then continued down the stairs. “No louder than myself, I’m afraid. I understand that we’re making true progress here in healing the war-wounds, but the posturing is so aggravating.”

Alleria laughed, “not a fan of politics?”

“On the contrary, I find politics fascinating. I strongly support the idea of mutual cooperation between nations to ensure a stronger, healthier world for all. It’s the ego that I detest.”

“I was certain that to engage in politics, one needed the ego.” Alleria guided them off the main thoroughfare toward one of the slender alleyways behind the shops themselves. The identity of the crowd around them shifted away from the numerous Draenei, humans, and Lightforged and toward a mixture of races that reminded Jaina of the Dalaran that hovered over Northrend.

Ren’dorei lounged on steps, engaged in games of chance with gnomes and the occasional goblin. Dark Iron Dwarves were here as well, a large group gathered around a makeshift anvil. They argued in Dwarvish, gesturing wildly over two air elementals who looked content to feed on the thermals rising up from the nearby brazier.

Jaina took in the new surroundings but didn’t break the conversation flow to inquire to the detour. “I take it you didn’t approve of the division of the southern Hillsbrad Foothills?” She inquired innocently, knowing full well that Alleria had mentally tuned out by that portion of the meeting.

Alleria flashed her a wicked smile. “Concerned about Southshore trade secrets, Lady Windrunner?” Jaina kept her question light; if the elven ranger was going through this much trouble to speak with her relatively privately, she’d
at least play along.

Alleria made a face at the title. “Lady Windrunner is my mother, please, just call me Alleria.”

Yeah, that wasn’t going to happen. Alleria might have been Vereesa’s sister, but she was also one of the heroes of the old Alliance. Her sacrifice upon Draenor was the basis for countless stories of glory and honor that Jaina had grown up on, and it would be impossible to just set aside that sort of awe.

“Lady Alleria, then?”

Alleria didn’t appear thrilled with the amendment but shrugged. “That works.”

Jaina nodded and proceeded to watch the first round of cards. She’d never got into Hearthstone itself, but many of the apprentices she’d grown up with had loved the game - betting curfews, allowances, and spell-aids on the outcome.

Several minutes passed, and they exchanged small-talk about the game before Alleria guided them onward. The elf kept glancing surreptitiously over her shoulder as they maneuvered through the crowd, but when Jaina tried to follow where she looked, she saw nothing out of the ordinary. Somewhere between the back-entrance to the herb gardens and the Reliquary, Alleria brought up the actual reason she’d tagged along on Jaina’s impromptu nightly walk.

“Vereesa hasn’t been to the last five councils,” Alleria announced.

Jaina thought back but brushed it off. “Vereesa doesn’t enjoy them.”

“She used to. Vereesa constantly tagged along when Syl -- “ the name caught in her throat, and Alleria coughed, “-- when Sylvanas observed military meetings under our mother’s supervision.”

Times like this, Jaina wondered the actual age difference between the Windrunner sisters, but there’s never been a decent time to ask Vereesa about her sisters before, and now wasn’t any better. Jaina’s fingers itched for a glass to hold, just to have something to fiddle with.

“She left the councils to Rhonin,” Jaina added in.

Alleria’s ears dipped low, “they probably reminded her of -- well --” she put on a more pleasant smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “That explains her absence, then, though could you ask her to come find me?”

Jaina nodded, about to answer ‘of course’ when she balked. Now that she thought about it, she hadn’t seen Vereesa for the past week. “I … actually haven’t seen her recently. She might have taken the twins out of the city for a while?”

“That would be like her, but the twins are still in the apprentice barracks.”

Jaina pinched the bridge of her nose and stopped just out of the shadow of a statue honoring one of the founders of Dalaran. The stone was worn, much like how her temper was at the moment. She missed Vereesa at this moment, if only because Vereesa was as blunt as a mace, whereas she felt her weaknesses and habits being prodded by the eldest Windrunner. Usually, she’d dance the steps until the conversation wound naturally to a revelation point, but she’d spent the entire day listening to farming rights and was, frankly, exhausted. “Lady Alleria, I don’t know where Vereesa is.”

Alleria blinked at her, all faux-innocence underneath Jaina’s withering stare before she sighed. “I know she’s angry with me, and I wouldn’t ask you to break her trust if I didn’t --”
Jaina held up a hand. “I swear on the Tides, Lady Alleria, I don’t know where Vereesa is. Why?” That previous sense of dread returned. “Did something happen?”

Alleria studied her much like a lynx contemplates the rabbit. That arcane gaze was enough to set Jaina’s last nerve on edge, and she reflexively took a step back just to provide distance. “I would have sworn she’d tell you, at least, seeing that you’re …” Alleria waved a hand vaguely in Jaina’s direction. “You know.”

Jaina didn’t know.

Alleria sighed again and shifted her stance. “I don’t mind. If Vereesa’s happy, then I’m happy. I mean, she’s my baby sister so I --”

Jaina had lowered her hand, but it snapped back up. “Wait. Wait. You think Vereesa and I …” she copied Alleria’s hand-motion, then felt her cheeks warm. “No! We’re - we’re friends!”

“What - really?” Alleria’s head canted to the side. “I - huh. All right,” she kept staring at Jaina as if she wasn’t entirely convinced. “So,” she ran a hand through her hair, “you haven’t seen Vereesa since …when?”

Jaina still reeled from the implications that she and Vereesa were together and that Alleria would have been fine with it. Well, as fine as an older sister ever could be about their sibling dating another person. She crossed her arms, hoping to create even more distance between Alleria and herself, and used the gesture to try and think on the actual issue on the table.

“She was there when the Hinterland rights were established - the Silver Covenant wanted to establish a breeding ground for their hippogryphs along the northern ridges,” Jaina mused, “that’s the last time I saw her?”

Alleria frowned, “I met with her afterward. We … talked.” Alleria’s ears twitched, “then she stormed out.”

“What did you talk about?” Jaina pressed for elaboration.

Alleria hesitated. She stared out over the street, breaking eye contact. “Our people, mostly. She’s still bothered about Kivan’s death --”

“It was fairly traumatic,” Jaina felt the need to point out.

Alleria waved a dismissive hand. “It’s not the how, but the why that bothered her.”

Jaina disagreed, but kept her thoughts to herself. She watched Alleria watch the road and the few travelers upon it for a little while before she prompted the conversation further. She was hungry, and it was growing late enough that the main kitchen of the Lounge would be closed by the time she returned.

“Vereesa believes I’m recruiting the Silver Covenant, and she’s worried that I’ll get the last of the Quel’dorei killed.”

Jaina didn’t quite know how to respond to that. “Aren’t you?” was what she finally went it. Alleria’s glower sent a chill of fear down Jaina’s spine. “I … that’s the perception.”

“Of course I’m not recruiting! The Void is my burden to bear - and the first of the Ren’dorei were … accidental. I did what I needed to so they could be saved.”
“The Ren’dorei ranks are growing, though.”

“The Void promises the power and cunning to protect their families and win back their lands,” Alleria explained.

“That’s a passive way to see the situation. You’re the Alleria Windrunner - even the human kingdoms lift you up as a hero to be admired.”

Alleria’s glower darkened. “How tempting are those Tidesage scrolls, Lady Jaina? You haven’t risked a peek at the abyssal rites, have you? For research purposes only, of course.”

Jaina flushed. She’d had to lock away the Tidesage scrolls deep within one of the safes offered by the Lounge and spent a few hours every night struggling with the urge to unlock and read through the texts.

Alleria watched her, victorious, but not smug. “The Void promises infinite solutions to their problems. I might be ‘the Alleria Windrunner,’ but I can only advise and train after they follow the call.” The victorious look faded into a troubled one. “The Locus-Walker and Magister Umbric...aren’t as concerned as I am about the growing numbers.” Alleria’s fingers twitched, catching Jaina’s attention, and she wondered what the elven ranger was missing. Probably her bow?

Then Alleria was on the move, with a dismissive: “thank you, Lady Jaina. I suppose I need to find Khadgar now.”

“Khadgar?” Jaina picked up the pace to match Alleria’s stride. “Wait, Lady Alleria, you just told me you believe Vereesa’s missing --”

“No quite. I simply asked if she told you where she was heading.” Alleria tossed her a sidelong glance. “As you don’t know --”

“We might not be involved, but she’s my closest friend. If there’s something going on, I’d like to help.” She gambled, “and any spell you need Khadgar to perform, I could manage it more efficiently and discreetly.”

That got Alleria to slow down and turn back to face Jaina properly. “You don’t even know what I’ll ask him.”

“You’re looking for Vereesa, but you haven’t gone after her yourself - even though you are one of the premier trackers outside the Huntmaster herself. That suggests that you’re worried someone else will notice her disappearance.” Jaina took the lead in their nightly stroll. She didn’t head back to the Lounge - her room was far too public for what she anticipated Alleria would need.

Alleria watched her with a calculating look but allowed the shift in control as she followed on. “Continue.”

“There are several excellent trackers in the Alliance, but you haven’t tasked them with this --”

“What makes you so certain I haven’t?”

“You wouldn’t have approached me otherwise.”

Alleria hummed.

“So, the Alliance trackers aren’t tapped, and SI:7 wouldn’t be involved because we’ve already established that you don’t want Vereesa’s absence to be noted. You have rangers in the ren’dorei
ranks but …” Jaina trailed off and noted how Alleria didn’t prod her to finish her thought. The eldest Windrunner assessed her and waited for Jaina’s thoughts to gather on their own.

The pair walked into the gardens and Jaina led them further to the outer wall. She waved her hand, and the stone moved aside to allow them out onto the Edge itself. Out there, the wind that blew south from over the lake was biting cold this high up but ate noise in a way that a simple masking spell couldn’t. No one walked the Edge anymore, really.

“It wouldn’t be a matter of trust with the ren’dorei, but perhaps that they can’t accomplish the task? Which means Vereesa’s gone somewhere that the ren’dorei can’t physically go.”

Alleria tucked her cloak tight about her shoulders. Her ears were pinned close to her head, and she had nearly all of her exposed skin hidden away underneath the heavy linen, but Jaina could see the faint smile that twitched at Alleria’s lip. “So, what am I about to go ask Khadgar about that you could perform so much more admirably for me?”

Jaina’s cheeks warmed. She spun to face the smooth wall and harkened the sudden blush to the fact that the wind was freezing cold. Yes. The wind. Certainly not because Alleria’s voice was smooth like silk and that it had been far too long since --

“Lady Jaina?” Alleria sounded amused.

Oh, to the blight with the Windrunner sisters. Jaina reached deep within herself and curled a fist tight around a pulse of powerful, electric energy. It rumbled in her bones like an oncoming storm and as she drew it up and out of her spirit, her body ached.

Without looking, she held out her hand toward Alleria. “Vereesa’s necklace, please.”

A moment later, silver piled into her palm as Alleria placed a locket there. Jaina’s fingers closed around it. With a wild gesture, she flung her other hand out toward the stone and like a storm-surge, an image crashed onto the walls. It shimmered with arcane and threatened to spill out as the spell’s focus nearly slipped the leash.

Jaina wound it in, centering the magic upon Vereesa. The scry sharpened until simple details could be discerned.

Alleria stepped forward, amusement forgotten. “This is western Lordaeron, but I can’t discern exactly where in -- belore, Vereesa, you stubborn child!”

Jaina took a sliver of her concentration to actually observe the image the scrying spell painted. The details shifted and glimmered in and out of view, much like the tide. She also recognized the dour forests of Lordaeron’s northern forests, and the blight that saturated the land and sickened the trees until they were black, broken things against the cloudless sky.

“She’s in the northern mountains,” Alleria’s voice echoed Jaina’s own thoughts. “With the blight, though, I don’t even know how she got through? Wait. What banner is that?”

Jaina glanced up again. Alleria pointed to a faded ivory banner trimmed with a dark red. In the center was a stylized L that looked more like a C and threaded in the same rich, red color as the trim. She knew the banner well, “that is the banner of the Scarlet Crusade. They were a group of former Silver Hand.”

“Belore, Little Moon, you just had to be difficult,” Alleria muttered, eyes locked onto the fluttering flag. “This Scarlet Crusade, were they Light-Wielders?”
Jaina nodded, and as Vereesa walked forward into the shadow of a cathedral’s tower that she thought she’d never see again. “Yes, they had sanctified themselves to better battle the Scourge and the Forsaken.”

“No wonder I could never track her down,” Alleria ran a hand through her hair. “Lovely.”

“Lady Alleria,” Jaina turned to the eldest Windrunner, resting a hand on her hip as she offered the necklace back with the other one. “As promised, far more efficient than Khadgar --”

“But I wouldn’t say it was more discreet,” Alleria finished for her, taking the necklace back. The two of them looked on as the scryed Vereesa met someone who waited for her underneath the archway, and though the details were murky due to Jaina’s divided concentration, there were enough clues to put together --

“That’s --” Jaina cut off the name with a hiss.

Alleria’s eyes gleamed in the shadows next to her. “You understand, I hope, the reason why I wanted to keep Vereesa’s absence quiet?”

Jaina nodded. “As far as the Alliance is concerned, your sister died in the Battle for Silvermoon.” She turned to Alleria, and with her concentration fully broken, the scrying image faded on the wall. “How are we going to get Vereesa back, then?”

Alleria canted her head, weighing the option of trusting Jaina, before she sighed. “Let me buy you a drink, and we’ll have a proper talk.”

As the two of them headed back into Dalaran properly, the wind picked up on the ash of the scrying spell itself. The last detail to disappear was the crimson gaze that burned bright in the dark beyond the doorway.
Chapter 4

Alleria led Jaina to the rather sparse space the ranger claimed for herself in Dalaran. It sat high above the covered alleyway and shared a balcony space with the adjoining greenhouse. On the balcony, plants twisted around the supports and along the wall, and the fragrance kept the blacksmith mostly as a visual nuisance.

As Alleria went to fetch the glasses, Jaina took it upon herself to do what every self-affirmed curious person should do when they enter the space of another: snoop. Jaina didn’t touch anything, of course, but she scoured the walls and the few personal touches to learn more about the elusive eldest sister. There weren’t many. The rooms felt less like a home, and more like an army tent - a place to rest and recuperate between struggles. On a desk near to the back window, next to a curtained-off room, was a pile of architectural papers detailing the commissioned work for not just one of the elven spire-estates that Quel’Thalas had been famous for, but the restoration of several buildings.

“Vereesa felt it a bit macabre to try and revive the estate, but Windrunner Spire was the home of my family for thousands of years. I can’t let it crumble.” Alleria returned from the adjoining kitchenette, a pair of steaming mugs in her hands. She offered one to Jaina, then stood next to her. “My family’s ancestral lands are far enough away from Silvermoon and the Sunwell that the ren’dorei can return to Quel’Thalas without risking contact.”

“It gives your people a homeland too,” Jaina observed.

Alleria smiled and took a sip of her drink. “Yes. We’ve been refugees a bit too long.”

Jaina took a moment to indulge in the offered drink. The scent of spiced cider brought back memories of her childhood, tucked into an overstuffed armchair with a crackling fireplace and an evening of stories to look forward to. On the colder nights, Tandred would be there as well looking over the requirements to apply to the naval academy, his unkempt mop of hair continually spilling over into his eyes. When she shook the memories from her mind, Alleria had stepped away from the desk.

Right. There was an actual reason Jaina was here.

Jaina followed, and once Alleria perched herself on a stool, Jaina brought the chair from the desk over so they could converse. “How secure are we?”

Alleria glanced around her living quarters, “most of the occupants of this building prefer their comings, goings, and all other activities to go as unnoticed as possible. We can discuss what we need to.”

Jaina held her mug tighter. “Right. So... she survived?”

Alleria worried her lip with a fang. Jaina didn’t blame her for the hesitation. Three years ago, Jaina had been one of the loudest of the voices calling for the head of the Banshee, and it had been her magic that served the vanguard that broke the defenses of Silvermoon. Though, with recollection, Alleria had been right there at her side championing the Alliance’s offensive efforts.

Finally, Alleria’s shoulders slumped. Her ears lowered, and her gaze went somewhere at Jaina’s
hip. “She’s my sister.”

“I had to put down Derek - I understand .”

“No, Jaina,” without the honorific, her name was a blunt weapon, “you don’t understand. You knew your brother for, what, nearly forty years?”

“He is still my brother.”

“She was my sister for over a thousand years, and then when I fought the legion, she was one of the lights that reminded me I had a home to fight for.”

“You said it yourself, though, that she should have been put down!”

“A threat said when I’m certain she’s being taken into custody is not the same as actually facing the possibility that she’s truly about to be killed!” The void licked around the edges of Alleria’s form, distorted and rippling like the ocean during a storm.

Jaina held up a hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply anything.”

Alleria snarled wordlessly and got up to pace. The frenetic energy swirled around her with each pass; whispers crawled along the open space between them. Intangible, incomprehensible, but loud enough that the myriad chorus tickled at that empty spot in Jaina’s psyche. She closed her eyes, counted slowly backward from twenty, and did not open them until she heard Alleria alight upon the stool once again.

The ranger looked defeated. Alleria set her mug on the counter behind her and folded her hands loosely in her lap. Alleria stared morosely at her fingers and looked so much like Vereesa did that Jaina couldn’t help but feel for her.

“I was supposed to protect them.” Alleria said, “Sylvanas, and Vereesa. After the orcs came through - we were all that was left. So, when it came the time - no, Jaina, I couldn’t find it in my heart to murder my sister at the gates of the nation that she died to defend for the second time.”

Jaina stayed quiet. She’d learned well enough that silence prompted a conversation much further than words at times.

It proved true with Alleria. The eldest Windrunner squared her shoulders and sat up straight. She’d plucked up her mug again, and settled her uncanny gaze firmly on Jaina. “Are you satisfied with my reason?”

“That’s not -” Jaina bit off her retort. “The Scarlet Monastery is tucked high into the northern mountains, and those mountains are saturated with the Blight. How did Vereesa even get there safely?”

“A question that she can answer for us once you retrieve her.”

Jaina didn’t even argue that point. Alleria couldn’t disappear from the public spotlight, not without attracting attention that the Windrunners wouldn’t want; where Jaina had an excellent excuse to recuse herself from the daily barrage of negotiations. And this was Vereesa - the one person alive that Jaina wouldn’t second-guess going after.

Jaina slumped back against her seat; all of her senses alert at the chance to riddle out a puzzle. “She left, what, eight or nine days ago?”
“Nine,” Alleria said.

“The scrying spell shows us the events as they’re occurring. In nine days, Vereesa wouldn’t have even reached Lordaeron’s borders.”

Alleria’s brow arched. “Are you judging by the common horse or a quel’dorei courser?”

“The courser, since I believe Vereesa still has Gallant, no? Even pushed to his limits, at best, he’d have reached Lordaeron City itself, but there are another few weeks of travel northeast, and you’ve got the Blight, the foothills, and then the mountain passes themselves.”

“Are you assuming she went through Alterac itself, or along the Silverpine Road?”

“Alterac. There’s less traffic that way, and the rugged terrain doesn’t slow down a courser that terribly. Silverpine would add another two weeks to her travel needs.”

“What if she took her hippogryph? That’s a direct shot.”

At first, Jaina thought Alleria was teasing her, but when she looked up to catch the ranger in the act, she found Alleria’s brow furrowed in thought and her gaze severe and intense as she waited for Jaina’s answer.


“I would hope so?” “So she knows how you track, and your limits. She didn’t want you to follow her, and any ordinary means of travel would put you on her tail immediately, but what about a portal?”

“I’m elven, we can pick up the trace arcane in the air after a portal is opened, even with the stabilization wards the Shal’dorei telemancers built.” Alleria shook her head, dismissing the line of theory.

“Ah, but a portal opened on sanctified ground?”

“I wouldn’t be able to get close enough to pick up the trail --” Alleria lifted her gaze from the map and rewarded Jaina with a small, but still brilliant smile. “Lady Jaina, I think you’re onto something.”

Jaina ducked her head, and knew she was blushing, but returned the smile. “My qualifications for the title of Archmage were centered around portal and location magical theory and practice.”

“So you’re a tracker-mage. Interesting.” Alleria kept looking at her, and Jaina grew more and more fidgety underneath that scrutinizing look. “I have an idea.”

Alleria scrambled off the stool fast enough that it clattered to the ground as she ducked behind the curtain. Jaina heard rustling, and of things being tossed around peppered with the delightful musical lilt of elvish cursing. Or what she assumed was elvish cursing. She sipped her cider and waited for Alleria to return, and used the moment to recover her composure.

When Alleria did return, it was with a pile of scrolls haphazardly tucked underneath her arm that she unceremoniously dumped upon the floor. She knelt and unfurled each of them until she found the map of Lordaeron Kingdom. It was a bit outdated - without the upheaval of the Cataclysm, but it worked.

“Lady Jaina, since you’re the expert on locational theory - can you point out where this Monastery
Jaina had to get down on the floor next to Alleria, but the rush of working through something that wasn’t politics had her caring little about the improbability of the situation. She conjured up a pair of calipers to assist her in tracing out the distance before she tapped a space on the western side of the North Lordaeron Mountains.

“The only monastery I know of in the mountains was the old Tirifal one.”

Alleria circled it with a charcoal stick. “Now, we know that Vereesa just arrived at the Monastery, so if she took Gallant through the portal …” she made an estimated circle, “and if we want to assume she took her hippogryph instead, we can extend it …”

“About as far south as Andorhal.”

“Ah, but Andorhal isn’t important to the Lightforged. They would have no need to waste resources establishing a stabilized portal in a sanctified space, and we’ve forgotten one important fact,” Alleria rocked back on her haunches, “the blight is airborne, so a hippogryph wouldn’t be exactly useful to her. So, we’ve got Gallant, and a Sanctified Portal which brings us to …” she crossed an X over Hearthglen.

“Why would Hearthglen be considered holy ground?”

“It is where Tirion Fordring took command. His martyrdom at the Battle of the Broken Shore is something the Lightforged take very seriously. They would be quick to ensure the hometown of one of their High Exarch’s paladins is under their watch.” Alleria’s jaw tightened. “Perhaps I could just swallow my pride and ask the Huntsmaster to track her from there - the Lightforged actually like her thanks to the help on Argus.”

“The Huntsmaster?” Jaina tried not to chuckle. “You mean the woman who will happily shoot you at four hundred paces with your family’s own bow?” Jaina shook her head. “I’ll go. Within four days I’ll have Vereesa home and safe, and absolutely no one will be the wiser. I’ve got the perfect plan.”

***

Two days, a haggling match with a stable master who would make the Bilgewater proud, a pounding headache; and faced with the treacherous mountain passes later; Jaina had absolutely no plan and for a solid second of her life regretted that she knew any of the Windrunner sisters.

Hearthglen had been, as Alleria mentioned, more like a garrisoned tomb than a living, breathing town. It was within the high stone walls that Jaina saw the realized potential of a city built on the ideals and preachings of the naaru. There was a vitality in the land that warmed Jaina’s heart but at the price of a rigidity that struck through the town like an iron lattice. Was it the brief touch with the void that made her uneasy here? She’d traveled to the few outposts that the kaldorei had allowed outsiders to wander, and even among the secretive and wary night elves, she felt more welcomed than she had in a town that honored a human hero.

Now, though, the prospect of dealing with the Lightforged seemed far more pleasing than trekking through the mountains. She’d taken the southern road along to the Northridge Lumber Camp on the excuse that she was on a pilgrimage to Uther’s Tomb before she returned to Kul Tiras. She didn’t expect that she’d been followed, or her movements tracked, but still - best not to have the Lightforged curious about why an archmage was invested in a mountaineering trip.
Once in the Hearthglen Hills, she was able to move freely. Before the Blight unleashed in the Battle for Lordaeron, the Argent Dawn bounties had brought plenty of mercenaries from both the Alliance and the Horde forces to cull the numbers of both the plagued beasts and scourged dead that once roamed the old growth forest. After the Blight, the trails were quiet and empty save for the occasional resistant creature that could be avoided with an incantation of invisibility. She remembered many of the old hunting treks from her summers with the Menethil family so made progress despite the hostile terrain.

Another two days and a night spent with the unpleasant feeling of being watched passed before Jaina snagged her first clue just as she left the lowland trails for the narrow cliffs. It was crudely etched, and anyone without specific arcane training would have passed it off as a quirk of erosion, but Jaina spent too many decades studying magical theory to assume that common thought. The rune was cleverly hidden in the natural setting of the stone, but as she traced over the shape with her fingers, Jaina found herself scrawling out an elven warding rune - and a powerful one at that. She could still feel the subtle grooves of the chisel that cut out the shape. You haven’t been here long enough to be worn down by the elements yet, have you?

There was just one problem. The runestone faced towards the western foothills, towards the Scarlet Monastery itself. Whatever it protected was located higher in the eastern ridges and the scrying … Was now five days distance.

Well, Jaina might not have had a plan per say, but she had her talents, and she had expected this. She found a blank, smooth section of the cliff and unwound Vereesa’s locket from its space in her pack. A reach within her for the scrying spell and --

Nothing.

The spell splashed harmlessly on the stone like she’d done little more than toss a bucket at the cliff.

Well, the Blight was entropic in nature, and it could have been possible that it saturated the ley-lines that Jaina drew from. She could adjust to that. She took a minute to scratch chalk symbols on the stone to focus the channeled spell and to adjust for the potential drain of the Blight itself. She reached within herself again, seized the spell, and launched it against the runes.

They bubbled, boiled, and melted down the cliff. Jaina faced nothing.

“What on Azeroth…?”

Right. The third time would be the charm. She redid the runes, and then took several minutes to center herself. She reached for the ley-line first to anchor her spell into the land and ground herself along the magical current.

She heard a faint hum of power.

She cracked open an eye to stare at the nearby runestone. The elven runestone. The practically perfectly replicated runestone of the warding magic that had protected Quel’Thalas for nearly seven thousand years.

Well. A good thing, then, that she’d already used Alleria’s insider knowledge of the runestone’s connections to the nexus of ley lines to infiltrate an elven sanctum, wasn’t it? And since she was not acting as a taxi for a strike team, she did not need a week to prepare for the teleport.

She just needed a night.
Jaina made camp close to the runestone, finding that the warding magic also worked to keep the Blight at a distance and granted her a safe perimeter that she didn’t need to keep refreshing every hour. For a moment, she wondered if it would be wiser to teleport her steed to Uther’s Tomb to throw off anyone who got curious - but a well-versed mage would be able to discern the spell. So, she took the time to work Scout - as she’d come to name the mare - into the teleport.

When she felt secure in the structure of the spell, she allowed herself a few hours of uneasy but recovering sleep. She might have been five days behind Vereesa’s travel, but if she were right, then this would rapidly close the distance the ranger hoped to have kept between them. Morning came and with it a miserable mist. The bit of rest Jaina managed had restored enough of her reserves that she felt ready to tackle the wards. She gathered her things and followed the lessons from Vereesa on how to make her campsite disappear. Then, she brought her staff from where she’d had it tucked away with the rest of the meager supplies Scout carried. The staff brimmed with the stolen power of the Thunder King and served as a perfect source to draw from for her spellwork. She wagered on whatever mage had established the wards to have protections against most mortal arcane spellweavers - they must have learned from the breach of Eversong’s defenses, but could they predict a Titan-sourced spell?

She hoped not as she called the spell into existence. She smelt ozone as the magic swirled around her and the mare. She felt the rumble of the earth beneath her feet as she sent was little more than a magical lockpick to turn the tumblers of the ward itself. Scout let out a nervous whinny next to her, but the mare didn’t attempt to bolt. She was either trained to tolerate magic, or she was too frightened to move. Either answer worked for Jaina.

There was a pressure in the space she existed in.

Then there wasn’t.

Where once there was the quiet awakening of a woods, there was now merely silence. A total silence that turned Jaina’s heartbeat into a drum that thundered against her ribcage. Scout’s pawing was a metronome that rung out in the middle of a sprawling courtyard that once saw life. Now, the crumbled ruins around Jaina only served to highlight the inevitable decay that everything would succumb to.

But what were the ruins? Jaina kept Scout’s reins in hand as she moved through a plaza that reminded her all at once of Surmar’s outlying districts, the elaborate spiral construction of Quel’Thalas, and the love of nature that Darnassus had shown in every bit of architecture. She thought of the Dire Maul in Feralas and found similarities in how nature had reclaimed much of the space she stood in.

Many of the buildings were in such a state of disrepair that Jaina first believed that she’d miscalculated, and now she’d be stuck traveling who knew how long back to where the boundary runestone was, but as she wandered through the unnatural stillness, she heard something.

It was white noise at first, the babble of a brook, but as Jaina’s hearing adjusted to the quiet of the ruins, she began to pick out the lilting rise and fall of Thalassian. She knew that voice.

“Vereesa?” She called out. She wrapped Scout’s reins around an overturned column in a slip-knot that she could loosen in a hurry if she needed to. Jaina quickened her pace, ears pricked toward Vereesa’s voice. Her friend sounded angry - no - furious. Her Thalassian was rapid, too fast for Jaina to follow. “Vereesa?”

There was that feeling of being watched again. Jaina felt the weight of more than a hundred eyes settle on her shoulders. She swore she heard voices whispering as she rushed into a spire that looked like it had seen some restoration work.
“Anaria malanore --” a pause, then a throaty laugh, “Little Moon, I figured after the first one, you would have learned to stay away from humans.”

Jaina knew that sibilant rasp. She had planned to encounter her after the scrying spell revelation, but hearing the ghostly hiss of a woman she’d believed long-dead immediately amped all of Jaina’s survival instincts.

“What are you talking about, Sylvanas?” Vereesa sighed.

Jaina gripped her staff. In her other hand, she summoned an ice lance that would shatter and ricochet if deflected. She’d use it to distract, then get close. Grab Vereesa, then blink out.

“Are you so self-absorbed now that you didn’t hear your pet arriving?”

Jaina swallowed a deep breath. So much for the advantage of surprise. She lowered the ice lance and rounded the final corner. As soon as she saw Vereesa, she assessed her for obvious harm. There were no bruises, no cuts, nothing that suggested she’d been hurt. “Vereesa! Thank the Light you’re ok.”

Jaina’s gaze locked on the second elf in the room. “You are not going to stop me.”

The Banshee Queen might not have been wearing her Warchief Plate, but even in the practical dark leather and mail, she struck an imposing figure that commanded Jaina’s attention. The years of exile had not seemed to ruffle the undead ranger, for she still held that same cold, arrogant smirk that had encouraged Jaina to spend years of her life attempting to wipe it from the Banshee Queen’s face. She found that urge was still as strong even now.

Sylvanas Windrunner held up her hands, her smirk dropping in favor of a more simpering expression; it was as false as the fiend’s grasp on life itself. “I notice the Alliance still has yet to learn the manners on how to conduct themselves in my home. Vereesa is a guest! And she is as free to leave as the birds themselves.”

Jaina ignored her and turned her sights back on Vereesa. She held out her hand, tried to school a welcoming, encouraging smile on her face. “Vereesa. Come with me. We can go back to Dalaran and -- “ her eyes flickered to where Sylvanas stood. “What? No. You shouldn’t even be here, Jaina. How did you even --?"

“Alleria. She couldn’t find you, and she got worried.” Jaina glanced to Sylvanas, who had not moved from her original spot. The Banshee Queen had dropped the simpering act and now watched the pair of them with a bored expression. Jaina extended her hand again to Vereesa. “It looks like she had every right to! Vereesa, I understand that Kivan scared you, ok and that you’re afraid you’re going to lose your sisters but --”

Jaina couldn’t believe what she was about to say, “but we can bring Sylvanas back with us. She can stand trial --” she ignored the snort of derision from the undead elf, “ -- and we can have justice seen.”

“You … don’t understand at all.” Vereesa shook her head. She picked up her bow with a trembling hand. Jaina blinked. Had Sylvanas told the truth about Vereesa’s lack of imprisonment? She glanced a third time to the banshee who only gave her a cool stare in return. Vereesa’s hand gripped the handle white-knuckled. “Jaina. You are my dearest friend, so please believe me when I tell you that you need to go. Right now.”

“Vereesa, I --” Jaina stopped as Vereesa nocked the bow and drew the sting back to where it
brushed her cheek. “Vereesa?”

“Well now” Sylvanas drawled. “I thought I was in for another dull morning!” The ex-Warchief of the Horde slipped over to a worn chair and fell into it like it was the very throne she’d been deposed from. She tucked a hand underneath her chin and watched the stand-off with a malicious gleam to her gaze. “I’m so grateful I was wrong.”

Chapter End Notes

1) In canon, Jaina is considered one of the premier mages skilled in Transmutation - which governs portals and teleportation spells. She, along with Khadgar, are probably the only mages who can easily slip through time and space like they were children's playthings.

2) I used a combination of a rather detailed map by Kuusien on deviantart, the few stated travel times in books, the atlas images found in the Warcraft movie, a dash of Warcraft's distant past as a Warhammer game, and some handwaving for the distances and travel times between places. WoW is terrible at actually mentioning anything about the size of Azeroth or the distance between places, but as it took an army weeks to march into southern Ashenvale from the Barrens, I'm just gonna roll with it.

3) 15k words before our leading ladies spoke to each other. :D
Another incredibly early update, I know, but I'm at the mercy of a strange work lull and I'd rather get more content out now than risk falling behind as the months go on. Plus, I did leave it on a nasty cliffhanger. Enjoy! And a huge thank you to everyone who leaves kudos and reviews. You're literally the reason I keep posting. :)

A cold, pale light illuminated Vereesa from above and cast her features in long, sharp lines. Jaina could detect the faint tremor in the elf’s hand as Vereesa held the arrow aimed at her shoulder - or what Jaina hoped was her shoulder.

“Vereesa…” Jaina gentled her voice, lifted her hand, and lowered her staff.

Vereesa was brash. Impulsive. There were quite a few times after the loss of Theramore where Jaina had to be the reasonable one, but even with Vereesa’s history of reckless action, she wouldn’t draw fire on Jaina without good reason.

Or perhaps Vereesa was underneath a spell.

Jaina’s attention flickered to Sylvanas.

“You won’t lay a hand on her,” Vereesa warned.

Ah. There it was. Alleria had lashed out about the same thing. This was a conversation Jaina had already experienced, and, she hoped, knew how to de-escalate.

“I can offer her the protection of Kul Tiras so she can see a fair trial --”

“A fair trial?” Vereesa scoffed, “and where would you find such a thing in the world now?”

“In Boralus. As Lord Admiral, I can oversee --”

“I’d be at the ‘mercy’ of my sister’s night-light in less than a week --”

Jaina tossed Sylvanas a scowl, “Not helping.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize I was supposed to be.” Sylvanas regained that simpering tone and unfurled herself from the chair to approach the standoff itself. “Allow me to ...illuminate you, dear Lord Admiral, on the futility of trying to see ‘justice’ done in a world where there is no truth but your precious Light.”

Jaina had to tilt her head to maintain eye contact. Sylvanas was several inches taller, and she wielded the height difference line she would use a weapon. “The Lightforged have no political power anywhere on Kul Tiras.”

“They wouldn't need political power. They'd just need a martyr to see the deed done before I even left the mainland.”
“So you should get to live out your days in peace while the innocents you slaughtered are denied their closure?”

Sylvanas smirked, the faintest hint of her fangs showed against the line of her lips. “Have you paid penance for the Sunreavers you and my sister cut down yet, Lord Admiral? Or do you just ignore that gruesome little stain on the consciousness of the Alliance when you count the losses of war? Are their names on the memorials to the fallen?”

“Sylvanas,” Vereesa chastised.

Sylvanas cast that crimson gaze upon her youngest sister. “My apologies, dear sister. I didn’t realize that you were the only one allowed to fire off shots in this conversation.”

Vereesa seemed to notice the arrow she aimed towards Jaina, and like she was shaken out of a haze, she dropped the stance. She carefully lessened the tension on the string and set the bow down back against her thigh. Her ears drooped as she let out a long, defeated sigh. “Jaina …”

Jaina shook her head. “No, I - I understand wanting to defend your sister; and you didn’t actually shoot me so …” she knew the smile she gave wasn’t as natural as she’d hoped for. “No harm, no foul?”

Vereesa disagreed, but her body visibly relaxed a fraction more. “Alleria sent you?”

“You sound surprised.”

“No, just - “ Vereesa fidgeted, and her gaze darted up towards the light source. “I thought I’d thrown the trail better than --”

“You showed up here barely a day after her,” Sylvanas finished for her sister. She prowled back to the seat; without the promise of imminent violence, she didn’t seem keen to involve herself in the conversation further. Nor, it seemed, was she willing to just leave them to it. She reclaimed her seat and resumed watching them with her previous bored expression.

Vereesa rarely showed it, but Jaina knew that an almost zealous need to prove herself drove the high elf in nearly all aspects of her life. It had been there like a simmering fire when they’d first met, and only sparked higher with every passing year.

When Alleria had arrived at Krasus’ Landing alongside the Champions four years back, Jaina had been there - if only because even she wasn’t immune to the sudden whiplash of planetary annihilation to a surprising victory. Jaina remembered the cry of jubilation as the long-lost Sons of Lothar finally returned to Azeroth. She remembered watching Vereesa smile so brightly that it looked a little fragile, but even then, the youngest Windrunner had situated herself as the proud sibling content to stand off to the side.

It was the same now. Jaina could see the mental steps Vereesa was taking to bury her true thoughts underneath a placid exterior.

“It was sheer luck. Scout - er, the mare I'd loaned from Hearthglen - picked up a rock in her fore hoof. I caught the bottom half of the warding rune …” Jaina's attempt to soothe Vereessa’s pride wasn't going anywhere. “Uhm.”

Well. Jaina felt awkward.

Vereesa was not in need of rescue, and the looming specter of Sylvanas Windrunner's legacy was lost in the reality of a brooding elf.
“Alleria couldn’t track you at all,” Jaina blurted out. “She was desperate enough to think about reaching out to the Huntmaster.”

Despite herself, Vereesa snorted. “I’m sure Mistwalker is heartbroken that she missed an opportunity to practice with her favorite target.”

“When Alleria approached me, we had to work through a pretty powerful scrying spell, and if I hadn’t found the rune, then I’d still be on my way to the Monastery, and then I’d be lost because I am not a ranger. At all.”

Vereesa quirked a skeptical brow. “Well, I’m sorry you trekked all the way out here, but when you return, you can let Alleria know I’m fine and that I’ll be out here for a while.”

“How long is a while?”

Vereesa shrugged. “As long as I want to visit my sister. I didn’t realize I had to ensure you were a part of the decision, Jaina.”

Jaina rubbed at her temple. Vereesa had reason to come out here. Sylvanas, even a deposed and relatively-toothless Sylvanas, was not the sort of family one just happened to drop in for a routine reunion. There was something here that Vereesa was invested in - but what?

“All right, Vereesa.” Jaina could admit defeat, and if she was honest, she’d done her bit. She’d found Vereesa, and if Alleria wants to worry about dragging her stubborn sister home, it’s on her. Jaina made for the archway, not looking forward to the long ride back, nor was she looking forward to informing Alleria in a few weeks.

Jaina paused. Her fingers tapped along her staff. She had one last trick she could try. “Alleria didn’t mention that the twins were worried about you…” she murmured. Jaina glanced over her shoulder. “What lie did you tell them?”

“How dare --”

“Because you wouldn’t have gone through the trouble of keeping Alleria as far off your tail as you have if you expected to be back soon. So, what did you tell them? Archaeological dig? A mission to the front-line down in Silithus?”

“Stop it!”

Jaina met Vereesa’s gaze head-on. The ranger was stubborn, but so was she.

“I’m here for Alleria, for my sons, and for the few quel’dorei that are left. Does that satisfy you?”

Jaina crossed her arms, brow raised. “That isn’t good enough, and you know it.”

Vereesa responded with a scowl. She pushed her hand through her hair, dragging her fingers through the silver strands. “What I know is that every single day, I’m watching my people give themselves up to the light, or to the void. Every single day, one of the quel’dorei decides that Alleria’s path is worth the risk and --” she snarled wordlessly, her hands clenched into fists. “Kivan isn’t an outlier. His issue is becoming more and more common for the ren’dorei, and it’s going to
happen to Alleria eventually.”

“What does that have to do with the Ba-- with your sister?” Jaina refused to voice Sylvanas’ name. Better to keep her categorized in impersonal nouns.

“Sylvanas and her dark rangers are impervious to the Void, even beyond what the average forsaken could tolerate - or the average Death Knight.”

Vereesa wasn’t wrong. When Azshara’s involvement in the Azerite Wars had been revealed, there had come another one of the infamous ‘truces’ that forced the Horde and the Alliance into an uneasy partnership to push back the Naga. It lasted long enough for the Champions to rally through a final assault, though it had left Azeroth herself weakened.

At the lowest point, it had been the Dark Rangers that served as the messengers to and from the battle lines the Champions carved in the dark depths. They had been the only troops - even beyond the ren’dorei - that had been utterly immune to the call of N’zoth so close by.

“You want to know why, and if it’s possible to transfer whatever it is they have to Alleria.” Jaina felt like someone drained her lungs of air. “What does She get out of all of this?”

Sylvanas answered before Vereesa could, “why, the warm feeling of a deed well done, of course.”

Jaina resisted the urge to hurl an ice-lance in her direction. “Vereesa?”

“We’re sisters. I asked for help, she obliged.”

Vereesa was lying, but Jaina had no evidence to back that up; only a gut feeling. “So, let me help you then --” she spoke faster, and louder when Vereesa started to protest. “This is the fabled Falor’Thalas, isn’t it? Where your people landed when they arrived in the Eastern Kingdoms?”

Vereesa nodded, her protest paused for the moment. “I’m surprised you knew that, but yes, this is the Wintering Land. Come on, follow me.” She slung her bow over her shoulder and caught a look from Sylvanas. “What? She’s going to find out anyway.”

Jaina mentally agreed that she would have, and followed Vereesa out into the courtyard once again. After a moment, she heard the soft press of leather-soled boots fall into step behind them.

With the overgrowth, it was difficult to make out the sunshine beyond the canopy that stretched over their heads, but here and there stray strands of sunlight spun a lazy path down to where they stood. It gave the space a tranquil quiet that Jaina wouldn’t have pictured the Banshee Queen being content to linger in. Yet, there they were. Vereesa and her blinked with the adjustment to daylight, Sylvanas merely tilted her head up into the breeze and stared off at a rustling branch.

Vereesa moved with coiled anger to her steps as she led them past where Scout grazed on wild grasses. The mare lifted her head when the elves approached and wickered fondly as Jaina passed by, before returning to her meal.

They walked towards what looked to have been a temple of some sort, the statues that once must have been magnificent worn down by time and elements to be little more than smooth stone spires. Unhappy with Sylvanas taking up the rear-guard, Jaina kept her wits and her staff close by as they stepped through the broken pieces of history. Vereesa stopped before a section of crumbled flooring that must have collapsed decades ago, what with the vines that tangled along the dark passage.

“Listen.”
Jaina walked to the edge and tried to do just that. Even with the stillness of the lost city, the simple truth of the Banshee Queen standing behind her prevented her from centering her senses too much.

The soft brush of a whisper against her mind didn’t need her senses attuned, though. Jaina’s eyes snapped open and met Vereesa’s steady look.

“That’s …”

“Not exactly the void - but it’s close enough that it’s a strong lead. There’s evidence that our ancestors went down into whatever ruins are below us and yet we survived as a people to make it to Quel’Thallas.”

“Vereesa …” Jaina worried at her lip. “The quel’dorei are tempted daily by the promise of the void - what makes you think you’re immune to it?”

Vereesa’s ears flattened. “I’m working on an immunity --”

Suddenly, ice seized Jaina as a sickening realization dawned on her. It was a stretch, a horrible stretch, but Jaina feared she knew exactly what Sylvanas was going to get out of Vereesa’s trip, and why the youngest Windrunner had taken so many steps to try and hold off the pursuit for as long as possible. Jaina’s staff nearly tumbled out of her grasp as she stumbled from the shock. “You’re going to let her Raise you.”

Vereesa’s ears, so animate even when her face was a neutral mask, swiveled back and forth. She didn’t speak for a moment, then: “that’s absurd.”

“Is it?” Jaina pushed forward, away from the whispering chasm, and towards the nervous ranger. “By the Tides, Vereesa, are you insane? What about your sons - are you even thinking about them?”

“Oh course I’m thinking about them!” Vereesa snapped, mask dropping to reveal desperate, hungry grief. “I’m thinking about the day they follow the lure of powerful magic because their elven blood craves it like a drug. I’m thinking about the night they have to learn that their aunt was killed for her own safety - I’m thinking about what you’ll have to tell them when I turn out just like Kivan!”

The outburst sent Jaina back a step, and with a glance to Sylvanas, even the Banshee Queen seemed alarmed by the sudden explosion of raw emotion.

“It’s not just the quel’dorei that follow me that give into the void, Jaina, you’re right. I feel the pull too. Every moment I spend with Alleria, I can feel the whispers scratching at the back of my skull like --” Vereesa snarled, cutting off her words. She threw herself into a pacing rhythm, trying to burn off her temper. Alleria must have taught her that.

Sylvanas said nothing for a while as she watched her younger sister stalk back and forth. “Her only other option is to embrace the light along with the rest of Silvermoon, and that would remove her from Alleria entirely.”

“And you think undeath is the solution?”

Sylvanas turned that burning gaze onto Jaina. “You have no idea what I’m thinking, nor should you presume to, Lord Admiral.”

Jaina disagreed. This wasn’t the time, though. Vereesa needed to be talked out of her plan, but Jaina had nothing to offer in exchange.
Except…

“I have resistance to the whispers.” Jaina piped up. Both Windrunners looked her way. “After - uh - after what happened, I worked with Swiftarrow, and we noticed that I’d picked up - like scar tissue?” She was running on straight theory here, pulling scraps of a story from a few conversations and hypothesis. “It’s why I was chosen to bring the Tidesage scrolls for comparison - I was trained by them when I was a little girl, and whatever Swiftarrow did seemed to reinforce it.”

She lifted her staff. “Plus, there’s the essence of the Thunder King, and we’ve seen that the Keepers are resilient to the corruption. I’m not - I’m not saying I’m immune - “ she tried to get her words out before Vereesa could speak, “ - but if you need information here, then I have a better chance of sifting through it and clearing it before sending it off to you.”

“So, what, I go back and do nothing?”

“No! You go back and find our connections from other ancient sites; any that the Requiliary knows about - and that have been cleared for actual study. You’re excellent at piecing together puzzles, Vereesa, we’d need your eyes for the bigger picture.”

Vereesa didn’t look convinced, and Sylvanas looked, well, it was near impossible to read any of the undead elf’s expressions beyond anger, annoyance, and sheer boredom. Sylvanas’ ears didn’t fidget like those of a living elf, and while Jaina couldn’t understand the finer points of elven kinesics, it still cast a further veil over the Banshee Queen’s motives. Neither of the sisters had interrupted her, yet, so she continued.

“Plus, if you stay here, Alleria will find a way to show up - and there goes the secret.”

Vereesa rolled her eyes, “Alleria meddles too much.”

“She’s the big sister, it’s what they do.” Jaina smiled.

Vereesa spun on a heel, and the three walked back into the soft sunshine. That stillness remained. No birdsong, no gentle whistle of the wind through the overgrowth, just an unnatural quiet that left Jaina’s nerves on edge. “Fine. I’ll give your option until Winter’s Veil, and if there’s no progress then, Jaina,” she took a step toward the mage, “you let me do this my way.”

“Three months is hardly enough time to solve a mystery such as -”

“I said ‘no progress,’” Vereesa pointed out.

Jaina bit her tongue. She wouldn’t get a better deal, and she was pretty sure that by the end of three months, either Alleria would have convinced Vereesa to not consign her life to the grave, or Jaina would have some leverage over Sylvanas that she could push back the death of her closest friend.

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An hour later and Vereesa had saddled and prepared Gallant for her own long trip back to the boundary, though she wouldn’t have to work her way down through the mountains themselves. Jaina had taken the hour to prepare a homing teleport for Vereesa that would have her arrive on Krasus’ Landing. It was one of the basics of transmutation that every apprentice learned.

She didn’t know if the sisters took the hour to themselves, and she told herself she didn’t care. It was just now dawning on her that she’d agreed to spend at least three months in the presence of a woman that she loathed.
Jaina went to see Vereesa off and wasn’t surprised (or happy) to notice that Sylvanas had joined her. The goodbye was terse, but Vereesa still exchanged one final hug with Jaina before she mounted up.

Vereesa didn’t hug Sylvanas, but she hesitated as her courser walked past where her older sister stood. Jaina stood quietly as Vereesa’s hand reached out to touch Sylvanas’ shoulder before the high elf thought better of her actions and urged the courser into a brisk trot. When Vereesa disappeared into the forest, Jaina turned on a heel toward the small alcove she’d discovered during the hour alone. It was large enough for Scout to have a shelter from the elements and had a small partitioned-off section that she could easily turn into a space for herself for the coming months.

She was in the middle of unloading the few things she’d brought off of Scout when a shadow darkened the entrance. “Well, now, I’m impressed Proudmoore.”

Jaina whirled about. “What are you doing here?”

“I was wondering if you would last longer than five minutes after my sister left. I see I was wrong.” Sylvanas remained at the entrance, backlit by the outdoors, so all that Jaina could make out was the crimson gleam of her eyes.

“What are you talking about?” Jaina closed the flap on Scout’s saddlebag.

“You’re not galavanting off after Vereesa. You succeeded, haven’t you? Wrested her away from her dreadful sister?”

“I like to keep my promises.”

“Mm.” Sylvanas’ gaze roamed over the space Jaina had acquired for herself. “Do you also like sleeping in an impromptu stable? I mean - I knew Kul Tiran thought fondly of their horses but this?” She gestured. “It seems a bit excessive.”

“And where am I supposed to sleep?”

“This is an abandoned city, there are plenty of open spaces that you could commander for yourself that might actually allow you to survive until Winter’s Veil if you plan on staying here that long.” Sylvanas stepped back. “Grab your things.”

Jaina remained where she was. When Sylvanas realized she hadn’t followed, the Banshee Queen stopped and turned her head slightly to the side.

“Would you like to sleep in a makeshift stable? If that’s your preference, I’ll leave you to it.”

Jaina growled. She cast a lightning charm on the saddle-bag and set it on her shoulder. She picked up her staff with her other hand and walked out to meet Sylvanas. “After you, I suppose.”

Sylvanas nodded and strode off towards a small, short spire that was half-devoured by a massive tree that curled around the masonwork like they’d come into existence at the same exact moment. Inside, the structure was dark and smelled of centuries of abandonment, but it felt a few degrees warmer than standing out in the open - and didn’t have the smell of horse.

Sylvanas stopped so suddenly just past the door that Jaina nearly stumbled into her back. The undead elf spread an arm out to encompass the space. “This is yours to do whatever you wish. I will respect whatever privacy you place upon it.”

“In exchange for what?” Jaina wondered as she began to piece together a picture of what her
temporary home was going to look like. It was far enough away from the desolate temple that the whispers weren’t hiding in the background silence.

Sylvanas turned and pointed a finger towards one of the other spires. It also seemed to have been built around a growing tree, coiling like a creeper vine around the trunk until the final result looked much like a snake poised to strike. “I know mages are a curious lot, but please, try to restrain those urges. You have the entire city to wander but that western spire. Am I clear?”

Jaina shrugged. “Sure, I understand.” She didn’t want further unnecessary contact with the Banshee Queen any more than it appeared Sylvanas wanted with her. “Stay out of the Western Spire.”

Even with the promise, Jaina couldn’t help but stare at that serpentine tower until long after Sylvanas had disappeared.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Two updates in one week? Inconceivable!

Jaina took the rest of that first day to acquaint herself to Falor'Thalas. As she wandered through the wreckage of the elven cityscape, she regretted having to send Vereesa away. The youngest Windrunner would have happily spent years here just uncovering the mysteries of the past. Well, once Jaina solved the dilemma of the Banshee Queen, she'd make it up to Vereesa. Somehow.

The upper floor of the spire was enclosed and dark. There were no windows that looked out over the rest of Falor’Thalas, but that suited Jaina just fine. At the back, she found a ruined doorway that went out into a shattered outside walk that was less stone and more branch. She walked the length of it, taking in the nature around her while she mentally mapped the perimeter of her new sanctum. When she ducked back inside, it was with a keen awareness of the boundaries she would require to feel comfortable.

Jaina’s first act was the establishment of the warding, defensive runes, and arcane tripwires that would reveal any movement or intruding specters that she wouldn’t be first aware of. After she spelled the apparent points of entry, Jaina committed two hours to ensure there were no less-obvious routes in. Without windows, the only source of light came from the two archways outside. Good, that assisted her as she roamed the space with her staff emitting a pale glow to highlight any offset or hidden tricks in the architecture.

Jaina found none, but she wasn’t convinced. The stone was covered in imperfections. Long grooves that scrawled in random ways and cast moving, disorientating shadows as the staff’s light passed over them.

Jaina tilted her head to study the high points of the sanctum. Now, how to get some light? She wasn’t a bat, after all. Or a brooding, murderous banshee.

Crystals were set in place along the high branches; the dust and grime that covered them evident from where she stood. If the ancient quel’dorei were anything like their descendants, it would only take the barest hint of arcane will to set them alight.

Jaina raised her staff, then paused as a horrible thought washed over her. This would be a good use of that strange incorporeal state Sylvanas could shift into. Just ask the deposed queen to pop up there with a rag --

She snorted, then looked about to make sure she was alone still.

But it gave her an idea. She went to the saddlebags and searched in them for one of her old cloaks. It’d been weather-beaten and worn before she’d arrived in Dalaran, but she kept promising herself that she’d restore it. She never would. She cut off sections of it, then with a touch of enchantment she’d picked up from the quel’dorei she’d once roomed with, and she had a small army of cloth carefully restoring the crystals’ shine.

Then, as the cloth worked, she went to unpack. The busy work kept her hands and her mind
occupied past the point of idle thinking. There was too much to do, and too little time. Three months? She should have pressed Vereesa for longer - until the Lunar Festival, surely.

Jaina had not only the larger dilemma of saving her friend’s soul from undeath but simpler needs. A place to work, a place to sleep. She needed basic facilities for hygiene and food. Glancing through, she had enough rations for half a month, and if genuinely desperate, she could conjure up the sticky mana-buns that were far too sweet for her own good.

She took her time in establishing the second ring of wards. The intricate design would keep out any hands but her own, and blur the words for any sight but hers. Still, just to be safe, there were a few nasty surprises.

By the time she finished, she had realized two things. One, she was hungry. Two, the sanctum moved around her.

Her head snapped up. All around her, the glinting light from the crystals danced along the carved walls, teasing an illusion of motion. Strong, sure lines flowed from the natural trunk of the tree and stretched wide fingers over the stone. More of the beautiful carvings spiraled and weaved in a pattern that shifted underneath her gaze.

Underneath the crystals, Jaina found herself in the middle of a canopy.

It took her breath away.

Jaina turned on the spot, her eyes darting from shadow to shadow. She knew the trick, she knew why the stone seemed to breathe like a gentle breeze rustled along it, but she couldn’t break the illusion itself. Her mind refused to accept the logical and only saw the whimsical.

She didn’t know how long she stood there watching the light play, but when she finally stepped away, she felt a little piece of the calming scene stay with her.

Jaina left the sanctum. The stillness of the city remained around her and felt like she’d left the breathing world for a painting. She canted her head for noise - anything that would suggest she wasn’t alone here. Nothing. Not even the softest hush of wind.

Her pace quickened as she returned to where she’d left Scout. She didn’t see her in the stall until Scout let out a massive sigh and shifted from one forehoof to the other. “There you are.”

Scout’s ears pricked forward and one eye cracked open to focus on Jaina. She wickered in response, then stepped out to give Jaina a fond nuzzle.

“Wha-hey, no!” Jaina laughed as Scout stuck her muzzle against Jaina’s cheek and then lipped at her braid playfully. “That is not - hey!”

Her laughter rang out as she suddenly found herself in a game of keep-away with the mare. Scout rounded on her, gaze directed forward as she danced about to try and pluck Jaina’s braid from her shoulder.

Suddenly, the mare wheeled about. Scout snorted, pranced sideways and whipped her head around to stare intently at the space between two columns. Jaina slowed her movements - as to not startle the mare further - and tried to spy what caused the sudden nerves.

She found nothing amiss; however, the playful mood was gone.

“Easy girl, easy,” Jaina set a gentle touch on the reins and coaxed Scout into a gentle trot to work
out the mare’s nerves. As Scout went about her, Jaina lowered her voice, lowered her hands, and spoke in a slow manner until Scout paced herself to a casual walk. “There you go.”

With Scout unlikely to bolt, Jaina’s mind turned to other aspects of her new situation; namely: water and hygiene. This was a city, and most cities only endured with a source of sustainable water nearby.

When the afternoon started to shimmer into early evening, Jaina had secured the basics for her, and for Scout as well. She’d found a fountain that still bubbled forth clear water, probably from some underground river. There was plenty of wild grasses and flowers for Scout to graze on. Jaina’s sanctum was perhaps a ten-minute walk away from the crumbled temple. Everything she needed was could be found just moments off the open courtyard.

That bothered her, though she couldn’t figure out why.

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Over the next week, Jaina progressed little in her promise to Vereesa. In fact, she had yet to even approach the temple and the dark chasm underneath it. Instead, she devoted time to the Tidesage scrolls that weren’t scrawled with dark teachings, but the gentle flow of the original lessons Jaina remembered from a childhood spent in the sand.

The ocean was too far to sing to, but the underground river rumbled when Jaina sent curious, tentative queries down through the rock and soil. She told herself it was practice, not avoidance.

She didn’t tell herself to listen to that little voice that called it what it really was: avoidance. Fear. The ugly anxiety that crawled up her throat when she even thought a moment about those whispers slinking just underneath her own inner thoughts.

Tonight was no different. Jaina dozed underneath the shadow-play of the canopy when a noise startled her. She bolted up, neck protesting the sudden change in position.

What had …?

Thump.

The soft clatter of ice.

The Staff of Antonious flared awake next to her. The icy glow pushed against the gleam of the crystals above. Strange shadows darted as Jaina pushed to her feet and carefully picked along the floor to the archway.

Ice glittered on her fingertips. She walked with her staff forward, a powerful winter’s blast brimming at the point.

“You weren’t at the excavation,” Sylvanas commented while brushing off the broken fragments of a frost nova off her boots. She lifted her gaze and eyed the two primed spells with a curious cant of her head. “I came to see what the hold-up was.”

“You said you’d never come here,” Jaina allowed the winter’s blast to dissipate into a soft, cold breeze, but her fingers still crackled with the promise of ice.

“Perhaps my Common is rusty - I was referring to your little cage. The rest of the city is free-range for the both of us.”
Jaina rested her staff on the floor. “What do you want, Banshee?”

Sylvanas quirked a brow at the title. “Why, Lord Admiral, allow me to repeat myself,” her voice slowed to a careful pace, like one would speak to a babe still in swaddling cloth; “you were not at the excavation, doing what you’ve promised my sister you’d be doing, so I came to see what’s causing the delay.”

Jaina’s entire arm went numb from the frost. Her staff was hot, almost burning to touch. Every inch of her shifted with the sudden surge of arcane need to slam the banshee off the entrance dais.

Seconds passed. Jaina released the spell into the wards. They flared a bright blue as they drank the energy. Sylvanas remained where she stood.

“I’m not delaying anything,” Jaina said.

Sylvanas scoffed. “Please, it already costs me enough of my willpower to tolerate you while you’re playing Vereesa’s game - I don’t need to have to sort through your lies as well.”

“I’m not lying! Magical knowledge is more than just charging blindly into the unknown and hoping for answers. I’m preparing --”

“Nothing. You leave your cage only to fetch water and to tend to your hygiene --”

“How do you …?”

Sylvanas twitched a hand signal, and Jaina watched three slender, elven women appear from the long stretches of empty space around them. They dressed much like the banshee herself, in practical dark leather and mail uniforms that allowed for quick, subtle movements. Their hoods were pulled up, but that didn’t disguise the soft shimmer of red eyes that stared out from underneath.

Huh. Not all of the Dark Rangers had been lost at the Battle for Silvermoon. Jaina wondered why that surprised her.

The trio of rangers lurked on the far side of the courtyard.

“You’re spying on me?” Jaina turned that on Sylvanas.

“I’m keeping an eye on an unwelcome guest,” Sylvanas corrected, as she inspected her fingernails, her voice lulling into that bored drawl. “Have you ever stumbled across a rat aboard one of your ships during a voyage, Lord Admiral?” The question sounded innocuous, but as Sylvanas continued to speak, malice slithered into her words. “At first, your instinct is to kill it and toss the vermin overboard - but then you realize that such action is far too brash. You’ll just teach the others (because there’s always more rats) how to better avoid capture. You could -” she peered over her shoulder to the dark rangers, “release the cats and hope they cull the nest - but we both know you’re smarter than that, no? You need to be confident you know exactly where they’re feeding, sleeping, and breeding.” Sylvanas’ gaze returned to meet Jaina’s own. “Only then can you be certain you’ll destroy every last trace of the pest.”

Jaina couldn’t help it. She took a step back behind the wards.

That put a vicious smirk across Sylvanas’ lips. The banshee lowered her hand, and her smirk turned blithe. “I know where you feed, where you sleep, and, well, I’m not certain I care to know where you breed - but out of all of my observations I know that you aren’t doing your job.”
“What does that matter to you?” Jaina shot back. “If I spend the months here doing absolutely nothing, then when Vereesa returns she’ll just jump right into the grave alongside you --”

Sylvanas lunged forward and snarled as the wards snapped awake. The brilliant scrawled runes revealed every inch of the grotesque twist of the banshee’s power. The way her skin pulled taut over her bones, and cracks snaked along the line of her jaw like withered hide. That crimson gaze burned within the banshee’s features, a hellfire that threatened to swallow Jaina’s soul.

Jaina stood rigid as the barrier held. She hoped the barrier held. She prayed to some distant god that the barrier held.

Sylvanas stepped back. The fingers of her gloves were charred, and her expression smoothed back to the unbroken, beautiful mask. She composed herself; rolled her neck left, then right, then fixed that lying, placid gaze back on Jaina.

“Heed the lesson of the ship well, Lord Admiral: If the rat cannot point me towards the nest, then it’s useless to me. You have three nights to prove you are any different.”

“Or else?”

No answer. Sylvanas stalked into the gloom beyond the ward-light. After a while, the dark rangers followed.

Jaina waited longer until her heart stopped pounding against her rib cage. Until her breath wasn’t jagged and her nerves snapping like wildfire at the slightest thing.

It was only when she felt safe enough to take her eyes off the darkness that she heard another noise. A shuffling gait, cautious and light.

A small, wiry forsaken came into view of the ward-light. Dressed in ragged scraps of cloth, it was impossible to distinguish any identifying marks about them beyond the pale yellow of their eyes as they blinked against the harsh gleam of the arcane. They carried something on a pallet-litter behind them and stopped well beyond the entrance dais itself.

“Lor-Lord Admiral?” Their voice was a whisper, and just barely at that. As they stepped closer, Jaina could see why: what was once a throat was now shredded flesh long desiccated. Air escaped the wreckage of their throat long before their mouth could form the words.

“Yes?” Jaina snapped.

The forsaken shrunk back, dropping the pallet’s rope. They froze in place for a moment before they picked it back up.

They were afraid of her. The barest twinge of guilt touched Jaina before she threw it off. Good. Let them be afraid.

“What do you want?”

The forsaken walked about the pallet and pushed it up and on the dais itself. Once it was close enough for Jaina to step out and grab should she wish, the forsaken broke into a scurry back into the safety of the night.

Jaina waited again. Any more surprises waiting to spring out from the dark? She listened and heard only the rustle of Scout settling in for the night.
When she went past the wards, she expected an attack. None came, but she still snatched and dragged the surprisingly heavy pallet back through the boundary.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid…” she muttered. She caught her breath while she took the time to look over what had been left for her.

The pallet held one of the old Undercity banners - the pale mask with the arrows over a rich purple fabric. Lordaeron’s catacombs had been untouched for six years by now, but the tapestry was well-cared for. The material was thick due to needing to handle inclement weather, and while Jaina’s first instinct was to burn it - she stopped herself.

Lordaeron’s winters were harsh thanks to the cold northern winds coming off the coast. Jaina remembered many a night bundling herself in triple layers to stave off the bitter frost even with a raging fire in her room’s hearth. Jaina had no misconceptions that the encroaching winter in Lordaeron’s mountains wouldn’t be any less of a miserable frostbitten experience.

And her with no hearth to allow a fire to rage in, either.

She fingered the fabric. She wanted to rip it - it could serve as a curtain to block out the wind that stole through the arches, but the fact that the tapestry was still intact and vibrant stopped her. Someone cared for it - and she couldn’t be sure it was Sylvanas herself. Probably wasn’t Sylvanas herself.

What did that matter? So there were still forsaken that weren’t the subject of hunting missions or tucked away in the locked cloisters waiting for their penance before the Light - what did that matter to Jaina? Why should it matter to Jaina?

The forsaken had been the most zealous of the Horde underneath Sylvanas’ leadership. They’d led the assassinations, the poisonings, the sabotage and terrorism missions that left plenty of Alliance settlements in disarray. In every veteran, Jaina knew she could find the scars of what the forsaken had done.

Yet …

Jaina crumpled the tapestry in her grip; relished the crinkle against her palms.

The promise of fire licked against her fingers. She’d just need to …

No.

Jaina set the tapestry aside.

Upstairs, there was a spot hollowed out within the tree that she’d been using as a makeshift bed. Warmth was warmth, and as long as Jaina made sure to fold the banner so the forsaken sigil wasn’t visible, she’d have more than just her cloak and a light travel blanket to sleep under.

Jaina swallowed a heavy sigh and set the tapestry back on the pallet. She cast one last look into the night - then brought the unwelcome but needed gift upstairs.

***

Sleep never came to Jaina as easily as others claimed for themselves. Since she’d left the lull of Kul Tiras’ shores behind to start her studies in Dalaran, it took Jaina longer to find rest in oblivion, and even harder for her to stay there.
She believed she’d find peace for a second time on Theramore Isle after the Battle for Mount Hyjal, and she had, for a while. The busy work of establishing a new home for her newfound people kept the restlessness at bay.

That shattered, of course, when she’d played the fatal role in the death of her father. She’d shut the windows of her tower at night when the winds howled just a little louder, or thunder rumbled on the distant horizon.

After the mana-bomb …

Her dreams were now unquiet, taunting ambushes that snatched her the moment she drifted off. There would be snippets of scorched flesh, the taste of ash in the air around her. There was the roar of a tidal wave that strained underneath her hands. The screams of the survivors. Her own throat scraped raw from sobbing.

Swiftarrow’s tincture had held them off, but nothing lasts forever.

So, it came to be, after another week that Jaina found herself wandering the sky paths between the various spires as another afternoon bled from gold to the blue of nautical twilight.

She told herself it wasn’t because of Sylvanas’ veiled threats, or the reality that she actually wasn’t alone, but Jaina had finally broached close enough to the chasm that she’d managed to scribble down a few stanzas before she’d retreated.

It had taken a night of flipping through the scrolls and abysmal collection of books she had: three - with none being a book on translation before she came to the frustrating conclusion that Vereesa would have been the ideal candidate to explore the ruins. Vereesa, who knew Thalassian in all its dialects. Vereesa, who actually had a passion and the ability to delve into the buried past. Vereesa, who was far too good a friend for Jaina to let down.

The morning arrived with Jaina sending off an arcane-constructed bird with a letter meant for the youngest Windrunner. In it were the glyphs and Jaina’s first theories, along with an unsure attempt to try and apologize. The construct lasted probably an hour before she felt the magic collapse.

Curious. She’d drafted another letter - this one with a more certain message in it.

It lasted an hour and a half. Jaina measured the time precisely.

The third missive, she set a small scrying spell upon the construct, then set it loose. When the spell collapsed, Jaina was able to see the final moments. She cursed when she noticed the arrow that struck true through the centerpiece of the animating rune.

Of course, she couldn’t see the archer themselves.

She would need another night to craft more of the runes required to animate the constructs, so chalked it up to a learning curve. Not to mention, she believed she had a substantial lead as to what could be underneath the temple - she’d send out another letter when she had more to her idea, and she’d first checked for any stray dark rangers.

With the knowledge that Falor’Th alas housed the few remaining survivors of the forsaken, Jaina took to the stillness a little easier. The lack of noise, of shuffling movement and quiet breath, was expected when one was close by to the dead. It didn’t completely remove her nerves, after all, now she kept one eye out for a glimpse of her neighbors and the local watch.

Once every few days, she did spy one of the rangers. They prowled the high spaces, slunk through the canopy and overgrowth, and kept their bows and sights set outward. And it was even rarer, but
Jaina began to pick up where the forsaken would frequent. They stayed close to the central portions of the city, near to the Western Spire, but they were there.

And they … left gifts. Often.

At first, it bothered Jaina, but after a gift of freshly cured and tanned deer hides that were supple enough that they felt like butter underneath her touch - she came to appreciate the little touches. There would be offerings of wild berries left along the ward during the morning, or once she’d found a set of tempered ceramics that could carry water to and from where she slept.

Yet she didn’t understand why.

The forsaken clearly listened to and followed Sylvanas’ leadership still, so why bother with the tiny gifts? Especially when, on the morning of the fourth week of her stay, Jaina felt the dissolution of not just the decoy missive-construct, but the actual one.

This time, she’d followed the constructs and watched, in the open, as one of the patrolling dark rangers stir from her seemingly idly pose to send a casual arrow loose directly through the construct itself.

That’s it.

She scooped up the letter itself, sent a rude gesture to the dark ranger who merely tipped her head and went about her duties, and then set off on an entirely foolish errand: hunting down the Banshee Queen herself.

She checked the inner courts first and spent an awfully long moment debating on storming the Western Spire itself when she just turned on a heel and went back to her sanctum.

It took another night, but she ambushed the next forsaken to leave a small offering. This one was a tiny slip of a thing, and only because Jaina didn’t want to face the horrible implications of children suffering through undeath, she attributed the forsaken’s size and stature to a loss of muscle and body fat as the years took their toll on the undead.

“Where’s the Banshee?” Jaina prowled in a half-circle around the poor thing caught in her adjusted frost nova. “Where does she lurk?”

The forsaken struggled against the ice, eyes wide and gift long-dropped on the floor. They caught and dropped Jaina’s gaze again and again like they wanted to tell her but couldn’t. Wouldn’t?

Jaina closed the distance, struggled to keep her demeanor calm. “I just want to speak with her.”

The forsaken shook their head, opened their mouth to plead and Jaina saw they had no tongue with each to speak before they snapped their jaw shut and stared down, forlornly at the ice.

“I -- damn it.”

Jaina released the spell. Her lead disappeared as quick as a rabbit escaping an improperly set snare.

Movement from above.

One of the dark rangers knelt down on the pathway, head cocked at a strange angle as she observed. Jaina likened her to a rather ugly owl.

“The Dark Lady will see you if only so you can stop harassing her people.”
“I’m not harassing -- “ Jaina hustled to keep up with the sudden burst of speed the ranger gained.
“I’m not harassing anyone, I just need to speak with her.”

The dark ranger led her away from the inner sanctums and courtyards and out along the space
where nature had all but reclaimed the forest. The stone buildings and monuments were little more
than dust underneath the overgrowth itself. Vines tangled themselves around column and trunk
alike, and wide-petaled dark flowers bloomed to give the night air a strange, sweet aftertaste.

Then came the scent of a campfire. The crackle of flames sounded unfamiliar to Jaina after a
month of quiet, and it was curiosity that pushed her the rest of the way.

She stepped into a moss-stone covered alcove exposed to the wind, the sky, and the forest around
it. In the middle, a respectable fire burned in a brazier and sent spirals of cedar-smoke up against
the stars above. Jaina visited the blacksmith and armorer in Theramore to recognize the tools one
would need to tan hides, and could make out past the smoke, an impressively-sized stag hung
upside-down from a nearby tree.

Perched near the bottom of an overturned pillar, Sylvanas straddled the marble as she dragged a
sickle down along a hide - wolf - if Jaina took a wild guess from the sheer size alone.

Huh. So, the hides were not from the dark rangers? That was information Jaina didn’t know how to
process.

Neither was the fact that Sylvanas was stripped of most of her outer armor; Jaina could see that the
former ruler of the horde was bare from the waist up. Now, fleshing a hide was a messy business
so Jaina could understand the reason behind the banshee’s choice, but to actually see it?

Jaina couldn’t name the muscles, but to watch as they flexed while Sylvanas stripped the wolf hide
of gristle made her wish she’d taken a class or two in anatomy just so she could name the triangle
that bunched against Sylvanas’ shoulder and that strong line that surged with each forward push of
the blade.

She should have expected a former archer to have a powerful frame. And her staring? Probably the
shock of the banshee having whole, unblemished skin unlike the forsaken Jaina had been near in
the past.
With the firelight, Jaina couldn’t even make out the gray pallor of undeath. For a heartstopping
moment, Sylvanas was alive under her gaze. All that was missing was a layer of sweat.

“Can I ask why you’re tormenting my people or do I need to wait for you to remember how to
speak?”

Jaina shook her head hard. Sylvanas hadn’t paused in her work but had turned to peer at Jaina over
her shoulder.

“Why are your rangers shooting down my missives?” Jaina launched right into it.

“To ensure you’re not giving away our location. It’s simple security measures.”

“They’ve given you every single one, so you know they’re not incriminating in any way!”

“They could be spelled.” Sylvanas returned to her work.

“There is not a drop of arcane on them!” Jaina stepped into the firelight and relished the warmth
that came with the movement.
“How can I be certain the spell doesn’t dissolve as soon as the construct is destroyed?” Sylvanas flicked grime off the blade, wiped it clean along a strip of cloth.

This was absolute petty bullshit. “If you wore a bell, I could find you and ensure that you’re comfortable with the message before I sent them off.”

Sylvanas shrugged. “No need, just place them in a secure spot outside your cage. Kalira will see they’re delivered to me.”

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“Fine. Have your power-play. I don’t care.” This was one of those battles Jaina would have to lose to win the war.

“I’m glad you see it my way; if that’s all?”

Jaina heard the dark ranger approaching from behind and took another step closer to the fire. She rounded it until she found a spot she could sit and observe the banshee queen without having her back exposed to creeping dark rangers or large bears or anything else.

“The hides aren’t cut for armor padding, or to turn into gloves or boots. They’re full, why? I know they’re not second-hand gifts from the forsaken.”

The fleshing slowed. Sylvanas took her time wiping the blade clean. “I’m sure you understand by now that I do not care if you manage to make progress, or if you fail miserably, Lord Admiral --”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“ -- sooner or later, you will find that this branch of theory that my sister has come up with is ultimately futile and that there is only one inevitability that remains for her family to return to the wholesome unity she so desires to have.” Sylvanas turned, twisting, so she faced Jaina as she spoke.

“In two months, you will have progress or you won’t. If you stay - another month, a season, a year - it doesn’t matter. What does matter to me, Lord Admiral, is that my sister seems to find you interesting? Like a pet cat, I suppose. I cannot lie and say I see what appeals about you - but Vereesa’s always enjoyed the strange quirks of the other races.”

Jaina growled under her breath.

“So, like a favorite pet, I suppose I’m stuck babysitting until Vereesa comes to take you home. Or you slip the leash. I’m hoping for the latter - and soon; caring for all your living needs is exhausting.”

“I guess even three years of sycophants would make even you miss the sound of your own voice, wouldn’t it?” Jaina snapped back. “You’ve had no one to preen for - I should feel honored, but your superiority complex wore out a decade ago.” Jaina leaned back on her elbows and soaked in the fire’s warmth even as she glared daggers at the banshee. “I don’t care if it takes me ten years, if there’s any credence to Vereesa’s theory, I’ll spend every single day right here until we solve it. Then you can have your city of the dead all to yourself. Just as you want it.”

Sylvanas went quiet, but not still. The banshee carefully set the blade down and rose from her perch to cross the space between her and Jaina. The firelight flickered over her body, highlighting the soft shadow of her breasts, running along the hard line of her stomach. She wore her nudity like it was a crown and came to sit next to Jaina like they were old friends sharing a simple fireside chat.
When she leaned in, Jaina could smell the cedar-smoke in her hair and see flecks of gold within a dancing crimson gaze. Jaina stiffened, but Sylvanas kept a few inches between their bodies. Sylvanas whispered like she was sharing a schoolyard secret. “How does it feel, Lord Admiral, that no matter who’s right - Vereesa, or myself - that you’re just a means to our end?”

Jaina’s heart stuttered. It meant nothing but damned if that didn’t hurt. Sylvanas was lying. Vereesa didn’t -- no. No. She wouldn’t let the banshee get the upper hand. Before she could speak, though, Sylvanas was already pulling away to stand. She paused a moment before she fully straightened.

“When you write your next letter to my sister, try not to grovel for forgiveness so much. You’re trying to convince her you’re actually capable of being useful. Enjoy your night.”

Sylvanas flicked a hand.

A cold grip curled around Jaina’s shoulder as the nameless dark ranger hauled her up to her feet. As she was led away from the fire, she could only watch as Sylvanas reclaimed her perch, picked up the fleshing blade, and resumed her work.
Jaina was wrong.

The dark rangers were not owls that she spied on a rare evening when the light cast along the upper paths just right. No, they were vultures. Nasty, skulking creatures that lurked in her shadow and revealed Jaina's movement to the waiting predator above.

For that’s what Sylvanas had become after their fireside chat. Somewhere after that night, the banshee decided that she’d grown tired of avoidance. Now she appeared on the edge of Jaina’s vision. The Banshee would stand still as a statue until the opportunity to startle Jaina’s heart into her throat presented itself, then she’d disappear only to repeat the fright at a later date.

The gifts still arrived, and a week after Sylvanas strutted around the fire to perch next to Jaina, the mute forsaken Jaina had attempted to catch with her frost nova had returned to the Sanctum to present a fine-tailored wolf-furred cloak. It was from one of the large silver-furred beasts that prowled the northern forests.

Jaina remembered the annual hunt during late autumn to cull them to prevent starving packs from risking ventures down into the lowland valleys to pick away at the crowded livestock in pens, or at the occasional unlucky villager.

At first, her hands twisted around the desire to ignite the cloak - but much like the tapestry, she resisted the tug of her destructive desire. Not that she believed the forsaken themselves were behind this.

No, this was purely an act from the banshee herself. An act that Jaina wasn’t certain would backfire onto the forsaken if she rose to the bait. Then again, would she care?

She wound up setting the cloak aside in the upper tier of the sanctum, along with several other “gifts” that she believed came directly from the banshee. A well-sharpened dagger with an antlered handle that hummed with gentle magic along with it. A salve tucked away in a small, painted jar that she didn’t trust to open. A leather pack that was lighter than the saddle bag and rested easier on her shoulders.

Separate, they were each beautiful gifts. They all displayed a mastery of craftsmanship one expected from an elf who had spent hundreds of years as a ranger.

Together, though, they painted a rather pointed message. A message that Jaina tossed at the feet of the very banshee bothering her the very next day.

Sylvanas was as still as the statues she lounged against. The only clue that she wasn’t the gargoyle she mimicked was the gentle sway of a leg casually dangling over the side of the upper-spire she perched on. She angled her attention down to the package dumped and merely quirked a brow.
“What’s all this?”

“It’s your idea of a joke, you tell me.”

“I assure you, my sense of humor died when I did the first time. I’m afraid you’ll have to explain the punchline.” Sylvanas lifted her gaze up and away into the canopy.

“A warm cloak. A dagger. A travel pack. A salve that may or may not rot through my skin.”

“And?”

“I’m not leaving. We had this conversation already.”

Sylvanas nodded, and her attention dropped back over Jaina once again. “Yes, I do remember you nattering on about some sort of noble endeavor to stay on regardless of personal cost, your duties, or any other random trifle that humans need to accomplish within the blink of their lifetime.”

Jaina took a steadying breath. “You can have them back.”

Sylvanas waved a dismissive hand. “I don’t need them. Though, Vereesa mentioned that the caverns beneath the temple held an unnatural chill in their labyrinth,” Sylvanas peeled herself from her vantage point as Jaina turned on a heel to stalk off and away. “I thought humans liked gifts!”

“Insufferable banshee…” Jaina muttered.

***

Jaina never traveled with the Explorer’s League much. Theramore and the complicated political knots that prevented an outburst of violence between her nation and the bloodthirst of her northern neighbors took up enough of her time that she had only experienced the finer details of archeology and field research through the exploits of the adventurers and mercenaries that ducked in and out of Theramore on a daily basis.

Before that, there were the rare field outings with the other apprentices as their mentors taught them how to recognize the silent, secret symbols of the arcane world around them. Antonious himself used the remains of the Alteraci prison camp that held Dalaran captives to educate Jaina further - how to establish and how to break through such seals and symbols without alerting others to her presence.

Jaina used that knowledge now as she took the first steps into the gloom. A pale orb of arcane light danced around her shoulders to assist her vision as she descended past the first layer of crumbled rock and rotted wood.

Armed with several sheets of parchment and an enchanted quill, Jaina began the arduous journey of detailing the first eye-witness encounter for Vereesa.

The elven influence went soil-deep. Further into the, well, best descriptor would be catacombs, and the architecture became a bizarre blend of early quel’dorei aesthetics imposed over an already-established culture.

Troll, Jaina’s reasonably sure, but she didn’t know the exact tribe. The Zandalari chroniclers would have known, but … well. That was a bridge that could never be crossed again.

Jaina hummed an old Stormsong melody taught to the youngest Tidesages as she sketched. The notes rang through the earth and reverberated within the natural current of that underground river.
A serviceable distraction to drown out the whispers that snaked through the ancient stone.

It wasn’t perfect though.

A mistimed opening, a breath that paused the melody, anything that interrupted the harmony and a discordant note slipped into the song.

The voices - the whispers were different than the cacophony that assaulted her in the Violet Hold. These were soft, subtle pleas that slipped into her thoughts like droplets of rain.

One moment, she reflected on the light needed to sketch a bas-relief she settled before; the next, she found herself up and moving.

Her hands were empty but stained with ink.

Behind her, the sketch was ruined. A spiraled glyph is repeated over and over on the parchment, the ink seeping through to stain the papers beneath it.

Jaina’s breath arrived in a fog. The air around her was cold. She inhaled, and her teeth chattered as a nasty shiver stole through her. She worked her fingers, and they ached and protested the motion like she’d gone out in winter without gloves on.

Where … were her gloves?

She stared down at her bare hands, knuckles white and tips tinged blue.

She found her gloves near the bas-relief she initially aimed to sketch. They were discarded haphazardly, and Jaina saw ink on the stone itself, dried to the touch.

“How long…?”

*How long, how long, how long?* Her question bounced down the dark hallways and chased her out of the excavation itself.

***

Autumn came with the crisping of the leaves. Drops of red and orange splashed onto the verdant canopy until the crowning boughs of the old oak and pine were decorated in the golds and crimson of the harvest. Where the world still turned with the seasons, cider would become the favored drink, and the fruits of the fields would be laid upon long tables for friends and family to share.

A few days after the frozen pit, Jaina went for Scout. She tacked up the mare and tried to ignore the way her fingers shook and prevented her from buckling the girth on the first, second, third try. It took a steadying pulse of the arcane to finish the job.

Jaina swung up into the saddle and encouraged Scout to make a westward pass through Falor’Thallas and the wooded outskirts. She allowed her mare free reign as the little pieces of sunlight that escaped through the canopy smoothed away the worst of her jagged nerves. She carried her sketches with her, unwilling to let that glyph out of her sight.

Her thoughts wandered as she did, and she tried to fall back into the comforting pattern of research and study to push away the unsettling feeling in her gut. She pondered the craftsmanship of the stone, the druidic spells that must have been needed to shape the trees into the designs required to support the spires and pathways that wove through the branches above her. She tried to picture the populace of such a place - the history of flight from Mount Hyjal and the exodus through the
mountains themselves.

Jaina knew little of Falor’Thalas’ history, only the stories that Kael’thas had shared when they’d worked together in the Dalaran archives. The elven prince had been proud to speak of his ancestor’s resilience and strength - but he spoke in myth and fables of a time thousands of years before.
Nothing concrete.

And now, Jaina wondered if there were any elves left that knew more than folk legend about the ruins she wandered through.

Had Sylvanas stumbled upon this place during her flight? Or had she or another one of the Windrunner sisters already discovered the lost piece of their history and risked its secrecy against Sylvanas’ continued existence?

Questions that had no easy answers.

She returned to her sanctum with the golden light of a mountain afternoon and found Sylvanas near the lower entrance. The banshee was back in her practical armor, with her hood drawn up. The bow slung upon her back was made of a curious silver material wrapped by what she believed was cobalt and - with a soft query of magic - leystone. The design flared out from a single crest in the center that bore the phoenix of the Sunstrider house - and rippled out like cresting waves until it ended in two near-transparent points. The piece hummed with the arcane and staring at it eventually made Jaina’s eyes water.

“Thori’dal?” Jaina questioned.

Sylvanas had already turned to spy her arrival, and the hood masked her expression as Jaina neared and dismounted Scout. “You have a keen eye, Lord Admiral.”

“I know my magical artifacts.” Jaina led her mare off to the side to groom. “Why are you here?”

Sylvanas pushed off the column she’d been leaning against and took a few steps forward. She held Jaina’s latest letter to Vereesa in her hand. “Your sketches - the first one -” she unfurled a sheet from the pile. It held the image of the bas-relief. “I know this figure: a matron worshipped by a sect of Zandalari druids. There had been some ...trouble with them during an Azerite mining excavation; the Archdruid mentioned them often in his reports.”

“The Horde’s Archdruid, you mean.”

Sylvanas paused a moment, then inclined her head.

Jaina thought briefly on the endless spiral in her pocket. “So, the highborne co-opted a loa?”

“It would seem so.”

“Why?”

Sylvanas stared at her for a long stretch of silence. She was weighing a decision, and she was, well, civil. Jaina watched her in return, trying to keep to her promise to Vereesa to try and find answers here. She worked the dust and sweat off Scout to keep herself busy. Idle hands led to aggravating the banshee, she supposed.

“Desperation, I would suspect,” Sylvanas’ voice reverberated through the still air. “Nordrassil’s well would not have been strong enough to sustain the highborne so far away, and I suspect the
first several winters without its assistance were horrifying for the exiles.” Sylvanas set the papers
down carefully, her voice taking on a distant tone. “The first death to starvation would have sent a
shockwave through the community.”

Jaina said nothing. This Sylvanas who spoke, well, at her, without the sting of mockery was not a
Sylvanas she knew how to approach, or manage. She felt as off-balanced as a greenhorn sailor,
braced against the anticipatory crash of a wave she was sure would break over.
“I’d like to see the actual relief, Lord Proudmoore.”

“I -” Jaina stopped. Her fingers brushed the paper folded away in her pocket. She thought of
echoes and the shimmer of pale light, and somehow knew she had more to sketch down. “All right,
follow me.”

“Lord Admiral?” Sylvanas called out as Jaina crossed the halfway point. The banshee stood near
Scout, the mare’s ears flicking nervously at the nearness of a creature she didn’t understand.
“Aren’t you forgetting something?”
What? Jaina had her ink, quill, and extra papers stashed away in her satchel. The way down was
marked with small glyphs that served as waypoints and specks of light. What had she forgotten?

Sylvanas looked pointedly at the still-saddled and hitched Scout.

Oh.

Right. Jaina hurried back and apologized to the mare as she finished the groom and pulled off the
saddle, the blanket, and swapped Scout’s bridle for a halter instead. All while Sylvanas stood and
waited nearby.

Job finished, and as chastised as a child, Jaina quickened her pace and left it up to Sylvanas if she
wanted to follow.

Down below once again.

At the precipice of the catacombs, Jaina began to hum. She walked along the corridor as the water
responded with the sweetness of a babbling brook. Their duet kept her mind focused as she
retraced her path back.

It wasn’t far.

Within a few minutes, Jaina stood before the bas-relief. Down here in the dark, the elements had
not had time to wear away at the details. The bas-relief took up one section of the crowded room.
A feminine figure crouched low and stared out, hungry, into the distance. Her hands were clawed,
curled over the crescent that served as her hunting perch. Her features were bestial, feline and
avian and strange to see upon the noble bone-structure of an elf.

Or, she thought it was an elf. There’s the impression of tusks - or are those fangs exposed in a
snarl?

How much --

“Incredible.”

Sylvanas’ voice cut through Jaina’s thoughts. Cut through the song.

“When Vereesa first mentioned this place, I thought she’d been reading too many bedtime stories
and yet --”

“I need to concentrate.” Jaina risked a sentence.

Sylvanas broke off from her inspection. Her gaze was sharp and intrusive.

Jaina went back to her work, picking up the melody again. There was a darker undercurrent now, her unease with the banshee plucking at the notes in a strange third harmony.

She went back to the relief carving, and brought her hand up again to run her fingers - wait, had she lost her gloves or … no. No, she’d rode without them. Yes.

Sylvanas’ stare was a dagger aimed directly between her shoulders that became impossible to ignore. The song wavered in her throat. Her hands twitched against the cold stone.

She stared into the subtle impressions beyond that hungry gaze and searched for the pattern hidden there.

She --

She was warm.

No.

Burning hot.

Jaina sat up, and the wolf cloak fell from around her shoulders. She faced a raging fire, the flames devouring massive, broken branches. Above her, the canopy was devoid of any light save from the fire itself.

Beyond the firelight, despite the night-blind, Jaina picked out the vague shadow of movement, and a quiet Thalassian conversation being held.

The figures pulled away from each other as a dark ranger stepped around the fire holding a small bowl in her hands. When she noticed Jaina was up, she called for Sylvanas.

“The Lord Admiral’s conscious.”

Sylvanas arrived. With her hood pulled forward, all Jaina could see was the blaze of her eyes. In her hand, she carried the spiral sketch.

“That’s mine.” Jaina reached out for it. “Give it back, please.”

“No,” Sylvanas jerked her chin toward the dark ranger, who took it as an unspoken order to leave. “I don’t think I will, Lord Admiral.”

“You went through - “

“Absolutely nothing of yours. You’d gone quiet - a blessing, really, that song had begun to aggravate. It was only after you scraped your fingers raw that I decided to intervene and found you attempting to retrace the circle of stars.”

Jaina checked her hands. Peacebloom and silverleaf, the base for any healing salve or potion, greeted her senses as she pulled back the cloth bandage around her index finger. Her fingertips were scraped raw, the exposed flesh shining against the light. The memory of pain ran down her palm and pinched up into her shoulders until she had to tuck her hand out of sight to stop herself
from recreating the sensation.

She lifted her head to meet that deadly stare and licked her lips as she tried to grab onto anything besides the throbbing ache in her fingers. What if she couldn’t trace runes or patterns? Had she crippled her spellwork? Why had she crippled herself --

“What did you mean by ‘circle of stars?’” She launched into the question, hoping that Sylvanas’ divulging mood carried through from earlier. “Did you learn something?”

“Yes,” Sylvanas folded the glyph up. For a brief span between heartbeats, Jaina’s panic rose to uncomfortable heights as she swore the banshee was going to burn the sketch - only to slump back gratefully when it was placed far out of reach from any errant ember or spark. “You lied.”

“I haven’t lied about anything I’ve found.”

Sylvanas snorted. “The last two letters you’ve sent for Vereesa, you did not mention the circle. You mention a few other details - the loa, the image of the Matron, but the actual circle.”

“I wanted to have more information before I sent her anything. That isn’t a crime.”

Sylvanas snatched the bowl that the dark ranger had been holding, then came to kneel next to Jaina, away from the fire. It exposed her, even despite the hood that masked most of her face. Jaina watched as the banshee worked through a rapid series of emotions before she settled on annoyance. The banshee set the bowl down and pulled out a wrap of clean linen cloth. Or it looked clean.

“You lied to Vereesa. You are not resistant to the Void, nor are you resistant to anything down in those tunnels.” Sylvanas peeled back the wolf-cloak and gripped Jaina’s wrists, dragging the wounds back out so they could be tended to. “How many times have you lost track of yourself?”

“Just the once - ow!” Jaina winced as Sylvanas removed the dressings. They were dry, and the linen stuck to the raw flesh underneath. Flecks of blood and other crusted fluids were picked away from her hands as Sylvanas scanned the bandages, then tossed them into the flame.

Sylvanas set Jaina’s hands into the bowl, and Jaina felt an immediate warmth, different than the campfire. It felt like she ran her fingers through liquid sunlight, through the memory of an afternoon underneath a clear sky. Sylvanas watched her as Jaina looked at her hands. Jaina glanced up once.

“Twice. I’ve lost track twice.” She did not mention that those were the only two times she was aware of; the moments she drifted off while pouring through the scrolls, or the blots of ink that forced her to rewrite her letters after coming back to herself didn’t need to be brought up.

Sylvanas squeezed her wrists tighter. “One time is once too many.”

Jaina’s hands soaked in the salve-water while Sylvanas broke her grip to start unfurling pre-measured strips of linen.

“It was an accident. They happen.” Jaina used the bandage-making as a buffer between her and the banshee. “How long was I out?”

“Long enough to prove your uselessness.”

“Uselessness?!” Jaina almost yanked her hands out. Almost. The warmth of the numbing herb made her sluggish because Sylvanas snatched at her wrists before she could. “If you’ve been
reading my notes, then you know there are several theories I’m sure we could start exploring --”

“I have read your letters, and I have given thought to the theories you’ve proposed,” Sylvanas waited another minute, then dipped the linen bandages in with Jaina’s hands. “I even suspect that I was wrong about the futile direction Vereesa proposed - and that you would -” Sylvanas broke off with a furious shake of her head. She looked so much like Vereesa as frustration stole over her like a cloud. There was a furrow between her brows that broke the tranquil beauty of her elven features that it offset Jaina’s hatred just for a moment.

“But, you lied, as humans are want to do when they’re trying to bully their way into things that do not concern them. That has never concerned them.”

Sylvanas words were at odds with her actions. She berated Jaina, sneered and snarled around her supposed revelation that humans were worth nothing but pain to elvenkind; and yet she treated Jaina’s hands with a gentleness that could not have been natural to the banshee.

Jaina’s hands were lifted, and her fingers slowly flexed and worked through various exercises before Sylvanas wrapped them with the soaked bandages.

“I don’t understand you,” Jaina commented as Sylvanas neared the end of her task. “Do you want me to fail, or do you want me to succeed? No matter which end of the spectrum I fall on during any given moment, you’re already halfway through taunting me about the other side of the pendulum.”

“I don’t need you to understand me, Lord Admiral, you won’t be around long enough even to begin to try.” Sylvanas let go of Jaina’s hands, then ordered: “trace a cantrip.”

“I have a little under two months left.” Jaina reminded her even as she complied with the order. She went for a basic spell-weave, an arcane light-orb that shimmered merrily in the space between her hands. Her fingers twinged with the movement, but there was no stiffness, nor loss of motion.

“Midwinter, remember?”

“Mm. At most, you have a week”

“I was out for two months?!” Impossible! She couldn’t have --

“I sent my letter to Vereesa yesterday when we couldn’t rouse you from your fugue. I believe she’ll do the bare minimum to disguise the reason for her sudden need to leave Dalaran, but she’ll arrive as fast as she can to rescue you from your pride.”

“What? No. It’s at least a week’s flight for even the arcane construct... “ Jaina trailed off. “You have a stabilized portal.”

Sylvanas waved her hand through the orb to banish the spell. “You are forbidden from going back down into the catacombs. If I, or a dark ranger spies you, we will do whatever necessary to keep you from turning into an abomination.”

The banshee stood up and collected the bowl from where it rested on Jaina’s lap. “The last mercy I can give my little sister is the knowledge that she won’t arrive just to put you down like a rabid animal.”
Shock rooted Jaina to the spot long enough that Sylvanas had strode back around the firepit to meet with the dark ranger from before. They spoke low, in Thalassian again. Their eyes caught the firelight every time they glanced her way, refracting red against the night.

Jaina wanted to continue the conversation. She wanted to protest against Sylvanas’ sudden decision to end her part in Vereesa’s plan - or protest Sylvanas’ involvement entirely. The banshee had no business refusing Jaina like she was an impulsive child!

Jaina’s first instinct was to return to the catacombs to spite the orders she felt Sylvanas was currently delivering to the dark ranger, but that wouldn’t be enough. She needed focus and time, and neither would be present under the pressure of hiding from a pack of rabid dark rangers. Not for the first time since she’d arrived, anger crackled cold and bitter over her more logical thoughts. As before, she tried to remember Vereesa’s plea, tried to remember the grief that’d overtaken her friend after Rhonin’s death, and Jaina’s vow to never, ever bring that sort of pain again.

The memory had eased off the sharp edges of Jaina’s anger before, but now? No. Now, it served as fuel. She had tried, Light damn it all, and now that she might have something to help Vereesa save one sister from an untimely death - that would more than make up for any damage dealt to the second, spiteful one, wouldn’t it?

Jaina looked over the small space around her makeshift recovery bed for her staff. A soft querying spell and the staff’s crystal took on a delicate gleam. Right beyond where Sylvanas was in the middle of her discussion with the other ranger.

The staff itself wasn’t vital to Jaina’s spellcasting, but it served as an anchoring point while she drew upon Azeroth’s energies. Without it, she would have to reach out to the ley-lines to control the current.

Simple enough.

Jaina reached out a hand underneath the cloak and whispered the chant that would guide her magic toward the ley-line network she knew lay beneath the soil. Human cities were founded near water and ample opportunities for trade. Elven settlements were never far from the ley-lines.

There.

She stretched her awareness towards the roiling arcane energy. It was a live wire underneath her touch, and so close to a font of the Void, it left an oily aftertaste on her tongue.

It would serve her well.

With Vereesa already summoned, Sylvanas had nothing left to wield as a deterrent for Jaina. If the
banshee was aware of her sudden loss, she didn’t show it and did not seem aware of the opening it allowed for Jaina.

The temptation to head back to that mural and solve the circle of stars was overwhelming, but Jaina had spent decades learning how to temper her passions.

No, what Jaina really needed was leverage.

Some scrap of information that she could use to flip the script. If there were any chance that the banshee had a weakness, Jaina needed to find it; exploit it.

*Call her a child?*

Power shimmered along her skin. A slow, steady wind kicked up. The frost that crept over she dampened the heat from the nearby fire. Jaina stared down at the cloak that covered her, the silver-fur sparking an idea.

An insane idea.

She slipped the cloak on over her own and cinched it tight before she tugged the hood up over her face. With the guise of the wolf, Jaina took a steadying, grounding breath.

Then she unleashed the blizzard.

That steady wind snapped and snarled as it gave birth to a frozen, howling nightmare. Ice crystals formed in mid-air, whirling in a frenzied dance as Jaina drew the wild magic from the ley-lines and flung it around her.

The fire died, cut low by the cold snap. Snow flurried.

Time slowed around her. In a battle, even a half of a second was precious.

Sylvanas and her fellow ranger had only seconds to react as a halo of jagged ice formed over their heads. As they scrambled to escape the trap, seven spears of ice drove down where they’d been.

Jaina moved with the luxury of haste and flung out her hand to call her Staff back to her side. The moment the arcane-infused wood brushed against her palm, the pulse of magic around her was as familiar to her as her heartbeat. The ebb and flow of energy were now hers to guide.

At once, the air glimmered around her. From the snow-flurry came three mirror images of Jaina herself. They each wore the silver cloak. They each carried the staff, and they each had just a fraction of arcane within them to trick the keen senses of even the most determined elf. The mirrors immediately conjured and then launched sets of ice bolts against the undead, following on the impulse they’d last felt from Jaina’s mind.

Frost was not as effective against unfeeling flesh, but even Sylvanas would be hard to throw off the sluggish impact of the cold.

With the elves distracted, and the blizzard effectively destroying all details beyond a meter or so, Jaina slipped into the storm and toward the inner city.

Time warp distorted noise so Jaina could not rely on the shouts and garbled commands as she fled through the white-out and toward the one place she hoped Sylvanas wouldn’t expect.

***
The funny thing about an arcane-storm was the extension of Jaina’s awareness through the wind and the wicked frost that tore through everything in its path. She could pick out the way of every sentient creature as they scrambled for cover. She could feel the structure of the city as the wind whipped around corners and screamed through open hallways.

It gave her Sight through the storm, but it kept the storm’s eye upon her. She did not believe for an instant that Sylvanas nor the dark rangers would be well aware of that.

So, with a murmur, she released the spell to the natural forces around her. The storm raged wild, eagerly shedding the reins like an unbroken stallion bolting for open pasture.

The Time Warp ended and seconds returned to their proper duration, the voices that rose over the wind were sharp with agitation. Jaina ducked behind two figures locked in an eternal dance and held her breath as one particular voice drew near.

“Hannah! Isabelle! Trevor!”

The speaker was elven, judging by the lilting accent of her Common. Jaina risked a peek over the shoulder of the leading dancer and watched one of the dark rangers push through the rapidly rising snow drifts. Her bow was slung over her shoulder, and her quiver cinched tight to prevent arrows from toppling out when she moved.

Jaina frowned. She couldn’t move now; her destination lied on the other side of the open street the ranger walked down, and even a small invisibility spell would instantly draw attention her way.

The dark ranger knelt and dragged pale fingers through the fresh snow before she straightened up again. Her gaze scoured the nearby buildings, over the statue Jaina hid behind, and down the open lane.

“Issa’nar ana?” The ranger gave the area another long study, then hurried onward in the same direction Jaina wanted to go.

“Great.” Jaina collected her staff from where it rested against the dancers, then shrugged back into the snow herself. She expended a little effort to keep the wind up at her back to help disguise her tracks and kept pushing forward.

***

A flash of disappointment coursed through Jaina as she entered what she believed to be the innermost district of Falor’Thalas and found that Sylvanas had truly spoken when she meant “western spire.”

She still had some distance to travel, and by now, the storm had well and truly transformed into a late autumn blizzard. Snow banked up against walls and columns and disguised the actual design of that section of the city. Jaina had to slow down, only because now she trudged through knee-deep snow and had to be certain she didn’t stumble over any unforeseen obstacles.

“Clea!”

Jaina cursed and slipped hard into the snow. The powder swallowed her whole until she poked her head up high enough to spy the voice’s owner.

Nothing but white at first.

Then, a small shadow huddled underneath a creaking branch. Overburdened with snow, it bowed
dangerously low against the body of the tree.

“Clea?! Lynara? Hello?”

The voice carried the dry rasp of the forsaken but also the unmistakable pitch of a child.

Jaina cursed again.

So the dark rangers weren’t just looking for her. Well, she supposed that gave her an advantage.

“Clea?” The forsaken - no - the child called out into the storm again, her words swallowed by the howling wind.

Jaina risked another peek over the statue’s shoulder. The forsaken child had a smaller, less rugged version of the leather blindfold she’d seen many of the sightless forsaken wearing. Jaina thought she could make out a bright yellow flower decorating the side of it. It looked like a sunflower.

Guilt fizzled in her gut.

Jaina cursed a third time and struggled against the emotion. It won out.

Jaina flicked her wrist and released a ripple of arcane energy out into the storm. It would call to even the deadened senses of the dark rangers and lure them in to investigate. The warmth of the peacebloom tincture had long worn off. Now, her fingers were frostbitten and stiff, resisting every grip, grasp, or gesture she attempted.

She hurried away, continuing on her westward path.

She berated her choice every step. She’d given up her advantage, and for what? A sycophant of the banshee who would have eagerly given up her position for a curried favor.

No.

A child. She’d done it for a child with a sunflower in her hair.

A child cursed with one of the worst existences Jaina could ever picture an Azerothian going through. Her mind flashed back to the Plague. Had this child come from Andorhal? Hearthglen? One of the villages targeted after she’d sailed across the sea to Kalimdor?

The only place she knew she could rule out was after Arthas left for Northrend the second time. The forsaken were monsters, abominations that walked long after the grave should have called them home, but she’d never heard of Sylvanas condoning the resurrection of children.

Even evil has their standards, she mused.

*****

The final stretch of her journey left Jaina jittery from hypervigilance. She expected to be discovered- expected to have those horrible shadows swoop down on her. Beyond the storm, there was silence. Beyond the crunch of her footsteps and the rush of her breath, the secrets of the city around her remained in the shadow. When she arrived at the base of that ominous, serpentine spire, Jaina felt like every nerve ending was overloaded with energy.

The western spire was different than most of the gleaming city. Even with thousands of years
separating her from the heyday of Falor’Thalas, there was a subtle undercurrent of malice cut into
the very stone itself. The elven structure was woven and twisted around the trunk of a towering
tree surrounded by a court of lessers cloaked in the finery of autumn. Vines as thick as Jaina’s arm
wound through the vegetation and gave the impression of a tangled spider’s web.

Snakes and spiders suited the banshee.

There was no door, no veil of hide or cloth to keep the elements out. As Jaina crossed the
threshold, the blizzard came along with her to pattern the walls with snow and ice.

Inside, there was only empty darkness. If there was debris, it was swept away, leaving just the
black, clean void as Jaina’s welcome into what she believed was Sylvanas’ sanctuary. The foyer
was as lifeless as the city itself, with no personal touches - no hint of the woman who must have
lurked here at some point in existence.

An interior staircase spiraled along the wall to the upper floors, and without any lead, Jaina could
only trace the steps up. The walls were cold to the touch, and though they blocked the bite of the
wind, the bitter chill followed in Jaina’s footsteps as she crept higher and higher.

Much like the sanctum space Jaina had been given, the western spire was utterly cut off from
exterior light. With a few soft words, the crystal adorning her staff flickered with arcane and
allowed her to see where she was going. Around her, the refracted gleam from over a dozen
embedded crystals glimmered like pricks of starlight as she ascended higher and higher. Her
fingertips brushed along the imperfections in the exterior wall, and Jaina wondered what sort of
pattern she traced along the way.

Up, away from the alabaster and granite of the ground floor, and alone with only her thoughts as
company, Jaina could not help but scold herself as the impulsiveness of her actions just now started
to catch up to her.

Though, had she any other options on the table? She could have darted down into the catacombs
and trapped herself in a web of rangers. She could have bolted for the forest and been hunted down
like a wounded fox.

Should she have just waited like a good girl for Vereesa to arrive?

No, of course not.

With Falor’Thalas underneath a series of ward-runes, and her without a clear map of the ley-lines;
Jaina could not have summoned a portal or teleported more than a few meters without risking
terrible injury to her body.

This was the right course of action, she repeated like a mantra. If she said it enough, she would
eventually accept it as truth.

Past the third spiral, the wind was little more than an eerie whistle echoing up from the depths.
Further along the steps, and Jaina was a silver ghost slinking through the shadows. Further along
still, when her legs protest and her lungs burn with the exertion, the sounds of the storm return with
a vengeance. Wood rattled and creaked, metal groaned, and the snap of fabric told Jaina she’d
arrived exactly where Sylvanas would never, ever want her.

Here, there was a door. Plain wood, it opened at the gentlest touch of her hand and swung
soundlessly outward. Here, Jaina could make out the crescent shape of the elven half of the spire. It
curved like a sickle outward with the western wall dominated by broad, sweeping arches that
opened onto a sheltered path that curled around the spire like a cat’s tail. The wide arches repeated themselves and delivered unto Jaina a bird’s eye view of the storm’s effects upon the dead city.

Snow flared up against the buildings like waves locked in time. The wind whistled through the open thoroughfares and avenues, tearing opportunistic vines away from the branches they’d bit into.

Beyond Falor’Thalas, the forest disappeared deep into the blizzard. Above the wind, Jaina listened to the groan of the old oak, the moan of the ancient aspen and ash, and the sigh of the spruce. Without the cloud cover, how far would the forest stretch before the mountains commanded the horizon?

A noise drew her away from the arches.

Jaina cocked an ear as she called upon a muffling cantrip that dulled the roar of the wind to a kitten’s purr. She turned to investigate the interior.

Here, she saw pieces of Sylvanas’ existence strewn about. Where Alleria’s loft had been nearly sterile, this space was a visual melody of what still haunted the exiled warchief. Like Alleria, Sylvanas had a place set aside for cartography - it made sense, a ranger in life, she would have trained to map out the lands she was tasked to watch over. Jaina flipped through several of the unfurled ones - there was Falor’Thalas, and what looked to be the mountains themselves. Several loose parchments fell out when she shuffled through older maps that detailed the Glades.

Over along the interior wall that opened into the hollowed trunk, two stands for armor stood sentinel; upon one of them rested the dreadful mantle of the Warchief, and against it, an empty, torn quiver.

Jaina didn’t expect to find the bow. After all, before the first Inquisitions, the world had believed Sylvanas died in battle, with Alleria presenting the wicked bone-bow as proof of the deed - for no ranger, living or not, would part from her weapon willingly.

The weapon itself was the trophy hung in Stormwind Keep as a reminder of victory over tyranny, an absolute and complete triumph in the Blood Wars. Jaina remembered how bright the future seemed that night as the Alliance celebrated the end of the war.

Along with the warchief’s mantle, the other stand stood empty. Probably meant to present the armor the banshee now wore.

Near one of the arches, the scent of tar lingered, and evidence of fletching was scattered across the floor thanks to the wind.

The room had a few spots of color; deep blues and greens with accents of black - the forest that Sylvanas must have loved in life. Closed away from the outside and set the crystals alive, and the banshee would have been in the center of a sequestered thicket.

Jaina headed into the hollowed trunk and found herself in the middle of a storm of broken items. Torn strips of fabric, a mess of cushions that were shredded, their innards spilled over the wood like viscera. Around her, the melted remains of candles and quills with broken nibs. Parchment filled with scratched out words were half-burned, half-crumpled littered the floor, the paper decorated with delicate, curving Thalassian.

Letters to whom?

Her sisters?
Former allies who still knew of her existence?

That noise again.

A rustle of something softer than fabric drew Jaina’s attention further into the dark, and with the lift of her staff she revealed -- a simple jewelry box tucked away carefully in the middle of the ransacked space. Three stones sparkled at her, red, blue, and emerald. Something about the ruby stone gave her pause - it looked familiar -- her fingers brushed over the cold stone. She didn’t understand. What was so important about this place that Sylvanas had deemed it off-limits? Jaina saw no weapons, no grand designs. Nothing save the memories of an elf.

“Was this everything you hoped for?”

Sylvanas’ voice whipped Jaina around. The banshee stood in the fading shadows, the mist that coiled over her body thicker than the darkness that dominated the room. It was more tangible, more real somehow.

“I don’t know what I expected,” Jaina answered honestly.

Sylvanas strode into the broken room, herding Jaina away from the trinkets and back toward the exit. She adjusted the pendants carefully, then turned her glower on Jaina.

“I was only trying to help,” Jaina said when no further response from Sylvanas was forthcoming.

“Help?” Sylvanas scoffed. “Meddle, you mean. Though with your track record - I wasn’t surprised you didn’t abstain from interfering.” Sylvanas’ words rang with that playful, mocking tone that Jaina was beginning to associate with the banshee lording a secret amusement.

Power hummed at Jaina’s fingertips, but she did not release it just yet. “Neither of us have time for games, Banshee. What are you insinuating?”

Sylvanas smirked and pounced on the opening she’d been looking for. “Why, the Legion, of course. The world was on the cusp of doom, and yet the leader of the Kirin Tor disappears? How dreadful.”

Jaina sent an impassive glance down to her bandaged fingers; the accusation easily brushed off as errant dust. “That’s what you’re holding against me? My proven-right prediction against your Horde?”

“Oh, no.” Sylvanas shook her head and took a step forward as she aimed her next attack.

To Jaina’s credit, she did not respond with a step backward. The time for diplomacy had ended. She would be happy to remind Sylvanas that she was a leader in her own right, and with a personal power that far eclipsed that of a disgraced undead elf.

“Let’s retrace the steps, shall we? You abstained from that all-too-famous translocation power when your High King faced down his doom -”

“You abandoned the Alliance to die!”

Sylvanas clucked her tongue. “Is that what alleviated the guilt you felt? Blaming it on someone else?”

That icy rush of power crept higher up Jaina’s hands. It took everything to remind herself that Sylvanas enjoyed throwing out bait and then digging salt into the wounds she inflicted. Don’t rise
to it, don’t rise to it, don’t rise to it, she repeated over and over.

Why not? Another part of her, a darker - far more vengeful part wondered.

Jaina closed her eyes against the sound of Sylvanas’ smug chuckle. She counted down from twenty, centered her focus, and focused on her breathing.

Sylvanas, undeterred by Jaina’s lack of response, pushed deeper. “Do you blame the Horde, Lord Admiral, for how you just let your father die? Theramore’s built on his bones, is it not?”

That snapped Jaina’s eyes back open. The mantra died. The promise to be the better woman turned to ash on her lips.

“You know nothing about Theramore,” Jaina growled. A pressure pounded just behind her eyes as raw arcane energy coalesced within her. “You know nothing about me --”

“I know you could have stopped Arthas.”

That stole her breath. It reached right into the very core of what Jaina had spent years rebuilding and snatched those emotional supports like they were made of sand, but Jaina has had years to learn how to brace against the crash of that particular wave, and so lets the accusation wash over her. Arthas was too distant to be anything more than a dull ache somewhere in the vicinity of her girlhood.

The energy around her died. The icy wave of magic that had been circling her fell to the ground like raindrops, splashing at her feet, and the pressure eased behind her eyes.

“Arthas?"

“Yes,” Sylvanas sneered. “I remember your lament in the Halls of Reflection --”

“Stratholme.” Jaina cut in. “Yes. It’s hard not to question if I did the right thing.” She set her staff down, the butt of it clicking gently as it came to rest on the floor. The ice dripped off her hands as she let the spell go. “But Arthas was --" she blinked as the mental tally of the years registered. “Nearly twenty years ago. Whatever legacy he forged, it’s gone now --”

“Gone?” Sylvanas snapped, and the crimson of her gaze burned through the delicate skin around her eyes. “You think Arthas is gone?”

“I know he’s gone,” Jaina risked stepping closer. A shudder raced through the banshee before her as she gripped the ruby pendant tighter against her. “He has no power over you anymore, Sylvanas - haven’t you let him have it long enough?”

“You know nothing--”

“I know why you don’t want to raise Vereesa in undeath.” Now Jaina recognized the ruby stone, as Sylvanas cradled it in her hand. She remembered asking Vereesa about it at Rhonin’s funeral when the youngest Windrunner had held it out over the bodiless pyre and debating dropping it into the flames.

Sylvanas stilled. “Do you now?”

Jaina was treading dangerous waters. “I’ve been trying to figure out why you were so damned mercurial about my being here. After all, if I fail, then your little sister comes back and stays … but not for you.” Jaina’s words trailed off as she voiced her thoughts aloud.
Sylvanas now stared at her over a shoulder, her look venomous. Even in undeath, tension coiled in that powerful frame, and the sobering realization that the wrong word, or if she overstepped too soon, Jaina would be on the receiving end of a banshee’s malicious temper.

“Well?” Sylvanas faced her. The sneer of her lips revealed the sharp point of her fangs. “By all means, finish your thought.”

“If … there is another way to save Alleria, then Vereesa doesn’t have to die, but her life - their life - will continue… without you.” Jaina risked another step forward. Sylvanas was stock still against the table she stood before. “Either way, you feel like you’ve got to make a sacrifice again, don’t you?”

Sylvanas didn’t answer. The venom in her features was frozen.

It was an opening Jaina had to take. She thought of her reconciliation with her mother and the release of the grief she’d carried on her shoulders. The burden Sylvanas must bear still … “You don’t have to sacrifice anything, B… Sylvanas. Let them in, talk to them - there’s still time to heal -”

“Heal?” That drew a response. Sylvanas laughed, dark and bitter. “The dead don’t heal, you stupid child. We stagnate. We rot. We’re meant to be in the ground --”

“You don’t believe that - if you just -”

“If I just what? Simper for mercy? Let love in?” Sylvanas snarled. “Arthas killed that --”

“Arthas is DEAD!” Jaina’s voice cracked. “He’s been dead for years! He can’t hurt anyone anymore. He can’t hurt you anymore, so why do you still allow him power over you?!”

Jaina might as well have struck true with an ice lance for how deathly still Sylvanas went. For an agonizing heartbeat, she dared to hope that she’d cracked through the Banshee Queen to reach Sylvanas underneath.

“Get out.”

Jaina blinked, not quite understanding.

“I said get out!” Sylvanas charged at her, her form unraveling into tendrils of shadow and necromancy. The banshee’s scream crescendoed into a terrible wail that forced Jaina to drop her staff; forced her hands to clap against her ears in a pitiful defense against the magic that assaulted her.

Gods, even her bones reverberated with the force and pressure built and built and then released in a single rush of sweet agony in her.

Her vision blurred.

Jaina cried out as that mass of shadows slammed into her and flung her back against the archways. She twisted to catch herself. An alarming bolt of pain exploded outward from her spine as she overextended to snatch the elegant latticework to prevent her toppling even further.

She skidded to a stop with her heels just over the edge of the tower. The bandages over her fingers were stained red again, and she knew that she’d ripped her fingertips further. They throbbed in time with her racing heartbeat - she couldn’t keep her grip forever.
Just as her fingers gave way, and the world just started to lurch around her - a powerful claw tangled in the fabric of her robes and hauled her up and up further. Her hands slapped over half-corporeal arms and struggled for purchase only to find none. As soon as her fingers closed over cold, hard flesh, it went to mist and left her grip floundering.

“Leave.” The words came out in a hiss, a whisper that scratched at her eardrums. “Get the hell out of my city and never come back.”

Jaina struggled, tried to find the elf inside the phantom that had a hold of her. There was nothing left in that creature but the burn of torment.

Then?

The cold rush of wind. The whistle of air. The panic that welled in her throat as she fell, further down - she didn’t even have her staff -- the tremor of her body as she readied a teleportation spell -- how much time did she have before the ground --

Oblivion.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Hello! My chapter updates might go a little wonky on dates just thanks to the revolving nature of my work shifts, but I am presently attempting to keep as close to a weekly schedule as possible. Enjoy!

Why do you allow him power over you?

Awareness, slow like the drip of honey, returned to Jaina.

It brought her back into a world that smells sick-sweet of pooling blood - her blood? Sight, at first fuzzy and distant, painted a picture of a choking night sky clogged with brilliant, swirling white. Everything was painted in broad strokes of shadow and light as the void of unconsciousness peeled back.

She heard nothing but the anger of the storm, distant now that it’s had time away from the rage that conjured it. The wind howled but it no longer carried that thrum of power. Her mind struggled to return to function, and her thoughts tumbled in vertigo as Jaina gathered her wits around her.

Touch returned to her in stinging numbness and tingling pins that sent hard, jagged streaks of pain along her limbs as she began to test her range of movement. Jaina’s left shoulder screamed in particular, refusing to comply with even the most forceful of her demands. Jaina tried to remember the lessons of combat medicine and found they all slipped from her before she could even touch on one word.

Carefully, terrified to discover what she might find, Jaina worked her muscles and limbs in short bursts. The snowdrift she’d landed in had absorbed much of the impact, but Jaina had to be sure the shocking lack of sensation in her lower legs was because she’d lost consciousness in the middle of a winter storm.

Not because --

No. She would not give into panic.

She fumbled a hand into her satchel. Her fingers didn’t respond quite as quick or agile as she’d like. They’d been exposed too long to the cold. Still, stubbornness was the birthright of any Kul Tiran, and this was not how Jaina wanted her last minute to go.

As her fingers fought the demand to function, Jaina dredged up pieces of her power to undo the clasp. The contents tumbled out, and a vial of a warm liquid rolled into Jaina’s frozen palm. One of three restorative potions she’d packed. Her hand shook as she brought the vial up, her fingers unwilling to work the stopper, but when the contents tipped down into her throat, she immediately felt relief.

Everything dulled. Cold, pain, and her nerves. The live wires that ran through her body quieted as the potion’s effects dampened her body’s responses to painful stimuli.

Jaina pressed her weight onto her right arm and shifted into an awkward slouch. She stared down
her body toward her feet and deliberately wriggled and moved each one until she was satisfied that it was actual, purposeful movement caused by her will.

She sat up and tugged her double layer of cloaks around her shoulders. Her right arm ached, but Jaina believed it was from exposure to the cold, not … whatever prevented her from doing anything productive with her left.

The Staff of Antonius was buried nearby, the wooden stave sticking out of the snow like a crooked street sign. Without the need for secrecy, Jaina brought the weapon to her with a gesture and then used the staff to center and then right herself as she stood. She tilted her neck back, and through the wash of relief that she felt no pain nor resistance, she glared up at the trajectory she’d traveled.

The dead vines suffered from her passage, the broken greenery perfectly detailing the path she’d carved through the brambles. With the snow piled against her knees, Jaina knew she’d been lucky not to strike something worse.

Then Jaina remembered why she’d fallen through bramble and embankment.

The vial shattered with a flex of her fist and the glass crumbled down into the snow. There were shards, Jaina felt them through the potion’s numbness, but she didn’t care at the moment. The spike of pain granted clarity.

In the eye of the hurricane of her design, Jaina saw the devastation around her. A brief touch of ironic amusement, Sylvanas had been right. Jaina had been acting the naive child that believed with just enough stubborn pride and willful hope that she could fix something irreparably broken.

A bitter laugh escaped her just to be swallowed by the dying wind. Somewhere above her, Jaina believed she could hear the anguish of a banshee, but she didn’t dwell on it. She didn’t have to dwell on it anymore.

Jaina gathered her cloaks around her for a second time before she resigned herself to the trudge back to the squat building. She cared about nothing but the goal of retrieving her things and fulfilling the request made of her.

Sylvanas wanted her gone? Fine.

To hell with the plight of elves, those living and dead.

Jaina had already gone through the cycle of being batted back and forth between two powerful entities, and she bore the mana-scars of that fallout on her body still. She cared for Vereesa, truly cared for the emotional happiness that her friend deserved after thirty some-odd years of pain - some of it that Jaina carried the burden of guilt still.

Jaina stormed through Falor’Thalas as she backtracked through the inner districts. Without the blinding winds, there was a spectral, silent beauty that hung over the dead city, but any tease of wonder at the glimmering winter spectacle was devoured by the gnawing pit of anger right underneath Jaina’s ribs.

Here and there, Jaina noticed the evidence of the citizens that the city still sheltered. As she closed in on the section that she’d once considered hers, the few signs of life disappeared. As she entered it, Jaina found her court lifeless and buried under the brunt of the magical avalanche she’d unleashed. Snow and ice lashed against the stone, and branches that had once supported masterworks of architecture were now broken and bent against the raw destruction of arcane-infused nature.
Good.

The destruction untwisted the knot in Jaina’s chest just a smidge. Vindictiveness had never been an emotion she enjoyed, but Jaina would be damned if she didn’t indulge in the rush of catharsis it brought with it.

The archmage whistled for Scout as she headed into the gentle dancing light of the canopy to recover her possessions. Underneath the swaying illusion, Jaina checked her wards. The wolf-cloak that currently rested around her shoulders had once been tucked upstairs and somewhat out of the way, so she didn’t have to keep looking at it. That meant someone had entered here when Sylvanas had promised to stay out.

Hadn’t Jaina done the same thing?

Nope. Not a thought she wanted to follow at the moment.

Jaina took that moment from her security check to makeshift a sling from one of the cloaks that she’d had to scrap a week previously, and tucked her left arm into it. A throbbing, dull ache settled in the space just behind her shoulder-joint, but at least it was now supported until she could have it checked out.

The sound of hoofbeats spurred her back into action. Her fingers, stiff as they were, still danced over the warding symbols and runic enchantments and found … nothing. Nothing amiss, nothing out of place. Sylvanas, or whichever minion she’d summoned for the task, had only come for the cloak and nothing more.

Well. That changed nothing in the end.

Jaina flexed her arcane skill as she drew the meager contents of her life here and collected them for her departure. She hesitated on the gifts; the dagger and the travel pack before she weighed them against pragmatism’s worth and added the gifts to her arsenal.

Her journal, the original sketches, ruminations about her theories concerning the obvious troll influence on the elven city, and all of her thoughts were secured for a later retrospective once she was tucked back in Boralus and far away from the antics of mainlanders.

Jaina left only the massive, weighted banner behind. She couldn’t picture a use for the Shattered Mask beyond kindling and momentarily dreamt of a satisfying fire. However, the uneasy implications of the forsaken who lurked through Falor’Thalas and the obvious care the tapestry had while they'd held it halted her hand before the fire could even wisp up smoke.

She left the banner crumpled but intact underneath the rippling canopy.

***

Winter followed Jaina out of the city. The kingly boughs of the oak and pine were brought low under the weight of their ivory and ice crowns. Frost glittered on the branches and spun a whimsical archway that Jaina ducked underneath. The golden gleam of autumn was still there underneath the ice, waiting for the thaw to steal one last bit of glory before the quiet snowfall swallowed the verdant courts until the spring.

The sensation of being watched followed Jaina as well, though this time there was no attempt to disguise their presence from her. In the high places, the shadows of the dark rangers balanced against their precarious watch-towers as they tracked her presence. In the space between buildings, the occasional glint of gold revealed the presence of one of the forsaken bold enough to risk a peek
at the leaving human.

Scout managed to work through the high snow without too much trouble, but Jaina’s exit from the city was slower than she’d wanted, and it just left her to stew on the events of the past hour. The further she put distance between her and the banshee, the thicker the anger coiled in her until even Scout was feeding off the energy.

The mare whickered, nervous, and side-danced off the path.

“Scout now’s not the time,” Jaina chided, and lifted the reins slowly to control the mare’s head until she settled. It took time; time she did not believe she could spare. Not when her heart picked up the pace at the thought of that horrible darkness pouring out of the forest to grab her once again.

Scout whickered again, forehoof stamping against the snow as she resisted Jaina’s call to settle, and pranced away from the path once more.

Jaina’s grip tightened before it loosened. With a sigh, she slipped out of the saddle and rounded the mare to take the lead. “Come on, girl.”

Scout resisted at first, but with a gentle guide, Jaina coaxed the mare into following her through the southern streets. Out from the cluster of buildings, the snow was not as dramatic, but it slowed them down as woman and beast maneuvered through the knee-high drifts.

***

Scout eventually settled enough to allow Jaina to ride, both horse and rider were too wound up. Jaina wondered, idly, as Scout’s ears flicked madly, if the horse was worried about the same sort of monster that she was - or if the horse picked up on Jaina’s fears.

A day out from Falor’Thalam and the snow melted enough to warrant a quicker pace than a slow march. The winter storm had centered on Falor’Thalam, and as Jaina entered autumn’s domain, she tried to leave the anger behind with the ice and cold.

Three days out and the city felt like a dream. A distant afternoons pretend with a fuzziness to the details of the entire affair.

Five days out and Jaina finally began to believe that she would leave, and that thought brought up a new wave of anxiety. A heartbeat of panic before Jaina cooly shut down the worries that came with Vereesa’s name in her mind.

Jaina recognized the landscape as she started looking for a spot to camp for the night. She was on a high incline and had a commanding view of the ridge and valleys below her. Far to the west, Jaina saw the desecration of the Blight. There was a stark line underneath the true horizon where the kingdom of autumn just stopped. Beyond it, a wasteland even her human eyes could see.

A kingdom left to wither into memory. Once, there had been an Aspect capable of burning the rot away until the charred corpse of the land could begin to heal, but that power was lost to Azeroth now. Jaina turned her gaze from the Blighted lands and down into the forests directly below her.

She saw smoke drifting up through the sparse treeline. Smelt the richness of a campfire on the wind.

Caution born from her recent archeological attempts guided Jaina’s movements as she dismounted and hitched Scout to a nearby fallen log. The mare nuzzled at her shoulder before dropping her head to pick at the grass and moss.
Jaina approached the ridgeline and crouched low as she came to the edge. There was a thicket of dried branches long shedded of their summer leaves that she used as cover. The sticks scraped against her skin as she maneuvered herself into a position that she could hold for a while, then she set her staff sideways on her lap. A small gesture and the crystal at the end of her staff darkened to the blue of the ocean’s depths.

From her satchel, Jaina produced smooth, polished quartz carved into the shape of a sphere. She felt the pressure build behind her eyes as she balanced the sphere in one hand, and lifted her other above it. As her fingers curled in the air, Jaina’s gaze went to the smoke trailing in the wind.

Jaina watched the smoke drift lazily in the gentle breeze that lifted it up and away from the trees, and then, as the pressure grew to be uncomfortable, there was a pop somewhere behind her right eye and --

She stared at the source of the smoke itself. A bird’s eye view of the hastily-erected camp built without fear of being discovered. Several tents littered the clearing not too far from where Jaina camped over a month earlier. The open canvas provided shelter for six bedrolls, scattered underneath the fabric. Jaina turned her head, and the sight swiveled to find only two mules hitched to the trees, but no horses, or more exotic mounts.

The fire was built to last for a while and had been set up for cooking something a bit more sturdy than reheated rations.

And around the fire, six Lightforged were in various activities. One of them, a slender Draenei woman with sweeping horns leaned over a map marked in the draenic glyphs. She wore leather and mail armor suitable for a trek through the woods, as did three others: two women, and a man. Jaina remembered the style of armor from the Draenor expedition, and the outfitted regiments the Draenei offered the Kaldorei before the Cataclysm. The rangari were the “eyes of the prophet,” or the Draenei equivalent to the elven farstriders.

Jaina frowned and shifted the sight to look over the final two Lightforged.

Recognition flooded her, and she fumbled to keep the scrying from disintegrating.

Two male Draenei wearing the full plate of the Lightforges front-line warriors sat on a log and were deep in conversation. Their weapons rested just within reach and even through the scrying spell, the holy energy that radiated from them saturated the air, and to Jaina’s magical sense, it was no different than the cloying, stagnate humidity of Stranglethorn.

One of them had the same sort of sweeping horns as the first rangari, but one of his horns was broken halfway through. The injury had long been smoothed over and capped with gold that matched the brands that decorated the parts of his alabaster skin that were exposed. He shifted his arm, and Jaina narrowed in on the detail work just underneath his shoulder pauldron. There was a dullness to the white-gold armor - like he’d repaired it in a hurry.

Broken-Horn ran a hand over his face, then stood up to approach the rangari detachment.

Jaina was tempted to pour more energy into the scrying to allow her to hear, but in a regiment of Draenei, she doubted they would be speaking any language she knew fluently.

She broke the scrying spell and lifted her gaze to track the flight path of a bird rustled out of the canopy. Below her was a tracking party led by a warrior who had called for Vereesa and her heads - accusing them of being as void-lost as Kivan.
They were also warriors who had been foiled by a tipsy ranger and a mage after two bottles. That sort of bruise to one’s pride was hard enough to shake without a dash of righteous belief added into the mix.

Jaina thought briefly to the conversation with the two younger Windrunner sisters, about the face justice wore in the presence of an all-knowing Light and the enforcement it wielded.

Jaina clucked her tongue, then extracted herself from the ridgeline. Her shoulder twinged painfully, and so she returned to Scout to pull out the last restorative draught from where she’d placed it in the saddlebags. While she waited for the potion to work, she debated what to do.

They were tracking Jaina’s camps, and the sting of her movement discovered after she’d tried to keep as low a profile as possible faded with the understanding that most rangari were rangers with thousands of years of experience.

They might find where Jaina set up her last camp, and then where would they go from there? She’d teleported, and though she trusted in the reputation of the rangari as phenomenal trackers - she didn’t think they’d be able to trace the portal.

At the same time …

Jaina sighed. The elven ward she’d uncovered had a clever dissuading rune upon it, but it was not the Ban’dinoriel - the Gatekeeper that had protected Silvermoon for thousands of years. These wards would keep any curious travelers from just stumbling through the boundary, but give the Draenei a curious enough mage and just like any wall - it would eventually crumble.

And so what?

The only thing it protected was a ruined city filled with the ruins of a people that should have long been laid to rest, and ruled by a shadow of a woman. It was Jaina’s duty to the Alliance to offer the Lightforged a direct line to the Wintering Land.

And yet…

Even with Teldrassil, with Boralus, with her brother now ash and lost a second time - what Jaina believed awaited Sylvanas at the end of the line was far more than the judgment and execution of the Light.

Not to mention the little sunflower girl. What would her fate be if the Lightforged uncovered the existence of forsaken children?

“I’m an idiot,” Jaina muttered aloud before she seized her staff and strode towards a patch of the woods about two hundred yards away from the ridge. Here, the trees grew closer together and their branches tangled above her. Jaina went into the center of the grove before she tilted her gaze to the canopy itself.

“There’s something She needs to see before I leave.”

Silence answered her but that suited Jaina just fine. She turned on a heel to return to Scout and allowed herself just a hint of a smirk. Let the dark rangers be startled for once.

***

Jaina roused from her slumber when her boundary glyph tripped. She stared blearily into the dark around her, then pushed up into a more dignified position. The moon was long below the horizon,
but she couldn’t hear birdsong.

Early morning then.

Jaina dressed with the assistance of magic. Her shoulder still resisted any real range of motion, and she wanted the security of her armor and regalia for this meeting - though she had not expected it so soon.

All that was left of her evening’s fire was a pile of smoldering embers, and as Jaina looked out into the treeline, she found a pair of embers there as well, watching her.

Jaina never believed she could ever have described the Banshee Queen as a skittish person, but as she observed the elven ranger gingerly entering into the circle of Jaina’s camp, she couldn’t think of a better word.

The undead ranger was restless; she fidgeted with her fingers, the leather of her gloves creaking as she worked them in the chill of the pre-morning.

“Kalira was rather upset that you spotted her,” Sylvanas chose a spot opposite Jaina to stand.

“I hadn’t, actually,” Jaina revealed, “but I didn’t think you’d let me just leave without observation.”

“Mm.”

Jaina took in a long, steadying breath. She was still angry - so angry about being thrown from the tower, but retribution for that could come later; not at the hands of a Lightforged bully, but by her design.

“What did you need me to see?” Sylvanas asked when there was no further prompt from Jaina. “I would have expected --”

“Nope.” Jaina sliced a hand through the air, cutting off the banshee’s words with a silencing spell. Jaina regretted the dark between them just because she couldn’t make out the indignation she felt brimming from that gesture. “We are not talking about anything that happened in the past month, or I will probably hand you over before I realize what I’ve done.”

Jaina tapped the butt of her staff gently on the ground, and the campfire crackled back to life. The blaze of light illuminated the ranger opposite her and revealed the silhouette of a massive winged creature furled underneath one of the sturdier branches. “A bat?”

“One of the surviving plague ones, yes.” Sylvanas acknowledged after the silencing effect wore off. There was a tinge of frustration in the ghostly echo of her voice, but she waited for Jaina to speak again.

“Right.” Jaina drummed her fingers along her staff, then turned to approach the ridgeline. She didn’t check to see if Sylvanas was following her. Without the benefit of daylight, or any other source of light, picking her way along the loose rock at the edge was dangerous.

She stepped toward the thicket, and a cold leather glove closed around her right forearm, pulling her just a tad off-balance. “What are you doing?” She hissed as Sylvanas let go.

“You’ve already taken one tumble, Lady Proudmoore, let’s not have another so soon.” Sylvanas moved up, and around her right, her hood lowered as her gaze dropped to the ground they picked through. When Sylvanas found a suitable path, she turned, and the banshee held out that gloved...
Jaina’s first instinct was to slap it away, but if she didn’t want to risk being seen, she needed the advantage of elven sight at night. She took the offered hand and allowed herself to be brought along. The sticks scratched gently against her skin again, and she settled back into her earlier pose to grant comfort over a longer spell scry.

Sylvanas crouched at her side, and her stare was out towards the western land.

Jaina couldn’t help herself as she pulled out the quartz sphere. “Do you regret it?”

Sylvanas tensed near her, and that hood turned so Jaina couldn’t even make out the gleam of her eyes to gauge the reaction. “What required my presence out here, Lady Proudmoore?”

Jaina pursed her lips as she conjured the scrying spell for the second time. There was less pressure behind her eyes now that Jaina had a better awareness of the location she was peeking into, but she caught the blue gleam reflecting off the quartz all the same as the arcane leaked into her gaze. There was a touch of violet, there, just for a second, as Sylvanas turned to watch, then the orb revealed the Lightforged camp.

Two rangari were on sentry duty, though they looked as if they’d have rather taken the extra hours of sleep instead. The mules nodded off at their hitching post. Broken-Horn and his companion perched at the fire, the brands gleaming and bright against the flames.

“How much did Vereesa tell you about the incident with Kivan?” Jaina murmured.

Without seeing Sylvanas, hearing the echo of her voice unsettled Jaina to the point that the spell nearly flickered out. “Enough of it to understand you both are sentimental fools.”

“These two were the Lightforged Vereesa held off. I believe they’re tracking our movements - mine in particular. Now, I teleported, so my trail’s about to go cold, but Vereesa…”

“Is an experienced ranger.”

“As are the rangari,” Jaina pointed out. She pulled her sight from the camp but left the image on the orb itself. She turned to face Sylvanas. “Your wards are based loosely on Ban’dinoriel, but they’d need a mage with an understanding of ancient elven runework and --”

“I understand.” Sylvanas cursed softly. She went quiet, her gaze hard on the image between them. “You allowed me time to evacuate the city, th--”

“Let me work on the wards.”

“--you -- what?” Sylvanas’ gaze snapped up to meet her own.

“Allow me to strengthen the wards. You want to keep the world out, yes?” Jaina continued as Sylvanas nodded. “Then allow a transmutation archmage to secure the entrances and exits into your land.”

“I almost killed you,” Sylvanas stated.

“Yes, and I am furious with you for trying,” Jaina was proud of the lack of emotion in her words. She had slipped on the mask of the diplomat who had negotiated the trade between Orgrimmar and Darnassus and that polite neutrality assisted her now in not ripping ice lances through the woman next to her. “However, that,” she gestured to the scrying spell as the image dissipated, “is not about
what happened between us. I saw the children, Sylvanas.”

Sylvanas stiffened, then let out an unneeded sigh. “Of course you did. Very well, Lady Proudmoore.”

Jaina glanced sidelong to her as the banshee straightened. Again, a hand was offered to allow her a safe walk along the ridgeline.

“What do you suggest we do?”
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

So, missed my weekly deadline by a few days, but I'm going to be heading to at least trying to stay consistent in that I will have a chapter up at least every other week, and if time and work permits, then more so than that. Or, I can go to a bi-monthly update that's consistent on a day yet to be determined (probably Monday). Let me know what you'd prefer in the comments!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first trill of birdsong broke into the early morning quiet and jostled Jaina out of her unexpected doze. She lifted her head, vision bleary as her mind struggled to piece together the fundamental questions of what, where, when, and most importantly who.

Her head hurt. It’d been bothering her since the fall in Falor’Thalas, but with the restorative draughts, she’d been able to keep the brunt of the pain managed. Before, she’d been relying on the hope of teleporting back to Dalaran and immediately into the service of a healer, but now all she could think of was that the birds were singing at such a shrill volume and the first streak of sunlight deliberately aimed for her eyes.

Underneath the birdsong, Jaina heard the soft flow of an elven conversation. She sat up and searched until she spotted Sylvanas and one of the dark rangers - Kalira, hadn't she mentioned - standing near a massive plague bat who was in the middle of grooming an outstretched wing. The bat stood a solid head or two higher than either of the elves with a body that was framed as wide as one of the draft horses the Norwich Estates reared. Kalira had a side-pack cradled underneath her arm, resting her forearm on the pack as she conversed. Being that the two were undead, Jaina found it difficult to read into their body language.

Hearing Jaina, Sylvanas broke off from the conversation and took the saddlebag from Kalira before she crossed the grass towards the mage’s position. Kalira, dressed in modest dark grey leathers with accents of moss green along her shoulder guard and gauntlets went back to tending to the oblivious bat.

“Lady Proudmoore,” Sylvanas came to a halt a solid distance away. “I sent Kalira out to survey the Lightforged camp while you were resting. She’s returned with a better sense of their numbers and what they’re expecting to encounter out here. Also,” she reached into the pack and removed a small vial of shimmering maroon liquid, “while I’m not quite sure they originated from Azerothian herbs, the curative remedies of the Draenei seem just as effective for field medicine until a healer sees you.”

Jaina craned her neck to see the potion that Sylvanas held up for her perusal. “How are you certain it’s a --”

“How are you certain that it's not poison, you mean?” Sylvanas shrugged, the gesture was oddly casual on her. “You don’t, but I would expect you consider me a mite more intelligent than maiming you just as I’ve agreed to let you work your talents on the defensive wards.” Sylvanas flicked the vial towards Jaina, who barely caught it before the glass smashed against the ground. The vial was welcomed warmth against Jaina’s palm, and on closer inspection, she smelled the
earthy scent of Ba’ruun’s Bloom - a hearty mushroom that’d been a staple of many of the remedies the Alliance forces required during their Draenor expedition.

Jaina lifted her attention from the vial toward the banshee before her. Sylvanas had a point, it would be somewhat impulsive and fickle for Sylvanas to poison her; but at the same time, Jaina found it difficult to trust at face value anything that the woman across from her said, or did.

Sylvanas’ heel scuffed against the loose rock of their vantage point as she returned to Kalira and the bat. Jaina watched her leave, then glanced back at the vial in her hand. Without the distraction of conversation, the dull throb of a headache threatened to creep back on Jaina; so with a grimace, Jaina popped the stopper off the vial and tossed the potion back with a quick twist of the wrist.

The liquid warmed her throat as it went, and with it, the various aches and pains she’d accumulated settled to nothing while the threatened headache faded to a twinge behind her left eye that only flared when she focused on it. The aftertaste left something to be desired, so as Jaina picked herself up, she took a swig from her waterskin and felt relief that movement did not come with pain.

Sylvanas glanced side-long as Jaina neared, and swapped from the fast-paced Thalassian to her slower, accented Common. “-- the mare’s capable on a good day to push a solid twenty leagues, and as our Lord Admiral is known to hail from a nation with good horsemanship, we’ll need rest areas - change in gait and patterns of grass wear.”

Jaina quirked a brow. “That sounds tedious, and the job for several dozen rangers with a few days advanced warning.” A soft chuff of breath from her right suggested Kalira felt the same way.

Sylvanas didn’t chuckle, but she acknowledged Jaina’s observation with a quick nod. “I would prefer a week’s forewarning, actually, but we’ll make do with hours. Kalira saw to it that the sentries won’t wake for a little while longer, and their bellies grumbling enough that the camp will want to idle for a filling meal before setting out.”

“How --? Nevermind.” Jaina cut off her question. There wasn’t enough time to spend satisfying her curiosity. “Aiding the misdirection buys me more time with the wards, so, what can I do?”

Sylvanas exchanged a look with Kalira, then gestured for the dark ranger to take the lead in answering. Kalira spoke up immediately, “I could use your frost magic; three leagues north along the path. I found a narrowing of the horse-trail that could send horse and rider along a nasty tumble if they were startled by a hungry predator.”

Jaina suddenly had the urge to lay eyes on Scout. She cast her gaze around the clearing, heartbeat kicking up in her throat until --

Scout’s head lifted from the moss she’d commandeered as her breakfast as if Jaina’s gaze was enough to gain the mare’s attention. She chewed on her morsel for a moment longer, then dropped her head back to her meal.

Jaina let out a quiet breath and met the gazes of the two elves who both wore the same impassive stare. “All right, then.” Jaina felt it better to move on before either one decided that commenting on her moment of panic was a proper next step. “When do we set out?”

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“Now, if you’re up for the flight,” Sylvanas answered. “Kalira will take Brittlemane and establish a trail towards the detour. You and I will design the scene of your unfortunate mishap along the trail. Afterward, Galen will take you back onto the upper ridge to the nearest ward and you will … do
whatever it is you need to do.” Sylvanas waved a dismissive hand in a suggestion of the spellweaving that Jaina would need to do.

“Brittlemane?”

Sylvanas led her over to an unrolled leather tarp. Upon it, a complete horse skeleton resided. With a subtle gesture, Jaina watched as dark spirals of magic drifted from Sylvanas’ hands towards the bones. Jaina couldn’t help but send out a quiet, exploratory gesture of her own as the violet tendrils seeped into the bleached skeleton.

Jaina had only tasted necromancy’s unique twist on the arcane a few times during her career. The first had been during the Plague itself and jumped off from Jaina’s insatiable curiosity about what macabre transmutation the grain brought onto its victims. That first encounter felt much like how Jaina suspected the rotten grain did: slimy, the spells that animated the ghouls stuck to her arcane spellwork like oil slicks upon water.

The second time she experimented with understanding the individual touch upon necromancy, she had stood in the Halls of Reflection and faced down a man she’d once believed she could marry. That touch of death had frozen her to the very bedrock of her soul, a cold far more bitter than the ice magic that she commanded for herself.

This time, the third query, felt different once again. Sylvanas’ command of necromancy was not cold, nor sickly. It felt like the whispers, only without the beguiling promise behind them. This was a command, and it even had Jaina rising on her toes to follow.

Kalira rested a hand on her shoulder, and the weight grounded Jaina. She pulled her spell back and waited as the bones reanimated.

The horse bones rattled and rolled together like they were attached to an invisible string. The bones danced until piece by piece they connected - but instead of ligament and tendon, Jaina watched as ropes twined from shadow took the place of connective tissue, tugging and twisting until the skeleton no longer lay before them, but stood upon four legs. It watched them with empty sockets, and Jaina wondered if she would find the same intelligence as she would see in Scout’s own.

Sylvanas lowered her hands and jerked her chin once at Kalira. The dark ranger removed her grip from Jaina’s shoulder and approached the undead mount. Kalira swung onto the creature’s bare back without complaint and settled carefully between the shoulder-blades, and urged the mount into the woods.

Jaina watched her leave, then turned to Sylvanas, brow arched in question.

Sylvanas must have been in a jovial mood, for she explained as she stepped over the empty tarp toward the bat itself. “When Kalira summoned me, I figured Galen here wouldn’t always be the wisest choice for traveling. He tires, after all.” Sylvanas unwrapped the beasts’ reins and gently tossed them up and over his massive, triangle-shaped head to land on the saddle. She then tucked Thori’dal into a custom-designed holster for the bow, and with it, her quiver. “However, at the moment, he’ll suit our purpose.”

Sylvanas rounded the creature and reached a hand up to hoist herself into the saddle. She leaned over the side to smirk down at Jaina. “Do you want to be the little spoon or the big spoon?”

When Jaina didn’t respond immediately, Sylvanas’ smirk grew into a wicked grin. Jaina flushed and scampered up and into the saddle without waiting for assistance. As she pulled herself up to be level with Sylvanas, she weighed the two options heavily before she chose to sit in the front.
Sylvanas said nothing but reached one arm around her to pick up the reins and encourage the bat to begin lumbering forward.

There was only a momentary pause, as the beast stretched out its foreclaws to seize upon something large that Jaina couldn’t quite make out, but what she could smell was blood and the musk of horseflesh.

“If you attempt to toss me again …” Jaina spoke up as two leathery wings unfurled to either side of her. The shock of the take-off forced her back against Sylvanas, who took the sudden crush of the mage with only a soft grunt.

“You’re a mage,” is all Sylvanas said, and with the bat climbing in altitude, Jaina didn’t want to turn around and be in that close of proximity to the banshee. If she saw a smirk or a sneer, there’d be a literal frozen corpse behind her.

“Yes, you’re observant. That doesn’t change what you did.”

“I believe slowfall is one of the first spells the Magisters taught to any aspiring apprentice in Silvermoon due to the high spires. Is Dalaran lax on that sort of spellcraft?”

Jaina almost turned around. Almost. “How far to the detour?”

Sylvanas adjusted her position behind Jaina, and her glove creaked as it closed around the reins in a firm one-handed grip. “Two hours by flight, give or take.”

For the Lightforged, without mounts of their own, that would be at least a day or two’s march, probably less with the Light fortifying them - and the rangari are used to traversing steep terrain. “I don’t understand: why didn’t they bring any steeds with them or winged mounts? I have a cold trail –”

“Any beast large enough to carry a fully-kitted warrior through the air is going to be too large to flit through the canopy. Autumn still has sway over the lower forests, and it would be hard for even a Farstrider to keep an eye on tracks over a month old.”

“It feels like a waste of time for them.”

Sylvanas hummed, noncommittal. “Is it? There are no wars, no dire threats that require the tenacity and drive that the Lightforged become imbued with.”

“There’s always the threat of the Black Empire rising.”

Sylvanas scoffed, dismissing Jaina’s words. “Hardly. What army the parasitic so-called “gods” once had was crushed by the end of the Blood War, and without the Naga, Queen Azshara cowered back into the depths along with whatever master calls her puppet.”

Jaina disagreed, and shifted slightly to toss Sylvanas a critical look. The banshee, for her merit, merely stared back, challenging Jaina to prove her wrong. They were several hundred meters above the ridgeline now, and the wind whistled cold against Jaina’s ears. Under Sylvanas’ hood, her eyes glinted ruby as she awaited Jaina’s response.

Even with the wolf cloak, and the heavy linen one beneath it, Jaina still felt the chill of the banshee against the length of her spine, but if Sylvanas hoped it would unsettle her, then she had another thing coming. Jaina had grown up off the waters off Boralus itself, and the chill of a glacier-fed current was her first playground.

“Both the champions of the Horde and the Alliance have clashed against the Old Gods, what …
four, five times? That was when we still had armies to throw at them - now we’ve got, what, farmers? A cohort of miners ready to square wits against the latest recruitment tactics of the Twilight Cult?” Jaina felt the need to point out the lack of any real soldiers for any nation.

“They’re still around? I assumed Alleria would have cleared out her competition years ago.”

“Competi--” Jaina stammered over the word. “They’re not competing, for the Tide’s sake!”

“Aren’t they?” Sylvanas’ voice went cloyingly sweet. “Two groups desperate for the attention of many-tentacled masters?” That wicked grin from before was back, but it carried a spice of something a little more devious within it. “Honestly, I’d always pegged Alleria as a little tamer than that if you get my --”

“You are insufferable!” Jaina knew she was blushing, and she could feel the heat blazing on her cheeks.

“And you are easily flustered,” Sylvanas lobbed back, “for a diplomat and leader.”

Jaina scowled, “ - my point still stands. There is little for Azeroth to use but the Lightforged. The Cenarion Circle and the Earthen Ring are devoted to Silithus itself.”

That abated Sylvanas’ constant need to torment. “The wound is still there?”

Jaina canted her head. “You knew as well as the Alliance that the Blood War did nothing but drain Azeroth’s strength, how is this a surprise?”

“The Blood War was won.”

“At a horrible price.” Jaina pointed out. “From what Magni told us, the world-soul is barely hanging on. The Farseer is practically bound to the Maelstrom to keep it from tearing open; the Archdruid Council is attempting to staunch the spillover in the Dream. The Tirifal Guard is working with the Telemancers of Suramar to try and establish a sort of safety net with the known ley-line network --”

“And of the races of the Horde?” Sylvanas interjected, “do you know what they do?”

“I … cannot say that I’ve kept a close eye on them.” That wasn’t entirely true, and Sylvanas seemed to see through the falsehood. “Well, what do you know of them?”

Sylvanas sighed, unneeded for someone with no need for air. “I know that they are unable to do more than the basic scraps of survival without the Alliance readying their blades.”

Jaina’s lips pressed into a thin, bloodless line. Sylvanas’ gaze traveled to the sight, and she sighed a second time.

“I can practically hear the lecture you’re dying to unleash on me.”

Jaina almost launched into that very lecture. It got to the tip of her tongue when she decided to swallow the argument instead. “Back in the Spire…”

Sylvanas stiffened behind her, and that ruby gaze darkened to a dangerous crimson. Jaina worried that she was about to receive a second helping of the banshee’s wrath. “I meant what I said: I want to help --”

“ -- and you’re suggesting that a saddle half a league above the ground isn’t quite where you feel
“comfortable taking the moral high road?” Sylvanas drawled, and that dangerous crimson dimmed, just a bit. Before Jaina could protest, Sylvanas continued. “There’s wisdom in that. Fine, work on the wards, and I’ll let you rage about any nitpicking choice that pleases you to bring up.”

Jaina figured that was as good an apology that she’d ever get from the banshee, and so, she nodded and accepted the peace offering, such as it was. She turned back in her seat and tried to use the quiet to collect her thoughts.

Halfway through the flight, Jaina needed to break the silence, and like a child picking at a scab, she pried again when she knew she shouldn’t. “The wards, you’re so certain I’m going to repair them.”

“Hmm?”

“I just want to know why you’re taking me at my word; you have no collateral on me.”

“Must you needle at everything?” Sylvanas shifted behind her again, her arm brushing against Jaina’s side as she adjusted her seat.

“It’s not needling; I’m just curious.” Jaina resisted the urge to turn around.

“Have you never heard the saying curiosity skins the lynx?” Sylvanas inquired. “Very well, only if you promise to remain quiet the rest of the way.” When Jaina nodded, Sylvanas murmured a quiet elven curse before she spoke up again. “You’re an honorable woman, and for you, your word is your bond.”

That answer did prompt Jaina to turn around, brow arched, and lips pursed. “Much of your war was built upon your claim that honor was useless to the dead.”

Sylvanas met her gaze steadily. The crimson of her anger was nowhere to be seen, and all Jaina saw was the sunrise reflected there. “I still stand by that claim, Lord Admiral.”

“Then --”

“However, you are not a corpse.”

Jaina blinked. “I ...oh. I see.”

Sylvanas hummed softly, then averted her gaze to look out upon the crags below them. Jaina waited for a beat longer, before she turned around to do the same.

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As promised, Jaina kept quiet until after the bat began his descent into a narrow, winding ravine. One half was a dangerously thin horse-trail, as Kalira had reported, with one side against the steep ridgeline, and the other breaking off into a neck-breaking incline that ended at a river below it.

Sylvanas guided the bat to settle near the higher vantage point and dismounted. She collected her bow and quiver, and then while she adjusted both on her back, she explained why Kalira thought it a good ambush point. “Last year, we cleared out a harpy nest that’d taken up roost in the northern caverns. Normally, I don’t care what the pigeons do, but unruly harpies would inevitably lead to unruly adventurers.”

“I hardly think I’d be off-centered by a harpy nest,” Jaina pointed out as Sylvanas finished her scan of the ravine, leaning forward to observe the drop-down. “If we’re going to sell me tumbling down the way, couldn’t it have been something a bit more … in my league?”
Sylvanas glanced back over her shoulder, amusement laced through her ethereal voice. “My apologies, Lord Admiral, I did not realize we needed to ensure that your accident kept your pride intact.” She watched as Jaina bristled, and just before Jaina could protest, she continued. “However, I suppose if Alleria had suggested I’d fallen to a gnome ambush, I would have come out of exile just to prove that sort of indignity wrong.”

Jaina was not placated, and Sylvanas’ mention of gnomes brought to mind her lost apprentice. “There’s a flaw in your plan, you realize.” Sylvanas’ look fixed further on Jaina, and she watched Jaina step up to the overlook much like a cat does a scampering mouse. “See, give off the impression that there’s a nest of harpies that an archmage could not best and you’ll have tales and rumor that follow - and with them, those same unruly adventurers looking for sport.”

Sylvanas grunted. Jaina took that as a sign of acknowledgment.

“Not to mention, there’s a risk that the rangari will immediately see through the trick.”

“No plan survives contact with the enemy, but go on,” Sylvanas settled down into a crouch, looking sidelong at her, “what sort of idea are you turning over?”

“Well, I’ve been mulling over what you said earlier,” Jaina mimicked Sylvanas’ crouch, using her staff to brace against so her calves wouldn’t start protesting immediately. “The Lightforged, the zeal that drives them. I think you’re right, in that the Lightforged don’t have an arch-nemesis to strive against anymore.”

“Yet earlier you so handily mentioned the Black Empire as a counter, though.”

“I did. I do believe the Old Gods are a threat.” Jaina doubled down on her previous stance.

“But?” Sylvanas prompted, apparently sensing the thoughts that were already causing Jaina to think and then think again over what she believed set in stone.

“But the Old Gods are subtle - whispers and slow corruption versus the apocalyptic brutality of the Legion. The Lightforged are restless -” Jaina recalled the ferocity that burned in Broken-Horn’s gaze once Vereesa had essentially opened up the field for battle. “ - give them something to slake their battle-lust upon, and they’ll be more amenable to any misdirection you place before them.”

Sylvanas’ look morphed from a dubious assessment to something more calculating, and if Jaina wasn’t fooling herself, a bit of approval. “My my, Lord Admiral, are you suggesting we ambush them?”

“No,” Jaina looked beyond Sylvanas, toward the northern peaks and where she assumed harpies would find a suitable nest. “The harpies will ambush them.”

“Ah. However, a point of contention: there are no harpies left.” Sylvanas pointed out, though her voice didn’t carry her usual sing-song when she was mocking Jaina.

Jaina’s gaze flicked back to meet Sylvanas’ own, and she couldn’t help it, Jaina grinned as she pointed out: “yes, but the Lightforged don’t know that.”

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Jaina explained the plan as they made for the abandoned harpy nests. She’d picked up inspiration from Sylvanas’ raising of Brittlemane, and the tactics itself from her skirmishes against Nightborne insurgents during the Blood War.
Jaina proposed as they clambered over a particularly gruesome series of rock faces, that Sylvanas might raise the bones of the harpies. Underneath the guise of an illusion, the reanimated creatures could rage and strike, then bleed and fall as fiercely as any of their living brethren.

The two of them refined the idea as they sidled along a footpath. Though illusioned, they would need to explain why the creatures don’t fall so easily to sword blows and quarrel bolts. Sylvanas was the one to mention the witch mothers of the harpies - shamans who twisted the restorative elements in dark ways and knitted flesh as quickly as one could breathe.

Jaina recalled some of the flocks in the Barrens - and the wasting toxins that unlucky travelers would arrive at Theramore’s small clinic struggling to survive with. She also remembered the poisons that ambitious Horde mercenaries wielded - bolstered by the witch mothers of the isles.

Between them both, the story they wished to tell weaved itself together. Jaina, on a horse that she loaned, was far too busy coaxing the mount along the trail when an ambushing flock of harpies descended upon her. The horse spooked, lost its’ balance, and with it, the mage.

There was just … one problem.

It manifested not too long after Jaina teleported over a longer span of the chasm, connecting with the solid ground just as Sylvanas crossed via the native agility of elven rangers. They stood before the maw of the caverns that once hosted a flock of harpies, but instead of finding the scattered corpses ready to be recalled, the place looked like it’d seen a stampede.

Sylvanas picked up the broken fragments of a femur, running her fingers along the flaking ends. “Odd. This isn’t the work of scavengers. They’ve been trampled. Often.”

Jaina frowned and moved further into the cave. “Are there salvageable parts?”

“Unsure. I need complete skeletons, or at the very least, bones that aren’t shattered or otherwise ruined - then there’s nothing for the magic to adhere to.”

“Truly?” Jaina was doubtful, and she sounded it as well. Jaina remembered the meat wagons, the abominations, the half-dismembered shambling things that crawled through Icecrown’s frozen wastes.

Sylvanas nodded, seemingly ignoring the tone. “I am not a student of the Cult of the Damned, Lord Admiral. I did not spend my years perfecting the art of reanimating flesh and bone --” she caught Jaina’s look, which had turned even more incredulous. “What I do is more …” Sylvanas’ words twisted in her mouth, coming out with a sneer. “Natural, I suppose.”

Jaina’s suspicions lowered, just a tad.

“A cruel gift,” Sylvanas said, her voice lowering to barely more than a breath on the wind, “from the mad prince. He felt it only fitting that for a commander such as myself, who had so many willing to die just upon my orders - why, it would be only proper that I can call upon those warriors a second time.”

Jaina watched as Sylvanas dropped the bone, the femur cracking as it struck against the rock. The pair milled in the entrance to the caverns, both of them at a loss. They’d spent precious hours traversing the chasm to get here, and now without the proper tools with which to ply their misdirection, they were going to have to figure out another ploy, and fast.

Jaina wracked her brain for another option when she frowned. Had that been a tremor? She looked across the way to see Sylvanas still as stone, ears pricked forward. It was the first time Jaina had
seen the undead elf’s ears move - she hadn’t thought it necessary - a reflex from life?

Jaina’s attention turned to the ravine beyond the cavern’s maw. She felt the tremor again, could feel the quivering rock beneath the leather sole of her boots, and yet, it couldn’t have been an earthquake. Each quake lasted barely a second, and they came spaced apart. Almost like --

“Something’s coming!” Sylvanas hissed, suddenly at Jaina’s side. Her hand clenched down over Jaina’s wrist, but there was no need. Jaina was already pulling at the arcane currents, twisting the air around them.

With a pop of pressure, the two disappeared as Jaina’s invisibility cloaked them in a distorted wave of magic. They stood, quietly, as the tremors continued, and grew in strength until, rounding the corner of the cavern’s mouth, the largest and ugliest ettin that Jaina’s ever laid eyes on stepped into view.

The giant was at least double the size of the creatures that plagued the lowlands of Silverpine, and the cave grew dark as the beast shouldered it’s way in, blocking the sunlight behind it. Quiet, Jaina and Sylvanas moved to one of the small breaks in the rock wall.

It must have been a nest. Feathers and caked bird filth littered the floor while the walls were scratched in a pictogram language that, under different circumstances, Jaina would love to try and decipher.

It seems her interest didn’t go unnoticed. “You are worse than a lynx cub, Proudmoore!” Within Jaina’s mind, Sylvanas’ voice lacked the ethereal echo of her physical self but was no less disapproving. “Might we focus on the giant problem at hand, here?”

Jaina rolled her eyes but did as suggested. The ettin, even hunched over, made even a Zandalari troll appear childlike in brawn and height. Jaina had not paid much attention during the zoological classes in Dalaran, but her travels with Arthas and her own time spent in the various foothills of the north had taught her several valuable things about the creatures.

The mottled, rocky appearance of its skin was no illusion. Ettin hide was as durable and thick as a dragon’s scales, and this one bore the scars and gashes of clashes with people who’d crossed it. Elder ettins developed resistance to magic, shrugging off the nastiest spells with a casual swagger. With one swipe of their hands, they could easily break the neck of a human or elf. With their club, even a mighty Draenei warrior could be at risk.

“Don’t you even begin to think about it.” Sylvanas warned, though there was no bite to the words that tickled along Jaina’s thoughts.

‘You don’t even know what I’m thinking’ Jaina mouthed, glaring at the banshee who was returning the glower just as good as Jaina was giving it.

“Yes, I do.” Sylvanas’ glare dropped into a resigned shake of her head. “Because I was thinking the same damned thing. Damn it, Proudmoore, I was counting on you to be the rational one here.”

Jaina snorted, then let out a muffled gasp when the ettin’s ears perked and one head jerked up from the bear carcass it was currently flaying open. One of Sylvanas’ hands immediately covered Jaina’s mouth, but it was too late.

“What you say?” The rightmost head asked in horribly broken Common. It squinted at its companion, and one hand stilled over the bear.

“Nuttin’,” came the other head’s reply. “What you say?”
“Nuttin’.”

The two heads grunted the matter settled between them. The ettin went back to his work, and Sylvanas removed the hand that cupped over Jaina’s mouth when there was no further risk of being discovered.

Jaina swatted away Sylvanas’ hand. ‘If it kills the Lightforged …’ she mouthed, prompting Sylvanas to pinch the bridge of her nose.

“Then I’ll have unruly adventures and a whole Light-damned Light Brigade at my doorstep. There was an ettin similar to the size of this one on Highmountain. The Unseen Path called for an entire brigade to assist in removing it. How do you suppose the two of us do so?”

Jaina smiled, smug. She pointed first to her staff, then as if hesitant on the prowess it presented, looked to Thori’dal slung over Sylvanas’ back. Sylvanas interpreted the gesture correctly, and the affronted scowl she delivered almost made up for the tower toss.

“Very well. You understand we can’t kill the beast, right? Reanimating it would … probably be impossible. The necromancers under Arthas tried. Their attempts went rather, well, flat.”

Jaina almost preferred the banshee ignoring her. She didn’t have to deal with the elf’s terrible humor then. She lifted her staff, the crystal at the top flickering to life as she began to channel the intent of battle magic around her. Magic crackled as frost laced down her armor and over her body like a second skin, a barrier to cushion any blow that might land upon her.

Opposite her, Sylvanas unslung her bow from her back and pulled at the tie at her quiver, loosening the top wide enough for her to snatch arrows without resistance.

The two of them met gazes for a final time in the safety of the harpy nest.

‘One’ Jaina began.

“Two,” came Sylvanas’ response.

‘Three’ “Three.”

As one, they dove into the fray.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: They came in like an Ettin-ball!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

There are reasons mountain ettins were 40man raids after all :)
it’s broken lips, exposing jagged teeth and rotting breath.

“Hah! Tiny creatures dance!”

“We really - “ Sylvanas growled, her bow knocked out of her hand as she sank into shadow. She stuttered back into the physical a little too quickly for it to have been deliberate. “ - should be fighting him outside! Do I look like a well-armored warrior?”

Jaina blew out a long breath. She didn’t have time to dwell on Sylanas’ tactics; she had her own to deal with. She twisted her fingers and curled her hands around the early tendrils of another frost spell. She hoisted her staff with her other hand, sending out violet streaks of energy that skittered along the ettin’s flesh like birds alighting over water.

“Damn it!” Jaina’s arcane missiles evaporated into useless motes that only managed to distract the rightmost head. That one looked like it took the greater share of meals, for its facial structure wasn’t as highlighted by malnourishment.

She risked a glance over Sylvanas’ way and found that the warchief seemed just as stuck as Jaina felt. Every battlefield Jaina encountered Sylvanas upon, the banshee had exploited the terrain, quick, decisive movements that left the enemy dizzy. In the caverns claustrophobic halls, the banshee had very little to exploit. The ettin took up too much of the space for her to pull off a flank, and her eyes blazed as frustration began to drive her.

As the balance of time began to snap back, the difficulty of the terrain started to warp into an advantage for the ettin. It couldn’t move, but compared to the two of them, it didn’t much need to. Jaina’s ice lances broke against its hide, and even Sylvanas’ arrows bounced along the rough, mottled skin to leave the ettin agitated but otherwise untouched.

Their earlier cockiness about refraining from killing the beast had morphed into a desperate need not to get killed in return. One of the ettin’s hands swung towards Jaina, and ice immediately snapped over her skin and then overlapped until she was encased in a frozen shield that still cracked when it absorbed the blow.

Jaina took the temporary abatement to catch her breath. Sylvanas flipped, dove, and dodged the clumsy sweeps of the ettin’s hands, but she was backpedaling now - they both were.

Then time snapped back into its regular flow.

Jaina’s ice block melted, and she let that Frost Orb go, and smirked viciously as it coated the rock underneath the ettin with a thick sheet of ice. The whipping winds might not cut deep into that thick hide as the orb went past, but it would make the ettin’s life miserable.

Sylanas rolled forward as the ettin’s club curved fast toward her. She flickered - shadow crossed her body - but she didn’t fade into the mist as she must have expected to do. Underneath the frozen spell, she dove - right between the ettin’s legs. She popped back onto her feet, only to narrowly miss tripping over.

The elven ranger didn’t fall over the ice, but Jaina watched seconds tick by as Sylvanas struggled to regain her balance on the ground that was now sheer and smoothed with ice. “Look out!”

Too late.

“HAH!” The ettin crowed, his fist closing around Sylvanas’ body. He lifted the banshee with little effort and sneered his victory as Sylvanas struggled. She twisted, and shadow dripped through the space between the ettin’s fingers, but she didn’t fade out.
Why wasn’t she ghosting out?

“Sylvanas!” Jaina shouted, blinking forward. She was inside the reach of the ettin, and with a cry, she swung her staff up, aimed toward the underside of the leftmost head’s jaw, and released an arcane blast. Around Jaina, three more explosions from her staff went off in coordination as her illusionary doubles followed her war rotation the instant they were conjured. This close, the concussive force snapped the ettin’s head back, knocking the creature into the cavern wall.

One of the nesting alcoves crumbled away, dust exploding into the air around them.

The ettin roared in pain, the gaunt head bobbing on that thick, corded neck at a crooked angle - tongue lolling out of its mouth and eyes fading in and out of a glassy stare. Good. It could be hurt.

The right head swung its gaze between its hurt twin and Jaina. “No!” With the club-wielding hand slackened by the unconscious half of the ettin, it used the weapon it had handy at the time.

“Move, Proudmoore!” Sylvanas yelled as she was hurled forward, and Jaina barely blinked away before the ettin smashed it’s makeshift banshee-turned-club into the ground just as Sylvanas got a hand free, half-turned to throw a perfectly aimed dagger into that hateful stare.

A sickening crunch reverberated through the rock.

The ettin made to pull its' hand back and found that it couldn’t when Jaina turned her frost onto that hand - not through the thick, mottled skin on the outside, but through the conduit it held within its palm.

The ettin yowled and released the near-frozen banshee. Sylvanas dropped to the ground, and was, for a heart-stopping second, utterly still. Another blink brought Jaina to her side as the ettin yanked back and struck out wildly - now half-blind - against the cavern. There was another rumble. The hair on Jaina’s neck stood up - they needed to move. Now.

She made to hoist Sylvanas up, but a cold grip snaked around her waist. Sylvanas used Jaina to help get back on her feet. Without saying a word, she jerked them toward the splash of sunlight revealed as the ettin stumbled away from it. They broke out into the open and turned as the earth collapsed behind them.

The gaunt head’s jaw hung at an awkward angle, and several teeth jutted out from between a nasty split in the upper lip. The creature was partly trapped underneath the cave in. Jaina could see one of its hands twitching frantically underneath a pile of rock as streams of black blood oozed out around the digits.

Sylvanas swung her bow onto her back and scowled at the mess before them. Half of the banshee’s face was scraped away. Jaina kept darting glances at the exposed muscle and the ugly white of … was that bone?

Why was there no blood?

Sylvanas caught her staring, and for a moment, stared quizzically back at Jaina before she brought a hand up to her face and found the damage. The banshee tugged her hood up high enough that her face was wreathed in darkness. “Well, he’s certainly not going to be able to face down a band of zealots any time soon.”

Jaina agreed. She half-slumped against her staff, using it to keep herself upright. “Change the story then, I didn’t fall in the ravine. I was wounded, came to find shelter, and ran into … that.” Breathless, she gestured vaguely toward the struggling monster.
Sylvanas’ scowl didn’t lessen. She went from observing the trapped ettin to giving Jaina a disapproving once over that made Jaina feel like an apprentice caught sneaking out after curfew. She must have been more tired than she realized because she found herself muttering her thoughts aloud. “I thought only Modera had that look perfected.”

Sylvanas snorted. She approached Jaina with a sure, slow gait. “Can you walk?” She inquired, coming to a stop just a foot away.

Jaina nodded and tried to ignore how that motion caused the world to spin around her. She gripped her staff tighter. “I can.” She caught the dubious look Sylvanas gave her. “I can! Just … give me a little bit to catch my breath.”

Sylvanas hummed, then offered a hand. “Come, up onto the ridge. You can rest --”

“No, I need to see to the wards before I rest.” Jaina ignored the hand and took several steps forward. They were shaky, but she managed them. “Once I do, I can just teleport back to Boralus and tell a story about a mountain ettin - might even request for the Unseen Path to handle it.”

“Didn’t we just agree that unruly adventurers weren’t exactly the sort of neighbors I desire?” Sylvanas fell into step alongside her, with only the occasional look back toward the ettin. “Might you have been struck on the head?”

“I’ll request the Unseen Path and solidify the story that I was out here - thus prompting the Lightforged to come to Boralus if they’re in such a mood to find me,” Jaina continued as if Sylvanas hadn’t spoken. Pain lanced through her skull as she ascended the cliffs to get out of the ravine. Her muscles trembled, and tiny, electric jolts rocked through her arms as she lifted herself again, and again.

She should have teleported to avoid the exhausting effort, but it would have drained the last of her natural reserves, and now that she had a proper delay between the Lightforged and herself, Jaina wanted the wards up and stable as quickly as she could manage. She could sleep - would sleep once she was back in Boralus, in her bed. Her comfy bed.

Sylvanas moved up the cliff alongside her and quickly passed Jaina in height. Even in death and wounded, Sylvanas’ body still carried the innate agility of her people, and when she swung herself up and over the top, Jaina wished just for a second that she’d spent less time bent over war tables and more time outdoors.

Jaina blinked as Sylvanas offered her hand a second time, and chalked it up to sheer exhaustion that she accepted it. Sylvanas hauled her up with a soft grunt of effort and let go as soon as Jaina was safe from toppling back down.

“The runestone stands on one of the low jutting peaks, next to one of the crumbled watchtowers.”

“Watchtowers?” Jaina asked as they made their way through the forest. The sparse growth of the trees made this section of the mountains drab beneath the cooler autumn sunlight. The landscape reminded her of the higher reaches of Drustvar - those cold crevices that were nothing but a frosted wasteland patrolled by angry elementals eager to bring down a lost traveler.

“Mm,” Sylvanas led them further up until even the trees stopped claiming space for themselves. The wind whistled, and the rock beneath their feet glistened with fresh frost resistant to the sun. Jaina leaned entirely on her staff as they walked, and couldn’t help but release a relieved sigh once Sylvanas stopped in front of an otherwise unimpressive monolith near a jumble of what could have once been the boundary of a building’s outer walls.
Jaina couldn’t even see the glyphs on the runestone; they were so faded from time and elements. Unlike the one in the lower foothills, this one didn’t pulse with new power.

“Dormant?” Jaina rounded the monolith. She reached out with her power and felt nothing stir in return.

“Is it? I can’t tell.”

Jaina lifted her gaze from the stonework to the banshee. “Really? I thought elves --”

“A living elf,” Sylvanas corrected. “Something which I, nor my rangers, are not. We can still sense powerful pulses of magic - like your tricks in that blizzard - but the subtle nuances escape us.” The banshee glanced over her shoulder to Jaina. “If this isn’t suitable for your needs --”

“It’s fine,” Jaina hurried to cut her off. “I’ll get to work, then.”

Sylvanas studied her a moment longer, then nodded. “I’ll scout and send word to Kalira to meet us here when she’s completed her task.” She stepped away from her overlook and moved around where Jaina crouched before the monolith. The banshee hesitated, and Jaina swore she heard Sylvanas take in a breath before the crunch of her leather boots disappeared somewhere around the treeline.

***

Without tool or cipher, and with the wardstone as dead and unyielding as the rock it was carved from; it took Jaina the better part of the day and well into the late afternoon before she finally called it for the time being.

Her headache had returned, along with stiffness to her neck and back that forced her to take unwanted breaks to relieve the strain on her joints. She had hoped that there would have been a ley-line nearby for her to tap into to bolster her natural mana regeneration, but as far as she searched, the ley-lines were little more than scar tissue that scrawled underneath the mountains.

Sylvanas returned just as the sun was sinking into the west. At this altitude, Jaina could watch and marvel at the golden rays turning bronze as they cut through the blight that still stained Lordaeron’s capital. The distance allowed her to enjoy the strange twist of color without lingering too long on the horror that spawned it, or that the architect of the destruction was currently striding back up the path with several dead marmots looped over her shoulder.

“Any progress?” Sylvanas asked as her greeting, coming to a stop to look all around the peak. She found something amiss, for she sighed and began moving around in Jaina’s periphery as Jaina looked back to the monolith.

“No,” Jaina sighed. “Whatever spells this monolith anchored are gone, and I can’t figure out which of these glyphs might give me any clue, or lead, or I don’t know, answer?” She winced. She sounded like a spoiled child when she spoke. She was about to apologize when she heard the first scratch of flint against steel. Sylvanas was bent over a small triangle of twigs and moss and in the middle of coaxing a small flame to life.

Jaina arched a brow. “What’s that for?”

Sylvanas peered up at her through the flames. She paused before she spoke, and Jaina just knew she’d swallowed her original answer. “Humans have abysmal night vision.”

“This human is a mage,” Jaina pointed out as she lifted her staff for emphasis.
Sylvanas pursed her lips, and her next words came out even more stilted. Jaina realized this was Sylvanas trying to resist her typical commentary. “You need heat and food as well -- yes I know you can conjure both,” she rushed on, “but that’s going to drain your reserves quicker than the sun sets. Besides,” she gave the staff an imperious look, “those conjured sweets aren’t sustaining at all.”

Jaina huffed, but if Sylvanas was attempting civility, she could try to hear her out, and if she wanted to be truthful - the idea of warmth and an actual filling meal were more tempting than maintaining her pride. However, that didn’t mean she’d let Sylvanas learn so quickly that her efforts were appreciated. “Ah, I see,” she said with a put-on air of revelation. “Yes, I get it now - thank you.”

Jaina turned back to the monolith and resisted the urge to peek back at Sylvanas.

It took a minute before: “All right, spit it out.”

“Hmm?” Jaina finally allowed herself a glance, and sure enough, Sylvanas stared at her, eyes narrowed and expression as focused as if Jaina was the quarry in a personal hunt.

“You agreed - too readily.”

“You’d rather I argue the point?”

If Sylvanas were still alive, Jaina believed she’d have seen the banshee’s ears pin back. The look she received was similar to Vereesa’s when the youngest sister was irritated. All Sylvanas needed was a lashing tail to paint the picture of a huge, grumpy feline. “I’d rather you’d make sense.”

“Well, that’s not going to happen.” Jaina turned fully from the monolith to watch Sylvanas at work.

Even with the occasional glare tossed her way, Sylvanas went through the motions of setting up a temporary camp with the practiced ease of long years. It might have been nearly twenty years since Sylvanas last needed to camp in the wilderness, but the muscle-memories were apparently still there. The banshee stoked the fire to a pleasant size - one that came with a welcome warmth that Jaina moved to be closer to.

Jaina pulled out the journal she’d scribbled her notes in. With the fire warming her and providing light, she focused on her previous workings concerning the ancient quel’dorei language. It wasn’t that dissimilar from modern Thalassian, which was one of the staple languages every mage studied in their early years if they wanted to understand the basics of enchantments and arcane theory - but Jaina had moved on from enchantments to transmutation early in her apprenticeship.

Jaina worked on her translations and the root of the glyphs while Sylvanas made quick work of the marmot. Within the hour, the scent of roasting meat and the crispness of the night’s frost drew Jaina’s attention away from her readings; the words were swimming on the pages before her, and every rustle in the brush snapped her attention to it like a rabbit wary of a nearby fox. She closed her journal when a speared chunk of meat was thrust underneath her nose.

She followed that up to meet Sylvanas’ eyes and quirked a brow in return. She took the offered food because the rumbling of her stomach overwrote any sense of pride or dismissal. Biting into it, Jaina nearly moaned at the first taste of actual food for the past few weeks. She stopped though when she noticed Sylvanas’ stare.

She swallowed that bite, then, chalking it up to her insatiable curiosity, asked: “Are you still able to eat?”
Sylvanas leaned back on her heels, the grin disappearing as she pondered the question. “Yes. Though my diet has become a bit more ...narrow regarding what sustains my physical requirements.” Sylvanas caught the question in Jaina’s eyes before she could even form the words: “I believe the term is an obligate carnivore. I require flesh to mend my own.”

Jaina blinked. “That sounds an awful lot like digestion.”

“With a dash of necromantic draining - yes, I suppose it does.” Sylvanas didn’t take any of the marmots for herself, though.

Jaina fell quiet after that, focusing instead on curbing the sharp edge of hunger that the scent and taste of actual food had awoken in her. Sylvanas seemed to approve of the quiet because she stood up and went to the monolith herself. Her gloved fingers trailed along the nearly-gone swirls and loops of the ancient glyphs.

Jaina watched her and observed a rare glimpse into the woman that carried the mantles of Warchief and Banshee Queen. She found that Sylvanas was no less impressive, but there was a weariness that weighed heavily on the elven woman’s shoulders.

“I haven’t made much progress with it,” Jaina admitted after a while. “There are some repeating patterns with the language down below the temple, but there’s no response to any of my spellcasting. It’s like the wardstone is dormant.”

“I sense a ‘but’ in there,” Sylvanas broke out of her quiet musing to fix Jaina with a curious look. “There’s a faint connection to the ley-line nexus that runs throughout Falor’Thalas. The deterrent enchantment is feeding off of the innate energy.” Jaina finished her last few bites and shuffled closer to point out the particulars of what she was talking about. It was hard to explain from a distance, after all.

Jaina took Sylvanas’ hand as she would any other student, or mage, and guided the banshee’s fingers over the various pictographs as she spoke. “While this is certainly ancient quel’dorian writing - I haven’t found a concealment enchantment at all. I might not have taken Modera’s master classes, but even with considerable leeway for cultural drift and dialects --” Jaina sat back on her heels and huffed a loose strand of hair away from her face. “Sylvanas, I’m pretty convinced Falor’Thalas never had a concealment array like Quel’Thalas.”

Jaina looked to Sylvanas for confirmation or dismissal of her assumption and found Sylvanas still and staring at where Jaina’s hand still covered her own. Jaina coughed and tried to extract her hand without the conversation turning awkward.

It didn’t work.

Sylvanas snatched her hand away, and tension crawled into the space between them.

Jaina went to apologize and looked up. She met with the ugly reminder of the ettin-encounter. Close-up, Jaina could see how the fall had torn away much of Sylvanas’ cheek. Without blood messing the wound, Jaina could make out the fine detail of muscle and sinew. Again, Jaina’s gaze skittered over that blush of bone.

“Does it hurt?” Jaina asked, quiet.

Sylvanas hesitated. “No,” she said. Jaina’s gaze lifted slightly to meet that crimson one. “It doesn’t feel much like anything.” Sylvanas’ gaze rose to meet hers and damned if Jaina could ever have been prepared for the open expression she encountered before both of them looked askance. Jaina
to give Sylvanas the privacy to recover her mask, and Sylvanas to collect herself.

“Sorry,” Jaina said. “I tend to get a bit carried away when --”

“Don’t apologize,” Sylvanas’ ethereal echo softened as she glanced back to recapture Jaina’s gaze. There was an indescribable shift in the banshee’s expression before she continued, “well, you should apologize for quite a few things, but never about your enthusiasm for your research.”

“I --” Jaina didn’t know how to answer that. So, she ducked her head and allowed the unusual warmth to pass through her before she returned to meeting that crimson gaze. Then, she processed Sylvanas’ words in their entirety. “Wait - why am I apologizing?”

Sylvanas chuckled, and for once there was no mockery in her laughter. Jaina found herself smiling along.

Sylvanas pulled away first, rising as she did. “Well, your aim is atrocious, for one.”

“My aim is atrocious?” Jaina played along, rising to match Sylvanas. “At least I was firing off shots. I didn’t realize elves needed to get a few spins off before they joined a fight.”

“Now, now, Proudmoore; just because I have managed to incorporate flair and substance into my battlefield prowess --”

Jaina snorted but found herself grinning regardless. “Is that what the kids are calling it these days?”

“I did not hear you complaining when I - what’s the crude term - ah yes: ‘tanked’ so you could finally do something with that sparkle-staff you carry around.”

“Sparkle-staff?”

Sylvanas nodded, and when their gazes met for the third time, Jaina felt a delicate warmth run along her neck. Jaina broke this glace first. “So, uh, the deterrent spell - it’s a modern design?”

Sylvanas went along with the subject shift. “Indeed, by Conjurer Vah’rallen.”

It took Jaina a moment to place the name with a face. “The Horde claimed a number of the Champions of the Legion War, didn’t they?”

Sylvanas shrugged, “I know talent when I see it.”

“Uh-huh.” Jaina paused, “so Conjurer Vah’rallen established the deterrent --”

“In haste. We discovered Falor’Thalas during the Cataclysm - the tremors had disturbed a few of the more unfriendly sort of mountain neighbors. At the time, we were going to present it to the Reliquary to curry favor with Silvermoon but plans changed.”

“When --”

“The night before the Battle for Lordaeron,” Sylvanas answered. “The presence of the plague children was a secret even to the majority of the Horde, and I preferred it that way. It was supposed to be temporary.”

Jaina watched Sylvanas’ face as the elf spoke. There was something beyond the stillness, something in the way her deathly echo wavered with a touch of wistfulness. She thought back to the months after the induction of the islands into the two factions.
“I believe I wasn't entirely truthful --”

“Rarely a revelation given that up to a few months ago we were sworn enemies --” Sylvanas drawled but gestured for her to continue.

“-- about the situation of the Lightforged in Boralus.” Jaina did so after an unamused glare tossed Sylvanas’ way. The banshee merely quirked a brow, waiting. “After Derek … returned … it devastated my mother. It nearly ruined me. I … I was one of the voices that clamored for Anduin to give command of the armies to the High Exarch.”

Sylvanas watched her in return, “I knew that already. We knew the Lightforged were a threat greater than most of either army’s caliber - even with the Azerite. After all, the Horde also lent aid in the Argus campaign.”

“Why would you want the Lightforged anywhere near command then?” Jaina asked.

“Well,” Sylvanas reached out a hand to smooth over the stone they stood before, and her voice went distant as she delved back into the memories. “At the time, I wanted the zealots chomping at the bit for command because I’d believed that, due to Alleria’s … newfound abilities … she’d be immediately resistant - that it’d cause tension between the two extremes that the Alliance had brought in. I hadn’t expected Alleria to just … allow that man an uncontested run of the show.”

“I don’t think either side expected Tyrande, either.”

Sylvanas laughed a raspy breath more so than a sound. “Spirits, no, even my most devious, dark dreams for splitting the Alliance leadership down the middle didn’t conjure that outcome.”

Jaina turned back to the monolith, studying it with Sylvanas by her side. “So, Falor’Thalas…?”

“Just children now, well, and your recruits.”

“My recruits?” Jaina looked to her for clarification and immediately started bristling at the grin she received.

“Why, what else should I call the rangers, now? You offered them target training practically every day.”

Jaina must have developed a concussion after the tower because she found herself just rolling her eyes. “I’m teleporting you back to the ettin cave,” she muttered and went back to the journal she left by the fire; Sylvanas’ laughter dancing in her ears.

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The next two days were devoted to trying to break through the monolith’s mystery and uncover the secrets it hid. Jaina had exhausted every magical avenue she could think of, and with the sun bright and gleaming overhead on the second day, she threw her journal at the monolith with a frustrated yell.

That prompted a curious sidelong glance from the banshee who currently sat upon one of the flat rocks of the plateau with one of Jaina’s parchment sheets and a charcoal nub. “From the tantrum, am I to believe that you had no success?”

“Whoever designed this ley-line network was high on bloodthistle --”

“I think we cultivated bloodthistle first in Quel’thalas --” Sylvanas caught her glare and returned it
as a cheeky grin before she sobered and left her perch, scooping up the thrown journal along the way. She came to a halt next to Jaina, journal extended. “Show me?”

Jaina tossed her another glare, but this one was half-hearted, and borne more of defeat than any malice. She took the journal back and flipped it open to the page where she’d spent time translating the few glyphs Sylvanas had been able to discern from the timeworn stone. “I tried the variations you suggested, and there’s still no response. The ley-line is completely resistant to any Concealment.”

Sylvanas stepped alongside her to run her fingers through the grooves. She quietly mouthed words as her hands ran through the swirls and dips of the incantations. “I don’t understand,” she dropped her hand away. “This is practically a predecessor to the runestones of Eversong. I’m certain that An’daroth held the same passages along the temple walls.”

Jaina believed her, but her results were still coming up the same. Any of her attempts to pull magic into a Concealment were just drained away. She’d already attempted a ritual casting four times and each time had watched the arcane disappear without effect. She couldn’t even tell if it’d reached the leylines at all.

“Vah’rallen had been elven, correct?” She asked, closing the journal a second time and clipping it back to her belt. Sylvanas nodded, having returned to Jaina’s side now that she’d confirmed that she’d given Jaina the exact words that had been on the monolith itself. “That explains how he could manage the deterrent – he could see the damned ley-lines.”

Sylvanas’ ear twitched, and the novelty of the gesture occupied Jaina’s attention momentarily. Over the course of the days, the banshee’s wounds had healed, and with that, she’d been a bit more expressive. “You can’t?”

“I … no?” Jaina met the banshee’s baffled gaze. “Humans cannot read ley-lines like elves --”

“Yes, of course, humans can’t, everyone knows that,” Sylvanas waved that away, “however, I’d believed you could. You drew so much power whenever we fought, and that blizzard you conjured?”

“I can sense them, but I can’t see them. It’s … like I can sense the current around me, but I cannot see the shape, or study how I affect it.”

“Color me impressed then, Proudmoore,” Sylvanas said after another quiet pause.

“Can you see them?” Jaina asked, curious.

“Were I alive, and given enough time to meditate and draw the arcane through me?” Sylvanas canted her head as she pondered the question. “Yes, I believe so.”

Jaina tapped her fingers over her lips as she mulled on that piece of information. “So, I need to channel the arcane through you to the point where it overrides the natural entropic drain of the necromantic energy within you --”

“Which sounds horribly uncomfortable, what’s the next option?” Sylvanas shuddered.

“I … didn’t have a second option?” Jaina shrugged, “unless you can somehow give me the ability to have elven sight…” she trailed off, a dangerous idea formulating in her mind.

Sylvanas caught on to her lapse in conversation and must have been aware that Jaina’s thoughts were going somewhere a little more dangerous because she rounded on the mage and fixed her
with a suspicious look. “I don’t like it when strange mages develop ideas, Proudmoore. Kindly cease whatever you’re beginning to brew —”

“Can you possess others still?”

Sylvanas’ brow furrowed as if she didn’t understand the question. “I … beg pardon?”

“You’re called the Banshee Queen - and it’s rumored that banshees can …possess people -- why are you staring at me like that?”

“Because I’m deeply concerned I gave you brain damage when I threw you out the tower!” Sylvanas strode forward, removing her gloves. She set the back of one hand against Jaina’s forehead and leaned in close enough that Jaina felt the chill of Sylvanas’ breath against her face.

“Oh, now you’re worried about lasting damage?” Jaina snarked, then yelped when Sylvanas pinched her with her other hand. “Ow! What was that for?”

“Reflex testing. Your brain stem is still intact and functioning, so the trouble lies in wherever humans keep their impulsivity contained.” Sylvanas muttered and pulled back enough to give Jaina a concerned once-over. She stepped back only when Jaina conjured up an arcane barrier to force space between them.

“I’m fine!”

“You most certainly are not - you just suggested to - to me - of all people - that I possess you!”

“I did not suggest anything of the sort! I just asked a question!” Sylvanas snorted, “never nock an arrow you’re not prepared to fire.”

Jaina scoffed. She crossed her arms and fixed Sylvanas with a stubborn stare. “Well, can you?”

Sylvanas easily met her stance and her glower pound for pound. The elven ranger stood a few inches taller even without the riding boots, and she used it to her advantage now. “To answer the question in the academic sense: yes, I can still possess others.”

“Thank you, that’s all I wanted to know.”

Sylvanas snorted, and Jaina took the higher road in ignoring that response. She moved to Sylvanas’ side to give the monolith the full force of her displeasure. The rock, being ancient and very much not alive, didn’t seem to care that Jaina currently hated it and what it stood for.

“I have never attempted possession on someone who’s soul I particularly cared about keeping around at the same time,” Sylvanas’ voice broke into Jaina’s thoughts. Jaina didn’t turn her head. She allowed Sylvanas the privacy to speak without Jaina’s eyes on her. “Normally, when we possess a body - we drain the spirit within to maintain the possession.” Sylvanas sighed, loudly.

Jaina was beginning to learn that those sort of exaggerated responses were the banshee’s tells that she was entering uncomfortably private topics of conversation, so she said nothing. Just waited. It worked before, after all.

“ -- and I did just rescue you from a mountain ettin, and fed you for the past few days - so draining your soul for a simple ley-line feels rather counterintuitive, don’t you think?”

And there was the snark - the sarcastic veneer that coated the banshee’s words. It was as much a
shield as the ice barrier that would shimmer into life around Jaina.

“What if I meditate to draw the arcane through me - would that be enough to sustain the possession without draining my spirit?”

“I knew you were thinking it,” Sylvanas muttered, “you’re like a lynx cub with a snake… fine - I’ll indulge. Yes, theoretically, that could protect your energy while I occupy the space in your body where you should be - and you realize how utterly insane this sounds?” Sylvanas forced Jaina to look at her, and concern dimmed the crimson to a softer heat. “This could kill you, Proudmoore. You said it yourself, the ley-lines are practically dead here and --”

“We wouldn’t need the ley-lines,” Jaina said, already forming the idea in her mind. It would be revealing one of her most well-kept secrets, and risking giving all of her advantages to, essentially, the enemy … and yet…

Sylvanas followed Jaina’s gaze to her staff. “Your conduit? That staff will be drained faster than you could take in a breath, Proudmoore. We’re talking - I don’t know - bathing in a moonwell meditation, and even then, I’m not sure that it would be more appealing than your lifeforce. The necromantic magic favors life over all other flavors.”

“What about Titan?”

“What about the Titans?”

“Just … Sylvanas, this might be our only option.”

“No, we have the option of leaving things alone - or my rangers taking the children somewhere else --”

“Where in Azeroth could they go without the Light eventually finding them?” Jaina asked. “Once the Lightforged learn of them -” she shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t want to know.”

“Why do you even care? This has nothing to do with what Vereesa asked of you.”

Jaina shrugged, helpless, “because I do?”

“Not an acceptable answer, Proudmoore.” Sylvanas’s grip on her shoulders grew tighter. That crimson heat bore into her own eyes until Jaina was certain Sylvanas was studying the very lines of her spirit. “You are asking me to possess you - an act that could kill you. ‘Because’ is not good enough.” She released Jaina. “Especially after I nearly killed you once already.”

“Sylvanas…”

“Oh no, you don’t get to do that.”

“Do what, call you by your name?” Jaina blinked.

“Yes, exactly.” Sylvanas sneered. “I am the Warchief. I am the Banshee Queen. I am the Scourge of Teldrassil.” With every title, she stalked toward Jaina. With every title, the shadow began to mist around her edges. That temper that Jaina provoked in the tower was returning.

And Jaina had an idea. A terrible, brilliant idea that needed that temper to explode.

“You were those things --”

“I still am!”
“No - you’re an exiled banshee who only rules children now –”

“And you’re a mage with a martyr complex!” Sylvanas was nearly all-mist now, and the heat of her eyes burned through her cheeks, infusing her with a mockery of the blush of life. “At first I couldn’t understand why you’d so willingly turn your back on your supposed morals to assist me but then, after the tower - after the ettin - now that you’re suggesting possession - I realize it’s just a way for you to seek out whatever oblivion you’ve been hunting for Lord Admiral.”

Jaina waited until she was sure the banshee was truly dematerialized, then blinked forward into that mist. All around her the shadow twisted and coiled. She felt the brush of a hand here or the scouring heat of a gaze there, and in the eye of that hateful storm, Jaina drew on the power locked away in her staff - locked away in the very core of herself.

And let it go.

The stolen essence of Lei Shen infused the air. Jaina smelled ozone and the luxurious heat of a thunderstorm. She allowed it to saturate the world, seep into the darkness and tantalize and then?

She snapped it back within herself, and the darkness followed.

…

She stood on the shore and faced a vast, open ocean. In the sky, a thunderstorm raged and churned from horizon to horizon. Lightning illuminated the world in heartbeats of heat and light between bouts of darkness.

She felt a tug behind her. She turned to see a field of flowers, pallid and wisping away in the howling wind.

“Is this…?” She asked herself.

“Yes.” She answered.

And then She knew nothing but darkness.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

As I work tomorrow and Tuesday, I decided to offer this up a day early as a lil' Holiday gift. I hope it brings you some joy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twelve

The wind rustled through the flowers. The delicate stalks bent and swayed to the breeze, and reminded her of the fragility of a butterfly’s wing.

She looked up and saw the distant spires and tower of a city that she knew. That she ran through as a child, laughing as the urban world opened up before her. Out of the strange mist came a series of riders riding upon proud horses. Their hides gleamed even from that distance, and the lightning that snaked between the clouds reflected along the majestic horn that sprouted from their foreheads.

Wait - no.

That wasn’t right. None of the horses in Lordaeron ever had horns. The oddity of the scene began to right itself as details fell into place. The horses strode with purpose as their proud bearing echoed the nobility of the Lordaeron breed. The riders became knights dressed in the silver and blue of the kingdom. Behind them, the spires and towers solidified into the strong skyline that dominated the Tirisfal Glades. Even across the waters, it was a cityscape that She knew well.

“No …” She said as she picked up the distant refrain of music, and somewhere beyond that, joyful laughter. “This isn’t quite right.”

Thunder exploded in the air right above her - chased by a crack of lightning that split the sky. It stayed there, an afterimage on her retina, as the world darkened.

The field of pallid flowers grew choked with bitter weeds. The gleaming towers became defiant fingers clawing up toward an unfeeling sky - cold and lonely works of stone that imprint a chill where her heart should be.

The Lordaeron breed carried themselves proudly even as death whithered away their bodies to little more than bone and ligament. The riders’ weren’t wearing the blue of the royal crest, but a rich purple that spoke of the night that arrived once the sun slinked away - of the blood that sluggishly pumped through lungs that couldn’t deliver oxygen. The cityscape loomed over the fallow field and dying woodland.

“There,” She smiled - felt the gesture stretch along her lips. “Home.”

Home?

She struggled with placing that word upon the city of the dead before her. She shook her head - once - twice - and on the third, it was violent enough that her jaw clicked.

Something was wrong.
Panic welled up in her chest - pushed underneath her ribs. She brought her hands up and pressed her fingers hard against the soft line of her sternum - pushed until the pressure inward matched the pressure outward. It hurt.

Oh, gods, it hurt.

“Stop.” She commanded. She tore her hands away from her chest. Her fingertips were reddened and angry; they’d grow to a dark purple within minutes once the bruise settled.

“This is -- not home.”

Why couldn’t she speak? Why, when she opened her mouth, did the words catch on the back of her throat?

Fine. If she couldn’t speak, could she move? She turned back to that vast ocean. The waves churned underneath the assault from the storm above, but this? This, She remembered. She took in a calming breath, and the panic subsided.

She closed her eyes. She listened to the waves.

The storm faded into the distance. The thunder rolled along the horizon, and it barely trembled along her hands. She thought of laughter, of waiting for her elder sibling; her toes digging into the sand. The sun on her cheeks. The way the world had revolved, just for a few years, around the comfort of family and hearth.

She opened her eyes once the gripping agony in her chest was little more than a dull ache and looked into the startling seaspray gaze of her --

Brother?

Sister?

She saw Derek and reached out to embrace him, only to be encased in a hug that filled her senses with the scent of fresh rain and the forest. Confused, she pulled away, and it’s Alleria who smiled so fondly down at her, reaching up with one hand to tousle her hair.

“Lady Moon--”

“Ahoy, Seabird,” Derek took a step back to squint at her, brow crinkling in the way that Mother’s tended to. “How did you manage to grow so tall?”

That sense of wrongness surged back up.

“Stop fighting it.”

She clasped her hands about her throat. Her lungs struggled to fill after so many years of being useless. She felt like drowning - only her throat was so dry --

“Enough!” She shouted. “Let go, Jaina --”

Impossible. She just needed to tear away whatever was constricting her chest --

“Jaina! Let go, damn it all!”

She looked up into Derek’s seaspray gaze and found him staring back through the half-rotted mask of a corpse. She shook her head, and the hollow space within her brother seemed to stretch further -
far into the great dark of infinity until that shadow threatened to consume the only sister she’d 
ever wanted to disappoint.

She never had a sister.

“Well,” she spoke aloud, and a piece of her finally snapped back into its’ rightful place, “but I did.”

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The dirt bit into her knees.

The sun warmed her face and the wind dusted along her cheeks. Jaina opened her eyes, and the 
world was laid bare before her.

And yet, nothing had changed.

The sky still reached out ever-onward as a beautiful blue expanse. The monolith and crumbled 
stone still stood defiant against the passage of time. The campfire crackled and hissed as moisture 
from the green sticks she’d collected --

“I collected. Jaina, keep to your own memories.”

Jaina frowned. She’d heard Sylvanas but where was --

Oh.

Jaina rocked back onto her knees. She pressed trembling fingers against her temple and fought 
against a sudden rise of nausea. She’d used the power of Lei Shen to lure Sylvanas in -

“Is that what that was?”

And Sylvanas was now …?

“Here,” A cold sense detachment fell over Jaina as she stood up and watched her other hand flex 
and work through a series of gestures that she didn’t recognize at all from any school of spellwork 
she had a passing familiarity with. “You wouldn’t, these are ranger hand signals.”

Oh. Jaina startled, and that sense of detachment grew worse until it settled in the pit of her stomach 
like a ball of iron.

“Enough of that,” Sylvanas snapped, “now, reach out towards the ley-lines.”

Right. The entire purpose behind her reckless stunt. Jaina took in a deep breath and ignored the 
way that it felt wrong to do so, and cast out her magical awareness. At first, nothing was different; 
the ley-lines were dampened but just there at the edge of her consciousness. As her mind opened to 
the arcane, the faint pressure she associated with utilizing her magic gently prodded along her 
temples.

She immediately realized the flaw in her plan when she sensed the ebb and flow of the ley-lines, 
but could not visualize them as she’d hoped. She opened her eyes, saw the refracted azure gleam 
against the monolith’s smooth surface, and stared into a reflection that sneered back.

“Foolish girl,” Sylvanas chided.

Jaina didn’t retort; if she was honest, she felt like she deserved the scolding. She’d acted 
impulsively, riding on the high of an idea that, now with hindsight, regret crept in like a horrible
hangover.

Her body twisted and convulsed as the banshee began to extract herself - pulling at their essence until they began to split apart; the cold command of Sylvanas’ necromantic energy was like an edge of ice that scraped along Jaina’s raw, exposed nerves until she couldn’t help but cry out at the pain. Every single part of her was hyper-aware of the separation and the magic that Sylvanas tore at in her attempt to escape. Jaina reached out beyond her internal reserves - out toward the ley-lines that crawled deep in the earth and --

Wait.

There’s something wrong.

“Wait - please - just … wait,” Jaina gasped out. It caught Sylvanas’ attention long enough that the banshee stopped trying to pry them apart. Sylvanas waited as Jaina forced clarity through the painful haze. “The ley-lines - they’re not feeding the runestones at all.”

“You’d established the dormancy of the monolith when we first arrived.” Impatience colored Sylvanas’ voice.

“Yes - but - not for the reason I originally thought,” Jaina glanced down to her arms and found them steaming dark mist like she’d stepped out of a hot spring on a cold morning. “Sylvanas - damn it - wait!” Jaina conjured ice around her, locking them both within the frozen shield. “Just - do one thing. One thing and I’ll let you go --”

“Let me?” Sylvanas’ voice lowered to a murderous whisper, “how incredibly noble of you, Lord Admiral.”

“Please?”

Silence followed, then Jaina sighed - and it wasn’t of her own volition. “You have three minutes.”

Jaina wouldn’t even need thirty seconds. “Reach out to the ley-lines with me and tell me what you feel? Where are they going? Where are they coming from?”

Sylvanas stayed quiet, and Jaina took that as consent, so she reached her awareness outward once again, her aura skipping along the ley-line like a stone as she tried to find a place to center her focus and --

“Stop. Right there,” Sylvanas commanded, and though Jaina could feel the fury that coiled deep in the banshee’s spirit, her voice and mannerisms were all business as she turned Jaina’s body. “The monolith does not pull from the ley-line at all.”

“That’s… no, I felt the connection.” Jaina shook her head, but Sylvanas had them step closer.

“Show me.”

Jaina responded to the command. She reached for the quiet buzz of the arcane current that sang along the monolith. Spun around the current like a grapevine was the deterrent spell and there was the soft pulse as it fed on the ley-line.

“No, wait, pull them apart,” Sylvanas spoke as they stepped closer. Jaina smoothed her hands along the stone as she searched for the anchor rune for the deterrent.

“That would dissolve the enchantments entirely, but I can dampen it for a moment,” Jaina offered,
already working on a brief silencing cantrip.

“Do so.” Sylvanas next had Jaina reach back toward the ley-line now that Vah’rallen’s spell wasn’t turbulence along the current of magic. “Here we are…”

“You can read ley-lines?”

“It was necessary as Ranger-General to understand exactly what defended the land, and how to utilize it to every advantage I could,” Sylvanas explained as the arcane currents began to flow back the way they’d been before Vah’rallen’s spell muddied the water.

Jaina followed Sylvanas’ direction, maneuvering herself until the banshee confirmed she was directly in the path of the arcane. Now, all she had to do was open herself up to it and …

“Huh.” Jaina paused, dropping her senses for a moment to check for external interference. “Are you sure this is the ley-line connected to the runestone?”

“Yes.”

“It’s flowing away from the monolith. Almost like …”

“Proudmoore —” Sylvanas started, her voice light with the realization of a theory and she’d all but seemed to have forgotten she was furious with Jaina, but Jaina was already in motion. Jaina followed along the same train of thought; they’d been looking at the monolith from the wrong direction - as it were. As Jaina moved away from the runestone, she took another look at the ruins of the watchtower around it and took her time to trace out the position of the stonework that still stood, and the grooves cut into the actual rock of the mountain plateau. Or rather, she allowed Sylvanas’ keen eye for detail and mapping to take over the studying of the ruins while she turned her focus toward conjuring up an illusion that would hint at what stood here thousands of years ago.

Sylvanas adjusted parts of the imagery as Jaina weaved the illusions to life since she was far more familiar with the style and flair of elven aesthetics in their rune-circles and sanctums and as more and more of the layout was mapped and materialized, the truth of where they stood came to be.

This time, when the darkness steamed off her flesh, Jaina didn’t stop it. Nor did she flinch when Sylvanas stepped into her physical form directly in front of her. There was a hollow spot directly behind her sternum, but she chalked that up to the mana-drain. Jaina braced herself for the attack - Sylvanas had every right to retaliate against her for what she’d done.

When no attack came, Jaina risked a look. Sylvanas observed her with an imperious air but made no move to approach her. She looked like a wounded animal, honestly.

“I … I’m sorry. I --”

“Yes,” Sylvanas sniffed, already waving a hand between them as she turned to assess their magical restoration. “I know. ‘You were only trying to help.’ That’s a statement you’ve been making for a while, already, Lord Admiral.”

“That wasn’t what I was going to say.”

Sylvanas glanced warily back at her and waited for Jaina to continue.

“I was going to say, I’m sorry because I acted without considering your warning and what it might have done to you. I did not realize that possession was so … “ she wanted to say intimate, but that
felt far too weighted for the conversation she wanted to have; “personal. For both parties, I mean.”

Sylvanas had turned to fully face her now, with her head angled slightly. “It … usually isn’t,” she offered after a moment. With a puff of breath that was oddly similar to a laugh, she shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know what that was, to be quite honest with you.”

“Oh,” Jaina breathed. Disappointment clouded her for a moment.

“It seems we both are slaves to our tempers,” Sylvanas mused as she brushed an errant strand of pale blonde hair back over an ear. “Well, there’s no use in wasting what we’ve done - shall we?” She swept her hand out toward the shimmering structure around them.

Jaina, gladdened for the change in conversation topic, took the time to compose herself before she stepped forward to stand at Sylvanas’ left. She also took in the reconstruction around them and marveled at the design. It spiraled along the mountain, and as Jaina followed the path, she noted that someone had arranged it so that it drew energy, yes, but not from the ley-lines.

“They drew from the air--” “It’s an elemental conduit.”

They broke off as the other spoke, startled that they reached the same conclusion.

“Some of the Horde’s staunchest defenders were shamans,” Sylvanas commented as Jaina fixed her with a dubious look. “The northern mesa of Orgrimmar was dedicated to the shaman wayshrines, and the Valley of Wisdom hosted the Tauren. This is … definitely elven in aesthetic but the practical intent is certainly shamanistic.”

“All of these lands were once under one troll tribe or another?” Jaina asked. She was fairly sure she knew the answer, but Sylvanas was the historically-bent one between the two of them.

“Mm, yes. The Amani Empire would have been at their peak when the Quel’dorei landed in Tirisfal. We have stories about those first encounters - and they practically shaped our military.” Sylvanas cocked her head to one side, “the ...Mossflayer were the dominant tribe in this part of the northern forests.”

“You speak like you were there,” Jaina mentioned, and Sylvanas laughed softly in response.

“Is that a subtle request for my age, Lord Admiral? I thought you were raised with more manners than that. No, I wasn’t there,” Sylvanas shook her head. “Talanas Windrunner founded the Rangers thanks to the aggressiveness of the Mossflayers, and that is the sort of family legacy that quickly gets impressed into a child at a very young age.”

“Is that how you know where to look for the city?”

“Perhaps.”

Jaina walked through the illusion, “so, when the Draenei first displayed signs of shamanism, there was a huge diplomatic incident in Theramore because Pained assumed that an errant water totem left behind meant another raid by the Grim Maw Clan - which leads me to presume that the Kaldorei weren’t shamans by creed - so I don’t think the elves came up with this idea on their own.”

“I would agree with that presumption because we’re speaking about the exiled Highborne, after all. So, this is a Mossflayer elemental conduit reworked to feed directly into an elven ley-line, so it channels the power of the wind - why?”
Jaina didn’t have an answer for that, but she did have an inkling as to why the other runestone had been half-buried in a cliffside. “How many runestones are there - or that you’re aware of?”

Sylvanas took a moment. “I know of … three. This one, the one south along the ridgeline, and there’s one in the very north.”

“Where, exactly?”

“Upon an island exposed during low tide,” Sylvanas answered. “Which gives us … wind and water --”

“-- Earth as well, with the ridgeline. That leaves us with at least one left to discover.” How would they uncover the final monolith? Jaina wouldn’t even know where to begin looking, but then again … she was currently in the presence of someone who clearly spent too much time mapping the mountains.

“Fire?”

“Fire,” Jaina confirmed.

Sylvanas hummed as she rounded the outer ring. “We’d have to return to Falor’Thalas to check, but I believe I might have options as to where the last one might be.”

Jaina perked up, excited. This would be a huge discovery, and it honestly unravels all the conventional theories about magic and the ancient Queldorei! She just about leapt at the offer to continue the adventure when she remembered why they’d come to the monolith in the first place, and what she had to do afterward. “Well, you’ll have to let me know how that goes then.”

“What? It’s your theory, not --” Sylvanas peered at her, then seemed to remember herself. “Ah. Yes, right.” She coughed, completely unnecessary for her. “We should get the spell ready, then.”

“Right.” The Concealment. “Give me a moment to set things up.”

“Of course.”

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A silence fell between them as Jaina retraced her steps from one of her previous binding rituals, revising it with the knowledge that the monoliths were the catalysts for the arcane. This wasn’t like the earlier quiet moments. This was awkward, filled with moments where Jaina wanted to break the heavy quiet between them. Every glance toward Sylvanas found the banshee just staring down into the northern valleys.

“Hey,” Jaina ventured after she’d completed the final touches and rewarded Sylvanas’ glance with an upward quirk of her lips. “Um, I think I’ve done what I can - and I’m ready.”

“Good,” Sylvanas mentioned as she stepped away from the ledge. “Is there something you require of me during the spell?”

“Nope!” Jaina shook her head, then immediately regretted it. “I mean, uh, no, the binding ritual can be done with one spellcaster,” but truth be told, it would be easier to run through the spellwork with an extra set of hands and another person focusing the energies. “Fine, just - stand there.” When Sylvanas moved to where Jaina first pointed to, Jaina crinkled her nose and shook her head again.
“No, here, just - let me -”

Sylvanas grunted but assented to being practically manhandled. There, Jaina smiled and stepped back to the primary position. She took up her staff with one hand and raised her other to begin coaxing the wind around them to kick up. She wasn’t a shaman, but there was enough of the symbology that she believed she could improvise.

Across from her, Sylvanas did not mimic the spellweaving gestures but rather tilted her head up into the breeze that kicked up with the first flare of the arcane.

What followed was simple cause and effect, and Jaina marveled at how easily the spell spun into existence once she knew what conditions were needed to be met.

Between her and Sylvanas, the dance of the wind started to follow the almost whimsical pattern set into the ground, the breeze twirling in the half circles, and rushing down the straight lines to stir through the pebbles and dirt. Jaina followed the energy as it was fed into the monolith, and if she’d had more time, she’d have loved to study the transmutation taking place within the runestone.

Jaina tried to replicate the feeling of being immersed in the ley line and found it just beyond her reach. Disappointing, but the network was fresh with new mana, and she still remembered where Sylvanas had guided her to reach … out …

“Ah!” Jaina exclaimed as she was doused in a sudden burst of arcane. It was like diving into a glacier-fed stream and left her a little giddy from the shock of it. She tilted her staff forward just enough that the crystal flared to life, and grinned. “There we are. If there’s anyone with magical talent in the city, they’d just need to come out here and nudge the design with the occasional touch of mana, and this should practically run itself.”

“Mm,” Sylvanas nodded.

Jaina left the monolith with a command to restore Vah’rallen’s spell and stepped back to admire her handiwork. She’d not done practical magic for years and right now, staring at the ingenuity of the spell before her, wondered why that was when it was so enjoyable for her.

“Right, now, back to the city to locate the very center of this network, insert the Concealment there - ensure the vultures have the command words --”

“Back to the city?” Sylvanas broke in, “your job is complete Lord Admiral.”

Jaina sighed. “Not quite. If the runestones were the intended -- you know what, it’ll just be easier to show you why once we get there. Uh,” she looked around. She could try another teleportation spell, and it’d be less of a risk now that she knew where her destination was.

She offered that, aloud, and Sylvanas shook her head.

“I’ve had quite enough of your spells for a lifetime, Lord Admiral, we’ll fly back.” Sylvanas made to head down to wherever she’d commanded the bat to lurk during their stay up here.

Jaina couldn’t explain the touch of disappointment she felt as Sylvanas disappeared into the treeline.

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Jaina figured they were at least a few hours into the flight when she finally had to try and break the silence. Behind her, Sylvanas was practically immobile save for the occasional command to the bat.
that carried the two of them, and the banshee had been as quiet as the grave since they’d taken to the air.

Even when they’d fought in the city, the banshee had never been without a sarcastic quip, and somewhere, someone could appreciate the irony that Jaina was on the receiving end of a cold shoulder, right?

So, as Galen banked through a low cloud, and the moisture stuck along her skin and made Jaina grateful for her two layers of cloaks, she decided to just go for it.

“When you said I had a martyr complex earlier,” Jaina started. “I, you were right.” At first, she got no response, and she wondered if she’d spoken loud enough to go over the wind. She went to speak again -

“I heard you the first time, Lord Admiral,” Sylvanas shifted, and Jaina could feel the cold of her body even through the layers of cloak and fur. “I’m debating if I want to answer you.”

“We’ve got a while before we arrive in Falor’Thalas,” Jaina pointed out, trying to keep her words light.

“I have no problem with silence until then,” Sylvanas retorted, “even if it seems that you do.” Before Jaina could respond, Sylvanas continued. “Furthermore, I’m not in the mood to pick up an argument right now. Consider the fact that we’re well above the earth and you’ve already proven that you’re abysmal at catching yourself in free-fall.”

“I -- you threw me!” Incredulous, Jaina’s voice reached a higher octave as she took offense to the implication that her fall was her fault and not because Sylvanas’ temper had overtaken her.

“Yes, I was already aware of that fact. I don’t need your approval to have it be true.” Sylvanas’ voice was soft and even, and perhaps she spoke the truth when she said she didn’t want to argue because even her body-language wasn’t confrontational.

“That wasn’t what I was - look, I don’t want to fight either.” Jaina turned back around and busied herself by running her fingers through the shaggy fur underneath her hands. “Just, no one’s called me out on it before.”

There was a shift behind her while Sylvanas adjusted her hold on the reins to be one-handed. Without being prepared for the move, Jaina found her body slipping down into the new divot between them, and righted herself when she realized she’d become cradled for a second there.

“You hide it well,” Sylvanas mentioned finally, “but it’s there.”

“Speaking from personal experience?” Jaina inquired, not risking a glance back.

“No,” Sylvanas’ laugh was a bitter sound. “My overcompensation for my past comes out a little bit differently, I’m afraid. Vereesa has the same problem you do.”

“Which is?”
“An inclination to forget to look before you leap,” Sylvanas answered smoothly, not missing a beat. “I admire the ambition you hold, Lord Admiral, but for all the formal education and teases of natural intelligence I sense in you --”

“I’m going to cut you off there because we’re not supposed to be fighting,” Jaina’s voice went sing-song.

Behind her, Sylvanas paused, then continued at a slower pace; “we were damned lucky that you’ve been fundamentally changed by your overexposure to the arcane,” Sylvanas’ mention of Theramore, even in passing had Jaina’s nerves on edge, but Jaina forced herself to listen without retort for a little while longer. Sylvanas had paused again, and when she sensed no response, she continued, and not unkindly. “Lord Admiral, you lack the elven physiology to see ley-lines. You don’t have an elf’s sensory abilities, and that isn’t an insult. Though the point is worthless now, my possession of your body was a risk far too high for the ‘reward.’”

“We accomplished our goal, though,” Jaina mentioned, voice soft.

Sylvanas went quiet for a moment behind her. “Yes,” her response was just as soft, “I suppose we did.”

After a minute or so, Sylvanas’ free hand came around to alight on Jaina’s wrist, catching her attention. “We have more than a few hours until we arrive at Falor’Thalas, Lord Admiral, and possession tends to drain my reserves. I’ll be taking the rest of the flight to recover.”

Jaina doubted that but saw the conversation stopper for what it was, and having already pried extensively into Sylvanas’ privacy enough for one day; the curious mage decided that, for once, she’d leave well enough alone.

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From the air, Falor’Thalas was indistinguishable from the forest around it. Vah’rallen’s spell did its work because as they neared it, Jaina’s gaze kept skipping over the forest like the entire picturesque landscape beneath her wasn’t worth a second glance. It was an impressive spell, and Jaina regretted that she’d never shared more than a few sparse conversations with the elven archmage.

What caught Jaina’s eye was the frost that snarled along a dip in the red and gold ocean, like the valley between waves. There, the ice tangled along the high branches, stubbornly defiant against the mild autumn air. Her magic called out to her and guided her attention to where it should be.

Galen descended slowly, following a wide spiral that Jaina figured served as a rare chance for Sylvanas to survey her domain from a choice vantage. When the bat finally broke through the canopy, Falor’Thalas glittered in the snow, and they were welcomed by a trio of dark rangers who waited at the edge of an open platform.

With them stood two non-rangers. One was a tall, lanky forsaken girl who wore a cloth tunic belted over worn-away cloth breeches. She held a gnarled staff in one hand, while her other hand was busy with an animated conversation with the nearest dark ranger.

The other figure…

“Oh,” Sylvanas remarked as if the reveal wasn’t a ticking time bomb about three minutes from detonating. “It has been about that long, hasn’t it?”

Jaina rewarded that drawling commentary with a stern look. “You couldn’t have sent another letter
after I’d left the first time?”

“It hadn’t exactly crossed my mind, no.”

“Great.” Jaina felt her headache returning. “What exactly did you write to her in the first one?”

Sylvanas paused before answering, and it did not bode well. “I saw no need to lie to my sister regarding what had befallen you.”

“You’re kidding,” Jaina groaned. Sure enough, she could easily make out the flattened ears that laid against Vereesa’s hood. Though she did not have elven sight, she didn’t need it to know exactly what sort of glare the youngest Windrunner sister fixed upon the bat riders. Vereesa’s hands were braced on her hips, her shoulders squared off and her body a rigid line from her head to her wide stance. She was ready to throw down.

“Bal’a dash, Isil’jael,” Sylvanas greeted, and Vereesa’s ears managed to flatten further.

“What in the name of the sun are you playing at Sylvanas?” Vereesa shouted as Galen readied to land, completely sidestepping the return greeting. She waved Sylvanas’ letter in her hand. “You send me this letter which practically has Jaina dying --”

“Dying?” Jaina asked Sylvanas.

“You were unresponsive for quite some time,” Sylvanas unapologetically explained, leaning forward to eyeball the descent; which put her mouth dangerously close to Jaina’s right ear. The echo of her voice sent an odd shiver down Jaina’s neck, but she didn’t seem to notice the effect she had on the mage. “I needed something to spark a prompt arrival.”

“Yes! Jaina - dying! It worked! And when I get here - using all of my goodwill with the First Arcanist, I have to add - do you know what I find?”

Sylvanas, who was well-accustomed to the antics of her sisters, merely rolled her eyes. “Pray, tell us, Sister.”

“Nothing! You’re both gone, and your flock refused to tell me anything at all!”

One of the rangers not currently involved in the conversation with the robed girl bobbed her head apologetically. “You were out of correspondence range when she arrived, Dark Lady, and we weren’t sure what to reveal to her.”

Before Vereesa could turn that scathing temper on the dark rangers, Galen landed with a solid ‘thud’ and came to brace himself on the wickedly sharp talons along his wing-joint. Sylvanas gestured for Jaina to dismount first, then followed with a smooth exit herself.

Vereesa broke forward and in three steps pulled Jaina into a frantic, tight hug. It was the first time in weeks that Jaina touched another living being besides Scout and she couldn’t resist the need to bring her arms up in return and just soak in Vereesa’s warmth. Jaina’s eyes closed, and she felt a tiny release of the anxious energy that’d been driving her since she first chose to stay here.

Vereesa allowed Jaina to linger in the hug, as elves tended to be far more tactile than most humans, but when she finally pulled back her gaze was business-like as she scoured Jaina for injury. Her eyes swept along Jaina’s form, and her hands firmly probed along ribs, arms, and shoulders. If Jaina didn’t know better, someone had let slip to Vereesa about the fall, but that was highly unlikely. Right?
Sylvanas tugged her sister back with an unsubtle pinch along her earlobe. Vereesa bared fang and whirled on the banshee, only to be met with a pointed gesture towards the nervously waiting forsaken girl. Vereesa peered at her, then back to Sylvanas.

The sisters exchanged rapid Thalassian, something about apprentices and ‘proper instruction’ but ultimately, Vereesa stepped back to Jaina’s side and hovered there, one hand just at the small of her back. “She’s not as trained as Swiftarrow --” Vereesa switched back to accented Common.

“-- but young Ranelle was trained in Lordaeron’s chapel by the best and continued her practice among the Forsaken.” Sylvanas pointed out, and Jaina idly realized that the sisters’ accents had shifted in their long time apart. Sylvanas’ Common still bore the musical lilt of her native Thalassian, but time spent among the throaty speech of the orcs had subtly shifted the banshee’s notes away from the higher-pitched tones of her sister.

“What do you think, Jaina?” Vereesa asked, and Jaina realized both sisters were watching her.

Jaina looked to Ranelle. The forsaken girl had escaped the worst ravages of the plague, it seemed. What gave away her status as one of the forsaken - beyond the unnerving golden gleam of her eyes - was a crooked set of lacerations that ran down along the delicate set of her jawline, along the line of her throat, and disappeared into the high collar of her tunic. When she murmured a hello, Jaina couldn’t help but watch the interplay of muscle the wound exposed.

“Doesn’t the Light burn when you use it?” Jaina asked. She didn’t want to cause pain to another when it was to tend to Jaina’s consequences.

“It does, my Lady,” Ranelle’s voice was a raspy thing, like the skittering of dried leaves over stone. “I’ve studied the lessons of Discipline for a while, and while I might not be a high priest, I can mend most aches and broken bones.” Those golden eyes weren’t familiar to Jaina, but there was something about the cadence of the girl’s voice that gave her a small pause.

Sylvanas watched her warily from the side and did a poor job at disguising her pure curiosity concerning Jaina’s reaction. Vereesa just looked relieved that Jaina wasn’t dead, and remained close.

“Truth be told, Lady Ranelle,” Jaina allowed her diplomatic persona to take over as she went over the necessities of small talk and proper appreciation of another’s trade skills, “I’d be grateful if all you did was rid me of this headache.”

Ranelle smiled, and that itch of familiarity returned. “Of course, Lady Proudmoore. This way,” she half-turned to escort Jaina off the open platform and hopefully somewhere away from the prying eyes of elven women.

She wasn’t two steps down the stairs when she heard Vereesa move to join her. While she desperately wanted to see her friend and was keen for someone she could trust without worrying about playing politics, right now, she just wanted to be healed.

Ranelle stopped to let Jaina pass her, and turned to hold up a hand, stopping Vereesa. “Ranger-General, I apologize if I overstep,” she spoke with the stilted formality of someone who had to be quickly taught how to speak to nobility and leadership instead of someone born to the expectation of a lifetime of training for it. “I would like to assess the Lady Proudmoore privately?”

Vereesa took a breath, but let it out as a sigh when Sylvanas joined them. “You’ll have what you need, Ranelle. Vereesa and I have matters we need to discuss.”
“We do?” Vereesa asked, doubt dripping from her words.

Sylvanas nodded. “Yes, actually. I require your advice.”

“I --” Vereesa’s ear twitched nervously, and she glanced between Jaina and her sister, obviously torn.

Jaina smiled in a way that she hoped was encouraging. “go, I’ll be fine. Sylvanas can fill you in on my theories, and we’ll catch up when I’m not nursing the need to rip my skull apart.” Jaina fished in her satchel for her journal - the one that focused on her work and not her daily musings. “Here, go over this - let me know your thoughts when Ranelle clears me.”

Vereesa still looked doubtful, but the offered journal piqued her interest. Her ears canted high and forward as her gaze dropped to the leatherbound book. She took it and gave Jaina one last lingering look before she turned back to where Sylvanas waited.

Sylvanas nodded to Jaina over her sister’s shoulder before Jaina turned to follow Ranelle once again.

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An hour later, Jaina sprawled in a shallow pool of heated water.

Ranelle had left her alone, mentioning that the relaxing heat of the water would honestly serve as a better treatment than any magical fix. She’d left a plain white tunic for Jaina to change into, along with a pair of dark breeches that looked to have been adjusted for a human’s wider frame. When the water chilled for a second time, Jaina finally extracted herself and took her time dressing.

When she went into the next room, she heard Ranelle singing before she saw the forsaken priestess.

“Run along lil’ pup, run along

dolly, dilly dolly

Her harvest’s come with fields undone

Dilly dolly away.”

Ranelle was tucked over a small brazier and around her were various herbs in various states of being chopped, crushed, or being steeped in water. She hadn’t noticed Jaina yet.

“Over hill and through pasture,

Dilly dolly, dilly dolly,

The bolt flies true but you’re faster,

Dilly dolly away.”

Jaina remembered the song as a favored tune among the huntsmen and herdsman of Lordaeron. She’d heard it on that first hunting trip she’d gone along with the Menethils. It had been half-business, as her father and King Terenis sized the other up, and half-pleasure as she spent time with the Menethil siblings without a care in the world. There’d been no thoughts of romance yet, just the passing days of youthful summer.
So, she blamed it on that sudden seize of nostalgia that she found herself joining in.

“Run along lil’ pup, run along,

Dilly dolly, dilly dolly.

Through bramble and brush and you’ll be gone,

Dilly dolly, away.”

“Under log and over water,

Dilly dolly, dilly dolly,

Just be mindful of the ram’s daughter,

Dilly dolly, away.”

Ranelle hadn’t startled, just smiled as Jaina joined in, and shifted to see Jaina as the mage walked into the room. “I still remember the moment when I learned that there were more lyrics and that they were so not intended for children.”

“Ah! Yes,” Jaina laughed and grinned as memories crept up. She remembered a tavern filled with laughter, raunchy and carefree, as her younger self realized that not all chase songs were meant to be taken so literally. She also remembered drinking far, far too much; and the hangover the next day.

Ranelle set a cup of steaming tea before her. “Drink, this will help with a headache.” She laughed as Jaina picked the cup up, “were you expecting a spell or two, Lady Proudmoore?”

“I, well, yes.” Jaina was used to the immediate jump to magical solutions. During a war, the convenience of cold, practical restoration had become the gold standard long after the treaties were signed and the frontlines demolished. She’d come to anticipate and expect the numbing magic as limbs mended and skin knitted itself back together.

Ranelle nodded. “The Forsaken are resistant to any sort of restorative spell, so I tend to use those as a last resort.”

“That, and the Light burning your patient wouldn’t exactly help?” Jaina asked, and Ranelle’s smile was a little more wane as she nodded in response.

“Exactly. I am going to at least channel enough to make sure you’ll be able to recover with rest and a few medicinal teas.” Ranelle picked up her staff and set it sideways over her lap. She settled one hand over it, while her other came up to rest on Jaina’s shoulder. “Take some slow, steady breaths for me, ok? Count backward from a hundred.”

Jaina closed her eyes. She brought the cup up to her lips and took a sip before she started her count. As she hit eighty, she heard Ranelle’s breathing come into pace with her own. As she hit sixty, she sensed a gentle warmth suffusing her body with Ranelle’s hand as the source.

At forty, Jaina startled when a wash of heat lanced through it, not uncomfortably so. It chased away that hollow ache behind her sternum and left her feeling a bit more settled than she’d been in a while. Her hands stopped tingling around twenty, and when Jaina reflexively worked her fingers, she didn’t feel the sting of pulled, healing flesh.
When she opened her eyes at ten, Ranelle was pulling her hand away. The priestess’ palm was blistered, and Ranelle winced as she reached for a bandage that smelled and looked similar to the one that Sylvanas had used on Jaina’s palms over a week earlier.

“I’m sorry,” Jaina said, but Ranelle was already shaking her head.

“Don’t be. I could have stopped being a priest after I came back. It’s my choice to keep the Light.”

“Even with … all that’s happening right now?” Jaina wasn’t sure how far she could take her questions before she stepped over bounds. Ranelle just smiled, and this wasn’t a wane quirk of her lips, no. It was beatific, and the young priestess closed her eyes to some private memory.

“Especially with what’s happening,” she said as an explanation and then sobered. “That, and I can’t chase away necromantic entropy with a delicious peacebloom tea and a long soak.”

Jaina looked down at her arms, recalling the pain that had come with Sylvanas trying to extract herself, and remembered Sylvanas mentioning the draining nature of the possession. She looked up to see Ranelle giving her a knowing look, but the priestess said nothing else on the matter.

“Thank you,” Jaina rose to her feet and felt years younger than her mid-thirties.

“Don’t mention it, Lady Proudmoore. I should be thanking you, anyways.” Ranelle rose to meet her.

“I - what?” Jaina hadn’t expected that. “Why?”

“For reminding us what hope feels like again.” Ranelle escorted her to the door, and beyond it, Jaina could see the sisters standing around a small table, Jaina’s notes spread out between them, and their heads ducked together in conversation.

She must have made a noise because two sets of glowing eyes, one azure blue, and the other crimson red - broke away from the papers to land on her arrival. Vereesa smiled at her, and Jaina easily returned it, but she sought out Sylvanas’ gaze with her gut twisted in a knot as she approached.

Sylvanas caught Jana’s eye with her own and if Jaina hadn’t been staring so intently, she would have missed the faint nod the banshee welcomed her with.

The knot in Jaina’s stomach loosened immediately, and she arrived to take her place alongside the Windrunners. “So, any luck?”

Sylvanas nodded. “Proudmoore,” she started, and Jaina could not explain the rush of relief that she was no longer ‘Lord Admiral.’ “How far along did your training with the Tidesages progress?”

Jaina considered, “not too far along. My parents sent me to be fostered in Dalaran when I was … fifteen or so? I never found out why, but my mother didn’t approve of me taking the formal step to join the Tidesages themselves.”

“I was thinking about your spellwork with the monolith - how it transferred wind to arcane. Are there other give-and-takes like that among the elements?”

Jaina nodded. “Yes, uh, there’s an interesting connection between flames and the element of spirit - uh, the Emerald Dream. There’s not a back and forth with Earth, but there’s …” Ah. She caught on to Sylvanas’ thoughts. “You think there’s another transference in the city.” Excitement crept into her voice.
“I do. You believe that the monoliths are not a primitive Ban’dinoriel, and during our …” Sylvanas’ eyes flickered over to Vereesa for a moment, then came back to Jaina, “investigation of the ley-lines--”

“What would require such a powerful current?” Jaina finished the thought with a murmur.

Sylvanas smiled, the hint of her fangs giving the expression a feral cast. “What, indeed?”

“There is a connection between the, um, void, and water,” Jaina mentioned. The sisters nodded, but Vereesa sighed - and her ears drooped momentarily.

“I know you’ve got a few scrolls on you --”

“-- but I’m not a Tidesage,” Jaina waved her hand. “It’s ok. I … don’t think there are any Tidesages anymore, not after the Blood War and Azshara’s interference.”

Sylvanas’ smile turned into a full-blown grin. “Ah, I have to correct you there, Proudmoore.” At the inquisitive look sent her way, she elaborated; “there are no living Tidesages left.”

Jaina frowned, not catching on until she did.

And Tides help her; she couldn’t help but grin in return. “Where do we find them?”

Chapter End Notes

Isil'jael is a fan-version of "Little Moon" in Thalassian using some Tolkien Quenya translators and adjusting them for a more Thalassian feel, and then 'jael' is from a quest in WoW where they give the rough translation
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Blame the work schedule of an exhausted nurse for the lateness, but luckily, a quick discussion with my beta prompted me to break up what was becoming a behemoth of a chapter into two, allowing me to catch up with my deadline.

This one's a bit of an exposition dump, but it'll all come to a head next week! We're starting to shift towards our end-game folks.

All of my thanks to QuickYoke, Raffnit, and TheObsidianWarlock for supporting me when I would have rather thrown my computer out.

Sylvanas had rid herself of the hood and cloak during Jaina’s absence, and the armor she wore looked different too; carrying the scent of polishing-oil and the crisp cold of frost. The banshee looked young as she reclined against the wall and shook her head. Next to Sylvanas, Vereesa carried a familiar tension in her shoulders and her bow rested against the edge of her hand. Underneath her other hand, Jaina’s work journals rested, waiting to be perused by the archeologically-minded elf.

Vereesa watched their banter go back and forth as they touched on the various political complications that had befallen the Storm’s Wake sages after the war. As Lord Admiral, Jaina had overseen many of the concessions and reparations that had been required due to the mess the previous Lord Stormsong’s ambitions had made of the northern valleys, but yet, when anything more personal had come up, Katherine had found work in Boralus itself that required Jaina’s attention.

Sylvanas’ own awareness came from second and third-hand reports, and between the two of them, they worked through a list of potential candidates to approach for their request. The candles burned low enough that Jaina had to break from her writing to idly cast a cantrip that shone magelight down over the proceedings before she returned to the matter at hand.

Namely, Sylvanas’ insistence that she had access to an incorruptible Tidesage that outclassed any of Jaina’s candidates, and that he’d been underneath the Kul Tiran’s noses since the beginning of the Blood War.

“And you’re certain the Waycrests know nothing about this?” Jaina inquired, fully doubtful even as Sylvanas flashing her a smug, victorious smile from across the table.

“I am,” Sylvanas lifted a letter, the parchment yellowed and made of a cheaper stock than Jaina had carried with her, and even without a fire backlighting it, Jaina could make out a heavy scrawl of ink on the other side. It wasn’t one from any of her collections, recent or not. “My agent spent years perfecting the art of disappearing.”

“Your agent?” Jaina’s voice tightened with suspicion. Sylvanas’ claws were still buried deep into Kul Tiras then? Three years after the dismantling of the Horde, Jaina hadn’t expected that answer.
“She is not a Horde spy, Proudmoore, nor, really, if I have to be truthful here,”

“That would be the polite thing to do,” Vereesa interjected, not bothering to look up from her own work.

“She’s never really been one of mine, either,” Sylvanas went on to explain with only a mildly poisonous glare tossed Vereesa’s way. Vereesa didn’t even flinch. The letter wavered in Sylvanas’ hand as she extended it for Jaina to read. “It’s hard to explain what she is, exactly, but Lillian Voss is no sycophant of mine.”

Jaina took the letter and read through it quickly. It was written in a strange coded version of Common, with the odd rhyming-slang of Gutterspeak. It was an update on the movements of the Lightforged, yes, but also the Drust?

“What’s your interest in the Drust?” Jaina handed the letter back over.

“Simple curiosity. I like to be aware and updated on anyone who considers themselves capable of commanding the dead.” Sylvanas tucked the letter back among a pile of similarly-looking parchment, then folded her hands over it. “In any case, Voss would know where we could find our Tidesage, and he is not only incorruptible by the void, he would also be...amenable to our cause.”

“Yes, about that.” Jaina straightened up and began to comb her hair over her shoulder. She carded her fingers through the strands and gave the pile of correspondence a measured look before she faced Sylvanas again. “I still think we should approach Brother Pike. The Storm’s Wake still hosts Tidesages who had not fallen under Lord Stormsong’s corruption -”

“Which makes them devoted to the cause of the Alliance.”

“- and they answer to the Lord Admiral first and foremost,” Jaina pointed out as politely as she could manage.

All the while, Vereesa had retreated to her own task; namely working through the beginning steps Jaina took in terms of research and translation. She hunched over the work journals, her left hand scribbling out her impressions on Jaina’s findings while her right skimmed along Jaina’s musings and kept her place.

As the candles burned through the last of their wicks, Sylvanas cocked her head off to a side, listening to something distant that even Vereesa didn’t seem to react to. “That would be Kalira returning,” she said without preamble. “I’ll be gone for a while, don’t … expect me.” Sylvanas rose from her seat and disappeared out the archway into the frozen landscape beyond without further commentary.

Vereesa wrapped up her current thought, then lowered her quill as Sylvanas left. Her ears pricked high in attentiveness as her arcane-blue gaze swept over Jaina. “All right, now that she’s out of earshot,” she said, her voice lowered to a soft murmur. “How are you, really?”

Jaina slumped back into the chair, and ran a tired hand over her face. “I’m fine.”

Vereesa snorted, “you’re so exhausted, you can’t even muster up a decent lie.”

“I’ve had a few interesting weeks,” Jaina lobbed back. “If I’d remembered you were showing up, I’d have worked up a better excuse to stop your worrying.”

Vereesa shook her head, and her smile was a little forlorn as she answered; “I haven’t stopped worrying, Jaina. Not since you practically shoved me out last month.”
Jaina’s gaze skittered away from Vereesa’s as the elven woman reached out to gently fold her hands over Jaina’s own. She nearly pulled her hands away, but stopped herself. “So, uh, what did you and Sylvanas discuss while Ranelle tended to me?”

Vereesa’s ears flicked backward with the change in topic but nevertheless, she gave Jaina’s hands a quick squeeze before she let go and leaned back into her own space. She shrugged, “not much really. Sylvanas decided she’d rather take the time to bathe and change her armor. It reeked of something foul, so I’m grateful she had the sensory awareness to do so.”

Jaina thought back to the cavern battle, and the shock of scraped bone and ragged muscle set against the pristine pallor of Sylvanas’ face. She recalled the panic that’d closed her throat and must have missed Vereesa’s next question entirely because she jumped when Vereesa tapped her wrist.

“Sorry, what?”

Vereesa bit back a smile as she said: “nothing.”

It wasn’t nothing, and Jaina tried to suss out what the elf was thinking even as she apologized, but the earlier bath and healing session were finally catching up to her. She yawned and none-too-subtly shoved the paperwork away from her.

Vereesa took the hint and tucked her own work away. She rose with a groan and pressed her hands into the small of her back, stretching obnoxiously before she shook her limbs loose. “Come on, it’s freezing, I’m old, and I spent way too long trekking up here.” She offered a hand to Jaina, who took it easily. “Wine, food, then a nap: those are my current objectives, and you can tell me all about why you went mental enough to go on a bat ride with the grumpiest woman I’ve known alive or dead.”

Jaina laughed through her response, “you brought wine? What am I talking about? Of course you brought wine.”

Vereesa gave her a conspiratorial wink as they moved deeper into the complex, back towards the heat of the inner rooms.

***

Jaina woke up with the distinct sensation that something was very wrong.

She tried to shake away the memory of a heavy pressure against her chest, her lungs squeezed of every last mote of air, and her throat crumpling underneath the weight of … something.

She inhaled, and her lungs hurt as the frigid air raced through her. Her body was drenched in a cold, clammy sweat that stuck her linen shirt against her skin, and when she went to wipe the back of her hand against her forehead, she found her hair matted against her brow. Her heart raced while anxiety shivered along the length of her stomach, and finally she pushed a fist against her navel to try and combat the growing bout of nerves.

Jaina fought the urge to reach out to the underground river; resisting the alluring temptation to wash her fear away in the current. Some part of her was hyper-aware of that need and feared it. With Sylvanas’ theory that there were more elemental exchanges in Falor’Thalas, the thought of the nearby rivers came with a healthy dash of caution.

Behind her, pressed against her back, Vereesa’s warmth provided little comfort to draw from. The elven ranger slept soundly, her breath coming in soft snores and her expression slack with
dreamless sleep. Even as Jaina sat up, Vereesa didn’t stir at all.

When Jaina caught the crimson glow from the doorway, she didn’t startle, merely let out a long, pursed sigh. She couldn’t tell if it was relief, or exasperation that fueled it.

Sylvanas sat against the archway, one leg extended while she rested her chin upon the other knee, her hands curled about her calf. She’d been watching them, and when she realized Jaina noticed her, her voice carried low through the room.

“My apologies. I did not intend to wake you, Proudmoore.”

Jaina shook her head and carefully moved away from Vereesa, tucking the blankets down to prevent the chill of the room to steal underneath the covers and wake the slumbering woman. “You didn’t.”

“Oh?”

Jaina found that she couldn’t explain what had woken her, so she merely lifted a shoulder in a lazy, shrugged response. She collected the wolf-fur cloak from where she’d stowed it, and with it tucked about her shoulders, went to sit opposite of Sylvanas. Her ankle came to rest against the crook of Sylvanas’ outstretched leg and she yawned as she settled against the archway herself.

Sylvanas’ attention snapped down to where Jaina’s foot barely brushed against her calf. She watched the offending appendage like it was a viper poised to strike her, and then carefully, her gaze slid up to assess Jaina in a way that she’d not done since Jaina’s arrival.

Her ears had lifted slightly, her eyes gleaming cat-like as she scrutinized Jaina across the way. Jaina caught herself fidgeting underneath that gaze, and if she didn’t do something to divert the banshee’s attention, then she’d be too anxious to ever get back to sleep.

“How’s Kalira?” Jaina inquired, coughing to clear the anxiety in her throat.

It worked. Her voice must have jarred Sylvanas from whatever internal dilemma she’d fallen into, for the banshee dropped the stare in favor of surveying the ramshackled, makeshift bedroom. “She’s well. She watched the Lightforged until they’d gone north into the ravine, and then made for here. She’s still half a day’s ride out.” Sylvanas drummed her fingers along her calf, “she’s pacing Scout so the mare doesn’t tire out in your blizzard.”

“That blizzard was entirely your fault,” Jaina muttered without hostility, then her ears pricked up. “You know Scout’s name.”

Sylvanas’ returning stare carried a touch of amusement before the emotion disappeared. She sniffed haughtily, “yes, well, you shouted it enough.”

Jaina hid her smile against the set of her knee to better stave off any further defensiveness from the banshee. She tucked her head so her cheek rested against her knee, and lifted her eyes to keep Sylvanas in sight. “So everything went to plan?”

“As far as Kalira’s concerned, yes. Even with the rangari, the Lightforged aren’t expending that much energy to track you. They believe you incapable of misleading them, so they don’t expect mischief.”

“Did they encounter our friend in the north?” Jaina wondered.

“One would only hope so,” Sylvanas replied. Her attention went to her slumbering sister, and
silence fell over them again. After another minute, Jaina nudged Sylvanas with her foot until the banshee looked her way again.

“What’s bothering you?”

Sylvanas shrugged, mimicking Jaina’s earlier response, but when Jaina nudged her again, she let out an irritable sigh. “My rangers are restless. My priestess chased away several … nighttime visitors that the children were apparently playing hide and seek with. One of the older boys has gone missing.” She held up a hand before Jaina could speak.

“No, this isn’t your fault. Falor’Thalas had unwelcomed neighbors long before you came and stirred the waters.” Sylvanas’ hand lowered back to its original position.

“Hide and seek?” Jaina’s brow furrowed. “Do the children see the void as imaginary friends?”

Sylvanas shrugged again, but without the evasiveness behind the gesture. “I would imagine so for the younger ones. Children are used to playing pretend after all.”

Jaina considered that. “It would suggest why they’re more resistant to whatever lurks in the catacombs, honestly. You can’t go mad from the whispers and the visions if you’re already in the middle of playing make-believe.”

“Ignorance truly is bliss,” Sylvanas agreed after a moment. “Though, if my rangers are troubled, and you’re …”

“I think I just had a nightmare,” Jaina admitted. “Whatever it was, though, it disappeared when I woke up.” She glanced over to where Vereesa still slept. “She doesn’t seem troubled by it.”

“I would say that’s because Vereesa’s practically acts like a child herself, but it’s more likely the wine you two polished off,” Sylvanas pointedly looked toward said bottle. “Vereesa’s always been a heavy sleeper, and alcohol just encourages her hibernation.”

Jaina tried not to laugh, barely managing to cover her unlady-like snort with a cough that brought Sylvanas’ now mischievous gaze back her way. They shared a smile before Sylvanas pushed herself back to a standing position.

“We’ll make for Boralus in the morning.”

Jaina watched her stand, then followed suit. “We? You’re coming along?”

Sylvanas nodded. “Lillian Voss won’t meet with you without my being there.”

Even with the small understanding that had developed between the two of them - Jaina wasn’t sure that she’d ever be comfortable having Sylvanas anywhere near Boralus. Still, this was all from her insistence to repair and complete the ley-line array, and the prospect of meeting with a Tidesage who did not answer to her mother’s commands to leave Jaina alone in all aspects but political was more than a little tempting.

Jaina leaned her head back against the archway. “All right, but when we’re in Kul Tiras -”

“- you are the Lord Admiral. Retrieving the knowledge of the Tidesages will be under your command,” Sylvanas finished for her, and smiled wanly when Jaina’s expression widened with surprise. “I have no desire to see war again, Proudmoore, I’m coming along solely to offer my assistance.”
Jaina brushed off her leggings. “I - that wasn’t exactly what I meant.”

They both knew that wasn’t entirely true, but Sylvanas merely waited for her to speak instead of offering a snide retort. That, Jaina realized, was strangely progressive for the banshee.

“I was also thinking about Falor’Thalas in your absence. The nightmares and the ...imaginary friends.”

Sylvanas looked down the dark corridor that led out into the outer reaches of the building. “My rangers might be restless, but they are resilient. When I’m away, they will guard this place no less fiercely.” At Jaina’s look, she added, “besides, the children can chase their ghosts for a few days longer without the world coming to an end.”

Jaina wanted to say something to follow that so they didn’t leave the conversation on such a low note. The words didn’t come to her though, and she tried to convey her hope that they’d manage at least this goal through the quiet look she gave Sylvanas.

Sylvanas set her hands behind her back and gave Jaina a polite incline of the head. “When you both wake, we’ll have the central promenade prepared for the portal stabilization.” With that, she turned gracefully on a heel and strode out of the room and into the dark beyond it. Jaina debated the urge to go after her but her discretion won out.

Jaina returned to the pile of cloak and bedrolls and tucked back underneath the covers. Vereesa stirred with a mumble and rolled over, sprawling out in such a way that Jaina found elven limbs tangled everywhere she wanted to be. She held her breath, waiting to see if Vereesa would wake, but eventually, Vereesa’s breathing settled back into a soft snoring pattern.

Jaina closed her eyes and tried not to think of the tight grip of fear that’d woken her. When sleep eluded her, she consciously matched her breathing to Vereesa’s own, counting slowly for every inhale, and every exhale until she drifted off.

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The bulwark of Proudmoore Keep had withstood the ever-encroaching strength of the ocean for generations. Much like the seawall that served as the underlying foundation, the Keep itself was high walls and impenetrable grey-stone that threatened to rival the surrounding mountains for domination of the skyline.

For centuries, the beacon at the pinnacle served as the guiding light home for the Fleet, and Jaina had long grown up on the promise of security from the solid stone walls of her childhood home. Comparatively, the surrounding harbortown was a winding tangle of weathered copper and wooden buildings. Where the Keep endured, the town fluctuated like the tide, streets coming into prominence and and fading away as time and trade ebbed through the heart of the harbor itself.

The usual destination upon arrival, whether magical or maritime, was a spacious outdoor marketplace. Here, travelers that disembarked from the ships or stepped through the meticulously-maintained portals would find themselves immediately confronted with the diverse spread of trade and custom that Boralus prided itself on. Every month as the White Lady and Blue Child readied their light for the coming cycle, the traders of Boralus engaged in complex and bizarre ritualized competitions to earn the right to occupy prized retail space in the bustling street.

As Lord Admiral, Jaina considered the refurbishments to Tradewind Harbor to be her proudest accomplishment since the end of the war. The clustering and intermixing of cultures and peoples along the waterfront rivaled even Stormwind’s trade district and called to Jaina’s desires as to what
she’d once hoped Theramore could have been.

The ocean greeted her with the sweet sting of salt-air and the crash of waves against the seawall, and the thrumming energy of the market was infectious.

The arcane rune thrummed with power as Jaina stepped from the dais, and that first connection to the ley lines of her island home renewed Jaina more than a long bath or any measure of sleep ever could. She couldn’t stop the smile that graced her as she set firm footing onto the stonework.

Vereesa arrived next. Her ears pricked up and forward as she scanned their surroundings with unabashed curiosity; Jaina realized right away that this was Vereesa’s first visit to Boralus, and made a quiet promise after all of this that it wouldn’t be the last. The living elf moved to the rope fencing to lean over and peek at the frothing waters below.

Sylvanas followed after her sister, and though her ears remained stiff, Jaina figured she was just as attentive in soaking in her new surroundings. Sylvanas craned her neck to study the marketplace itself. She spent a particularly odd amount of time noticing the mostly-empty fishmonger’s stalls, or the distant profile of three ships drawn up into the dry docks for needed repairs.

Sylvanas had decided that her attire for this trip was to be discreet leather and cloth devoid of any filigree, embellishment, or emblem. With her hood pulled high over her head, and a simple illusion charm Jaina set on the dark purple cloak, so long as the hood was raised, Sylvanas would appear as any other ren’dorei. They were a rare sight outside of elven lands now, but within Tradewind Harbor, she was just enough of an exotic face to blend into the already wildly diverse crowd.

Jaina allowed herself a moment to simply be, surrounded by the legacy of Azeroth’s people and left the sisters to their own devices. Jaina took in several deep breaths, indulging in the scent of the ocean and the wood-smoke on the wind. She allowed herself to listen to the near-cacophony of over a dozen languages crashing over one another like waves onto the shore. Then, with some measure of composure restored to her, she coughed to gain the Windrunners’ attention.

Vereesa peeled away from the water’s edge, and Sylvanas eventually followed suit. The pair remained quiet as Jaina led them underneath a weathered archway of grey stone and Kul Tiran honorifics towards the Tides. The tentacles that wound around the solid stone were comforting visages that she was home, but as Jaina stepped through to the main thoroughfare of Tradewind Harbor, the weight of that homecoming began to settle like iron in her gut.

Away from the trade district, and the harbor, the townsfolk became less likely to favor her with a kind look. Here, the common Kul Tiran worked for the military in the smithies and forges, or served as a craftsperson. Away from the water’s edge, the conservative values of the nation tended to sway the mood a little less welcoming. To the farrier, the supply of elven mithril lessened the need for horses to be shod. To the smithy, the easy access to dwarven steel and hammer drove up a competition they’d rather not endure.

In many ways, Kul Tiras was as stubbornly introverted as Silvermoon.

By the fourth passerby that fixed Jaina with an openly contempt stare, Jaina diverted their course from the low roads up onto the walls themselves. It was longer, but devoid of nasty glares and muttered complaints.

“The gryphon’s nest in Tradewind Harbor still sends flights out towards Vigil’s Hill, yes?” Vereesa inquired when they’d left the lower tiers and moved to the higher walkways and ramparts.

“I don’t see why they wouldn’t,” Jaina responded. “Why?”
Vereesa took a moment to secure her cloak and double-checked her hip-satchel. “There’s a small squadron of rangers who recently posted there, and I think there’s one or two ren’dorei with them - which means I can contact Alleria. Longest I’ll need is about a day? I should be back by tomorrow afternoon with Alleria. The Void-Rift is uncomfortable, but --”

“Instant travel without arcane evidence,” Jaina finished for her. “No, it’s a good idea. I like it.”

Sylvanas frowned, having fallen into step on Jaina’s other side. “I don’t. How are you certain Alleria will help?”

Vereesa boggled at her sister’s question, and answered her as if Sylvanas had inquired what color the sky was supposed to be. “Because it’s Alleria? All I need to say is that I want to go on a wild adventure with her that doesn’t involve the walls of Dalaran, or any awkward conversations with Turalyon and she’d be packed and out the door before I’d even finish the sentence.”

Sylvanas didn’t look as convinced about her elder sister’s altruism as Vereesa did. “So long as you don’t mention that said ‘wild adventure’ will involve me, you mean.”

“Honestly? I think she’d rather deal with you than another week cooped up in Dalaran playing political leadership with Magistrix Umbric,” Vereesa pointed out, and Sylvanas conceded that point with a quiet hum. “Give me the day, promise.”

“Fly safe, Vereesa,” Jaina bid her to cut off any further dissent from Sylvanas’ side and the youngest Windrunner acknowledged it with a wave over her shoulder as she slipped down the side path toward the small open aerie.

Sylvanas clucked her tongue as Vereesa left. At Jaina’s inquisitive look, she shook her head to dissuade open discussion. When Jaina kept staring at her, however, Sylvanas scowled and attempted to bat away Jaina’s curiosity. “It’s nothing, Proudmoore.”

“Uh huh.” Jaina didn’t let up.

Either Sylvanas was already on edge due to the incredible risk of exposure, or she wasn’t in the mood for silence, because it took only another minute or so of staring before she relented. “I’ve forgotten how simply Vereesa sees everything, that’s all.”

Jaina quirked a brow. She reached out, her hand brushing the edge of Sylvanas’ cloak to slow the banshee’s pace. “Hey,” that touch turned into a gentle clasp of Sylvanas’ arm when the banshee stiffened and attempted to rush forward a step or two. “Stop, ok? You’re ...ghosting a bit.”

That prompted Sylvanas to literally stop, her attention rigidly away from where Jaina stood, or where Vereesa disappeared to. Her armor steamed with small traces of dark vapor, and Jaina had seen Sylvanas become ethereal enough to realize what was about to happen.

Sensing that the middle of a busy street where the locals already had their opinions dampened wasn’t exactly where Jaina wanted to carefully talk Sylvanas’ temper down, Jaina whispered a small word of power and felt the tug of arcane somewhere behind her navel.

A second later, and the two of them landed in the center of Jaina’s arcane workshop. Underneath the aging copper support beams, Jaina glanced up to the hazy skylights and the lazy sunbeams that drifted through them. There was hardly any warmth along with the light, but she closed her eyes and tilted her head up regardless.

Beside her, Sylvanas prowled forward and came up short. She stared around, her ears canted back as she took in the sudden landscape shift. She craned her neck as she peered up at the copper
supports and the ceiling covered with delicate runes etched into the ancient wood instead of the overcast sky from seconds earlier.

Whatever she was about to say, Jaina steeled herself for it. That made it all the more surprising when Sylvanas said simply, “Thank you.”

Jaina took a breath, and didn’t say anything in return. Instead, she strode forward to set her staff upon the solitary stand in the very center of the floor, where the two intertwining runes of stability and empowerment joined together. As she set the weapon upon the stand, she keenly felt the separation from Lei Shen’s power and yet felt that same energy flood into the room itself until even Sylvanas made a small sound of surprise.

“It’s a trick I picked up from Aegwynn,” Jaina said finally.

Sylvanas’ gaze swiveled to the Staff of Antonidas for a heartbeat longer than Jaina was comfortable with; before Jaina could venture to say or do anything, though, the undead ranger composed herself with a steady ing breath and took several determined steps towards the door that divided the workshop from the rest of Jaina’s quarters.

“I should reach out to Voss. Since speed is of the essence, I’ll need your highest and most isolated tower.” She scanned the arcane workshop with a critical eye before she asked, “Are you the only mage here?”

Jaina dipped her head. “In the Keep? Yes.”

“Good, then I won’t be disturbed by curious minds. Don’t be alarmed if you sense anything unusual.”

Jaina watched her cross the room and fell into step with her as they crossed into the main living space of her quarters. “There’s a corridor just off of my quarters that rounds about the towers. One of them - the southwestern one, has been closed for repairs for a while now.”

“Should I be concerned about the occasional servant looking for a hiding place, or a lovers seeking an illicit tryst?”

Jaina shook her head as Sylvanas allowed her the lead. “Now, just be mindful of any weakened supports. I’ve yet to devote time to clean up after the kraken’s attack.”

“I don’t remember managing to wrangle a kraken in any of our skirmishes.” Sylvanas mused, right on Jaina heels as they entered the crowded space that served as Jaina’s study and bedroom.

Most of the floor was taken up by varying heights of books enchanted to keep dirt and wear from the tomes themselves. The far wall was commandeered by an antique writing desk that offered a perfect view of the thoroughfare that led up to the main gates of the keep, the sprawling trade-town beneath Proudmoore Keep’s shadow, and beyond to the open ocean itself.

“That’s because the kraken belonged to Ashvane.” Jaina pointed out, stopping just a moment to set her travel pack down upon one of the rare empty spaces.

“Mm.” Sylvanas’ disgruntlement caused Jaina to laugh softly.

“Somehow I can’t quite find it in myself to apologize for denying the Horde access to one of the deadliest monsters of the sea.”

Sylvanas rolled her eyes, but Jaina caught the tail-end of her smile before it disappeared.
Jaina went to unclasp her cloak, and paused, her fingers resting over the buckle, when she heard raised voices from outside her room. She exchanged a glance with Sylvanas and as one, the two of them made their way to the door, coming to either side of it.

Jaina cracked the door open and turned so she could make out the voices a little more clearly.

Tandred’s voice boomed along the bare stone walls of the keep. “How many times do we need to have this discussion?” He sounded upset rather than angry, his voice pitching higher with the question.

Jaina pulled back from the door just enough to find Sylvanas watching her. She shrugged, then went back to eavesdropping.

“We’ll continue having the discussion until you give me a reason that makes sense, Tandred.” That was her mother, exasperation clear in her tone. Katherine Proudmoore’s temper ran as cold as the magic that Jaina favored; and it was a rare memory indeed of her mother ever lifting her voice to yell. Jaina creaked the door open further, sneaking out into the hallway. She expected them to be too occupied by their argument to hear the squeak of the hinge, or the gentle fall of her steps on the floor. She felt Sylvanas’ presence behind her as she followed the argument towards her mother’s office, and finally peeked her head around the corner.

Katherine sat at her desk, her fingers pressed to her temples and her focus solely on the man who stood across from her. She looked, for lack of a better term, exhausted. Her uniform hadn’t changed much since she’d turned over leadership to her children, and Jaina admired the authority the elegantly tailored coat bestowed on her mother.

Tandred’s overcoat was tossed over one of the armchairs before her mother’s desk and he had rolled his shirt sleeves up past his elbows. His was the uniform of the working sailor - simple and efficient linen and heavy trousers that wouldn’t hinder work on a deck. He’d trimmed his beard since Jaina last saw him.

“By ancestral rights, the monastery belongs to House Stormsong --”

“Brannon is a halfwit.” Tandred cut in.

“- and Lord Stormsong is a fine young man rebuilding his family’s legacy. I will not insult him by handing the monastery over to mainlanders, Tandred.”

“She’s not just a mainlander, Mother!”

“Oh?” Katherine’s brow arched hawklike. “My, I didn’t realize she’d converted since I spoke with her on Harvest Night.”

Tandred shoved his hands through his hair, tilting his neck back as he stared up at the high-vaulted ceiling for patience. After a loud breath, he said, “She only wants to help.”

“I respect that, but Kul Tiras does not need the sort of help she wants to provide.”

“Don’t we?” Tandred flopped into one of the chairs. From where Jaina spied, she couldn’t see his face, but she could hear the earnest pleading in his voice. “The fishermen are reporting smaller and smaller hauls every week. The sirens practically have the southern islets as their private playground. Freehold’s rallying behind their latest attempt at leadership, and I’ve had to double the patrolling fleets twice within the past month.”

“All of which are troubles that Kul Tiras has faced down before. I’m confident that once Brother
Pike approves the release of the latest novices, the Storm’s Wake will be able to assist us in repairing the balance of the Tides.”

“The Tides?” Tandred barked, more laughter than words. “The Tides are what got us into this mess in the first place!”

Katherine pinned her son with a steely glower. “Careful, Tandred. I might not mind that you’re keen on courting a mainland, but I will not have you blaspheme in this Keep.”

Jaina winced, but Katherine’s warning didn’t seem to faze Tandred. He shrugged and stared off to the side. “I’m not blaspheming. I’ve just - I’ve seen what’s out there, Mother,” he gestured vaguely to the windows that overlooked the harbor. “After we were summoned back, I saw that same darkness in the Tidesages. I cannot commit our future to them, knowing what lurks out there in the depths.”

“What you saw was the folly of one man’s lust for power.” Katherine lowered her hands, folding them together. Her voice had gentled, as if she were speaking to a spooked colt ready to bolt. “The Tidemother provides for us, Tandred, as she always has, and as she always will.”

“I don’t doubt that, Mother.” Tandred turned back to her. “I’m just not certain we should trust what She provides any more.”

Katherine sighed, and Jaina waited with her breath caught in her throat for what her mother would say next. She must have made a noise because Katherine’s attention slipped past Tandred. Her mother’s eyes widened and she rose from her desk with her arms outstretched. “Jaina! I - when did you return?”

Sylvanas tipped her head toward Jaina before she slinked toward the tower access.

Jaina stepped into her mother’s office as Katherine rounded her desk and fell into the offered embrace. She basked in the security of that hug for a luxurious moment and felt much of the previous month’s stress loosen from her shoulders. When she stepped away, she missed the warmth immediately. “Just now, actually. What are you two talking about?”

Katherine stiffened, her smile freezing momentarily before she schooled her features and shook her head minutely. “Simple matters of philosophy, darling.”

Jaina doubted that. She leaned around Katherine to peer at Tandred. He’d risen from the seat he’d fallen into and was in the process of donning his overcoat. He flashed her a roguish grin when he noticed her looking.

“You were gone! Someone has to keep Mother on her toes.” He slipped his coat on and approached them. He easily drew Jaina into a second hug and not for the first time, Jaina wondered when her little brother had grown up. “She disapproves of my choice in women.”

“Oh, now that’s hardly fair. I was quite fond of Mishan,” Katherine protested. She stood gamely off to the side as the siblings embraced. “And the last tavern girl you brought home knew how to manage her drink - I liked her.”

“Mother, you’re a terrible liar.” Tandred chuckled and pressed a quick kiss to Katherine’s cheek, then to Jaina’s. “I’d stay to defend … Susan’s -”

“Sarah, dear,” Katherine corrected with a wry smile.

“Right, Sarah’s honor, but I’m actually running late. I’ll let you two catch up and we’ll speak at
dinner?” He paused for their answers, then grinned when they both assented. “Excellent! Until then.”

After he blustered out, Jaina turned to her mother. “What was that all about?”

Katherine watched Tandred scamper down the stairs before she looked Jaina’s way. “Hopefully nothing that you’ll have to be concerned about. Tandred’s always followed his heart.”

Jaina frowned. “What does Tandred’s heart want with Stormsong Monastery?”

Katherine sighed. “Ah, heard that did you?” At Jaina’s nod, Katherine beckoned her in and toward the armchairs set before the hearth. The fire was tended, a cozy source of heat and light. As the two Proudmoore women sat down, Katherine let out a soft breath and gently rubbed at the bridge of her nose.

“Mother?”

“Tandred met a girl while he was in Dalaran. Apparently, he’s found her inspiring in terms of belief, and has decided that Kul Tiras would benefit from hosting the Church of the Light.”

Jaina frowned. “I … don’t follow.”

“He doesn’t like to talk about it, but the time out on the ocean - with the fleet? It changed Tandred.”

“He never told me this.”

“Says the girl who’s first lullaby was the sound of the waves. He knows how strong your relationship is to the water, Jaina, and I’m sure he doesn’t want to put undue stress between you.”

“I’m his big sister,” Jaina protested weakly, and allowed her mother to squeeze her hand gently.

“You’ve also gone for over twenty years, Jaina. Tandred was barely six when you went to Dalaran -”

“When you sent me away to Dalaran, you mean.”

Katherine paused. “You could have come home after the plague. Instead, you went sailing, and after the trouble across the ocean, you decided to spend sixteen years in Kalimdor.”

“We both know how that would have turned out if not …” Jaina trailed off.

Katherine hesitated. She went to speak, and Jaina could practically hear the denial about to spill out, when her mother simply sighed and bowed her head. Her eyes closed, and she pinched the bridge of her nose tight enough that her skin blanched. “I know. I’m not blaming you for staying away.”

Jaina mirrored her mother’s slouch. She blew away a stray strand of hair and stared morosely into the fire. “No, I get it. I grew up hearing how Derek was this great captain, a hero to be emulated by any true-hearted Kul Tiran.” She let her gaze drift down to her hands. “Meanwhile, Tandred learned a shanty about how I murdered our father and abandoned my ideals.”

Katherine’s laugh was short and bitter, but she reached over to squeeze Jaina’s hand tightly all the same. “He actually didn’t. That shanty sprang up around the same time the Cataclysm struck - which is when the fleet was lost.”
“Huh.” Jaina glanced over. She reached out to grasp her mother’s hand. “That’s something, at least.”

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By the time Katherine had excused herself to prepare for dinner, Sylvanas had returned to brooding within Jaina’s quarters. She’d met the mage at the door with a questioning tilt to her head that Jaina had shaken off.

“I’ve been summoned to dinner,” Jaina explained as she passed by Sylvanas and went to her armoire. She pulled out the stately uniform tucked safely within it and laid the accents and cloak on the bed.

“I don’t understand,” Sylvanas leaned on the windowsill and surveyed the scattered noble dwellings and winding, wide streets that wove around Proudmoore Keep. The banshee kept to the shadows, as keen as Jaina was to keep attention off of her, and yet, Jaina figured that it was near-impossible for Sylvanas to resist the urge to scout and devise tactics for whatever environment she found herself in.

“What aren’t you understanding?” Jaina asked. She’d stepped behind one of the screens to strip down out of the simple tunic and breeches from her time away from the harbor-city into attire more appropriate for her status in Kul Tiras and for the impromptu dinner with Tandred’s beau. As she donned the uniform of the Lord Admiral, Jaina felt the burden and direction of that title come down like an iron mantle over her shoulders. She stared at a reflection of a woman she didn’t truly recognize - when had that furrow set into her brow?

“The atmosphere is not exactly the welcome home I’d expected for you.” Sylvanas broke away from the window as Jaina rounded back into the main room, busying herself with the last few buckles. The banshee queen arched a brow, bafflement clouding her otherwise-stoic nature.

“Proudmoore, you wear the clothing of your people like a funeral shroud.” The banshee offered Jaina’s gloves and gauntlet as she neared.

“Kul Tiras has a long memory,” was Jaina’s answer as she took her gloves and gauntlet from Sylvanas’ hands. She secured them over her hands and did her best to avoid the banshee’s scarlet stare. This was not a conversation she was comfortable with without the other party being one of Kul Tiras’ most vitriolic enemies.

“Kul Tiras came out as one of the strongest nations after the war,” Sylvanas pointed out, either having not picked up Jaina’s reluctance, or just didn’t care if it made the mage uncomfortable. It was most likely the latter, really. “Your fleets dominate the seas, your merchants are involved in every major trade - in fact, in nearly every measure that counts, your nation prospers and yet … you hide from them like a common criminal.” Sylvanas reached around Jaina to pluck the heavy blue cloak from its stand. Her fingers ran over the golden filigree along the edge before she waved for Jaina to turn around.

“Kids like me well enough,” Jaina jested as she turned. She didn’t understand (or wanted to question) why Sylvanas was suddenly so invested in her presentation so she stood there and worked on smoothing down the front of her ivory corset as Sylvanas set the cloak about her neck; holding it steady as Jaina secured the buckle. “My nation lost their most beloved Lord Admiral, a hero of the Second War, and inspiration for all.” Jaina dropped her hands, and she was unable to disguise the bitterness in her voice. “I can only hope to complete my penance in their eyes.”

“I hope you understand that you will never achieve that?” Sylvanas ventured, and Jaina had to snap her head up to meet the banshee’s gaze in the mirror before them because she had never heard the
undead woman speak so. It was … kind, for lack of a better word. Sylvanas must have been looking to the mirror already because their eyes met.

“Sylvanas…”

A knock on the door cut off Jaina’s reply, which was probably for the best, because how could she answer that? Sylvanas dropped her hands from Jaina’s shoulders and placed a respectable distance between them as Vereesa poked her head around the corner.

The youngest Windrunner looked dejected as she ducked into the room. She shut the door behind her and leaned against it, her ears drooping so low that they nearly curled over onto themselves. “Alleria’s a dead-end.”

Chapter End Notes

Needless to say, this story is no longer canon-compliant once 8.1.5 comes out. Everything else up until 8.1 should be considered played out as canon, though.
Somehow, the chapter still managed to be a behemoth. As a reward for the mostly exposition-dump that was last chapter, I hope you all enjoy this one! Many thanks to Raffinit, TheObsidianWarlock, and QuickYoke for making sure I wasn't writing gibberish.

Damn it. Alleria’s ability to manipulate space through the Void had been one of the pillars of Jaina’s plan to get into the monastery without undue trouble. “She refused?”

Vereesa went to speak, stopped herself, and shrugged, “Something like that.”

Sylvanas rounded Jaina’s left. “Alleria wouldn’t deny you aid unless she had a good reason, Vereesa. What happened?”

Vereesa rubbed a hand over her face, pushing her fingers up and through her hair. Her ears had straightened, but they were partly pinned and twitched when Sylvanas repeated the question. Avoidance? Jaina wished she had paid more attention when she’d aligned with the Silver Covenant years ago - it’d save on half of her translation issues with the elves that she found herself surrounded with.

“Vereesa?” Sylvanas pressed again.

Vereesa averted her gaze, and her shoulders dropped along with her ears. “There’s more trouble in Dalaran. Alleria has to stay to help keep … disagreements at a minimum.” There was more she wasn’t telling - even Jaina could pick that up, but the young elf rolled her neck once and set a neutral expression on before looking at the two of them.

Sylvanas watched her sister for a moment longer. “Very well, I’m expecting a reply later tonight with a meeting time and location from Voss. There will be ways into this vault without Alleria’s … talents, I’m quite sure of it.”

Jaina agreed, but now she was worried about the eldest Windrunner and the lack of follow-through considering Vereesa’s earlier assurance of unrequited aid, and the unexpected swiftness of her return. This wasn’t the time to dwell on it, though. She offered Vereesa a sympathetic smile and turned back around to attach her shoulder pauldron, checking only briefly to ensure the deflection enchantment did not need a touch-up.

A flash of brilliant light from outside brought the three of them to the window. Jaina and Vereesa both leaned out for a better look, and Sylvanas waited just behind them; obscured enough so she couldn’t be spied in return.

A second flash of light forced them to shield their eyes. When they were able to look once more, they looked down upon a small procession.

“Impossible,” Jaina said. “Boralus is warded against portals, and I personally warded the Keep against --”
“I don’t think they came via mage travel,” Vereesa rested a hand on Jaina’s shoulder and pointed with her free one. “Do you see those marks on the cobblestones?”

Jaina, who did not have elven sight, still tried to squint and make out what Vereesa was pointing at. Behind her, Sylvanas leaned forward to get a closer look for herself, and the chill of her nearness easily made it through Jaina’s clothing. “They look Draenic,” she explained for Jaina, and of course she would, because she knew how poorly human sight was compared to elven.

“They are Anchor Marks for a …” Vereesa’s nose scrunched up, “well, it’s teleporation --”

“-- which I’ve warded against --”

“-- but it’s not magic. Not like we have here on Azeroth,” Vereesa finished with a sidelong sigh toward Jaina’s griping. “It’s the same type of technology that the Lightforged used with the Vindicaar during the Argus campaign. It’s based around crystals and a really odd warping of space and time that does not feel like there’s any arcane involved at all.”

Sylvanas frowned. “Are you certain it isn’t magic?”

“The closest I can describe is that it’s similar to the teleportation beacons in Ulduar which were Titanic in origin.”

“Whatever powers them, magic or Titan secrets, they appear to be able to get around wards,” Sylvanas pointed out, adding dryly, “which isn’t concerning in the slightest.”

“That’s my point.” Jaina patiently cut in when there was a lull in the sister’s banter. “I remember their teleportation tricks from the time they were stationed here during the Blood War. They shouldn’t have been able to arrive even if they used teleport beacons designed by Mimiron himself. I set wards against them that can only be lowered by …” Jaina trailed off.

“By the Lord Admiral,” Sylvanas finished for her.

“Didn’t you mention that you and your brother shared that title?” Vereesa inquired, and Jaina slowly nodded.

“Yes. He is Lord Admiral of the Kul Tiran fleet, and I am Lord Admiral of the Isles.”

“Do your spells have the ability to distinguish between the two?” Sylvanas tilted her head to watch Jaina’s reaction. Jaina felt like a fool when she shook her head in response. “So, your brother invited them, then.”

The three of them fell into silence as they watched the newcomers come closer until even Jaina could start to notice the differential details in the company.

Nine strong, eight of the arrivals wore the ostentatious white-gold plate of the Lightforged, their armor polished to perfection. The runes of the Naaru shimmered in and out of view over the metal, and their cloaks billowed as they strode down the wide promenade. Jaina immediately recognized one of them, his broken horn now an unpleasantly familiar sight. He took up the frontmost right guard, his hand resting on his weapon and his chin lifted proudly as he led the others toward the Keep.

In the center, surrounded by the eight warriors, and dressed in a delicate, flowing robe that seemed almost too light to have been woven by any mundane thread, Calia Menethil walked with the confidence of the Light. Her unblemished body appeared to be illuminated from within and her eyes glowed bright with the liquid gold of the Naaru’s gift.
“My greatest regret,” Sylvanas murmured, low enough that the echo of her voice disappeared and all that was left was a husky rasp, “was that I was unable to bring that abomination down.”

Jaina’s gaze snapped over to her. This close, she could once again make out the flecks of gold that danced around Sylvanas’ pupils. Vereesa didn’t react as sharply, but her ear twitched as she turned part of her attention back to the conversation right next to her.

“Calia wants to return the lost sheep of Lordaeron to her flock,” Sylvanas explained, “even if that means bringing the unwilling lambs to the fire to ensure their … defiance is not due to some … untoward influence.”

“You’re referring to yourself,” Vereesa said. Sylvanas scowled at the obvious, but still nodded.

“Yes.”

Jaina didn’t quite feel like diving into the complications of that conversation. She stepped away from the window, and in doing so, jostled Sylvanas back. The banshee grunted, settled a hand on Jaina’s arm to set herself, then moved so Jaina could continue on her path to the door.

“Where are you going?” Vereesa reached out to pause Jaina in her tracks.

“I’m still a Lord Admiral of Kul Tiras,” Jaina answered, sidestepping the touch after a moment. “I will greet them as such.”

“I’ll come with you,” Vereesa fell into step as they walked. “Whatever story you need to explain why you - we - were up in the mountains, I’ll go along with.”

Jaina smiled her thanks, then sought out Sylvanas’ reaction. The banshee remained at the window, her fingers drumming along the sill in a discordant rhythm. As if she noticed she was being watched, she turned her head enough for her profile to be visible. “Go, I’ll remain here.”

Jaina wanted to say something more, but found the words lacking, so she merely nodded and ducked out; Vereesa on her heels.

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The Lightforged had already been welcomed inside the portcullis when Jaina arrived. Underneath the watchful eye of the Proudmoore Admiralty, the Lightforged set their weapons down into the care of the Kul Tiran military. As axes, swords, and one mace were secured, the Lightforged Warriors stepped further into the yard and awaited their orders. Some glanced around, mild curiosity clearly written on their features.

Others, like Broken Horn, scanned the immediate area for threats, then froze when he noticed Jaina stepping into the yard, and then past her, to Vereesa as well. Taken aback, he was unable to hide his shock before Jaina saw it.

Tandred had also taken the time to change into formal-wear. He’d tied his hair back into a loose tail, and Jaina could smell the subtle touch of cologne he’d donned.

That caused her to arch a brow.

Since when had Tandred taken to wearing scents?

“Lady Menethil,” Tandred bowed, sweeping an arm out to the side. “I welcome you to Proudmoore Keep.”
Calia smiled as she dipped into a curtsy. “Thank you, Lord Proudmoore.” Her eyes darted across the way to meet Jaina’s own. “Lady Proudmoore.”

Jaina neither bowed or curtsied. She inclined her head and used the gesture to try and snag Tandred’s attention. It didn’t work.

Calia stepped forward as Tandred straightened, and took his offered hand. He drew her close and pressed a chaste kiss onto her knuckles before he set her hand upon his arm and turned them so they could duck into the Keep. They passed by her without further words, too busy with a banal conversation that Jaina didn’t bother with.

That left her in the yard with Vereesa, Broken Horn, and the rest of the Lightforged. Most of the entourage filed after a footman who would have undoubtedly led them towards the barracks, where they would be presented with their rooms and the mess hall where they’d be able to eat and relax away from their duties.

Broken Horn, however, remained in the yard for a minute longer after his companions had followed the footman out. He stared at Jaina, his eyes narrowed slightly in contemplation. Finally, he said, “You look well.”

Jaina inclined her head again, ever the picture of the diplomatic hostess. “Thank you.”

Broken Horn didn’t move. He kept watching her, with the occasional glance to Vereesa. He looked like he wanted to say more, but if the Lightforged wanted to keep the fact that they’d tracked Jaina in the mountains quiet, he’d be unable to broach the topic at all.

As the staring continued, Jaina almost indulged in a petty comment or two that would have given up the ghost almost immediately. Beside her, Vereesa’s body had gone rigid, though a glance wouldn’t give it away unless they knew the woman well enough.

“Enjoy your time in Boralus,” Jaina’s smile didn’t quite reach her eyes, but she didn’t care. With a gentle word, she and Vereesa turned to follow Tandred and Calia back inside. The entire way, she felt Broken Horn watching her until he couldn’t any longer.

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Jaina found that she’d lost the ability to maintain smalltalk after the entrée had been cleared from the table. Even with the intimate number, the questions that Jaina wanted to ask Calia buzzed too loudly right at the tip of her tongue and every word was a measure in discipline.

Vereesa, on the other hand, was an absolute delight. The young elf easily integrated into the dynamics at the table without any hint of discomfort with a constant supply of easy-going chatter that kept the conversation from stalling.

Katherine seized on Vereesa’s initiative and kept the topics bouncing through banal and pleasant courses - the most recent being the similarities of growing up in a military family. Katherine, being the youngest of four, found common ground with Vereesa’s observations on expectations and living up to them.

Calia joined in, sharing her own experiences growing up with Arthas as the expected heir to Lordaeron. At first Jaina expected the memories to sting, but found that they only left her with a quiet, nagging sense of nostalgia that kept her subdued. Instead, she used the animated discussions to observe the interaction between Tandred and Calia. She remembered her little brother so differently than the man who sat across from her and was in the middle of throwing his own
complaints into the growing pile of youngest child gripes.

It went without saying that Jaina recognized nothing about her once-friend beyond the name. Calia had been several years older than Jaina, but they’d quickly turned thick as thieves during the autumn holidays Jaina spent in the northern kingdom - or over the summer when the Lordaeron royal family would pay their Kul Tiran allies stately visits. The untamed ferocity that had infamously driven Calia to defy her father’s expectations of an arranged marriage alliance for her was gone and replaced by a placid serenity that made Jaina wonder what it hid beneath the surface.

Where once Calia’s eyes had been a sparkling blue that expressed as earnestly as the sea, they were now a deep gold that gave nothing away. Even as she laughed gaily at a story about Tandred discovering the deceptive power of a scuttler’s pinching claw - the curve of her smile stopped at the gleam in her eyes.

Jaina rubbed a hand at her temple. Maybe she was just being paranoid. It wouldn’t be the first time that she’d allowed her emotions to override the logic of a situation. If she were truly honest with herself, the only one at the table that should have been concerned about being outed as a traitor was the one who currently had an exiled Warchief in their bedroom.

Vereesa leaned toward her, voice quiet as she asked in slow, careful Thalassian, “are you alright?”

“Tired.” Jaina answered. It wasn’t exactly a lie, but Vereesa didn’t look convinced. When Jaina gave no further answer, she coughed and leaned back in her chair.

Dessert was a simple fare of tea with softened ginger cookies that left a tingle of spice after the first bite. As Vereesa added more than a healthy amount of sugar to her cup, she cocked her head toward Calia.

“It’s good to see you outside of the Reclamation, Lady Menethil,” Vereesa started, her voice light. “How’s that coming along?”

Calia lifted a hand, and while fine lines appeared around her eyes when she smiled, her gaze remained serene. “Calia only, please. I prefer to leave the titles for official events, not dinner among friends.”

Vereesa dipped her head to the request. “Calia, then.”

Calia smiled again. “The Reclamation is going as well as one can hope when we’re discussing the healing of a wounded nation. We have managed to secure a forward outpost near what the Argent Crusade called the “Bulwark” - we’re hoping to encourage the workers to bring their families there, perhaps even establish a small community.”

Tandred lifted his glass. “I sent some of our ship-builder apprentices to assist with any carpentry needs.”

Jaina frowned. “What about the fleet’s maintenance? We’re still recovering from the last skirmish with the naga.”

“Jaina, that was months ago. The naga don’t strike during the winter, and I can take advantage of that to assist Lordaeron.”

“There isn’t an iron-clad treaty that the naga keep to the deeper waters when it’s cold, Tandred -” Jaina pointed out, but Tandred dismissed it with a quick laugh.

“- They’ve done so for the past three seasons, and if they change their mind, the fleet is more than
ready to deter their landing. Sending a few apprentices to help an ally isn’t going to open us up to attack, Jaina.”

Calia set a hand on Tandred’s arm. “She’s just being cautious, dear, and wise. After all,” Calia appeared concerned as she glanced Jaina’s way, “the Void’s attack in Dalaran reminded all of us that our enemy will take advantage of any weakness it thinks it can exploit.”

Oh no.

Katherine sat up straighter, and sought out Jaina’s gaze. “You were attacked by the Void in Dalaran? Are you alright?”

Jaina nodded, already trying to think of damage control. “The Void didn’t attack -”

“I would believe the poor elf who was torn apart would disagree, Jaina,” Calia admonished.

Vereesa’s earlier good humor faded instantly. Jaina practically heard the creak of her glove against the armrest of her chair.

“Kivan lost control of the powers he wielded,” Jaina’s jaw set stubbornly as she spoke. “It is the risk we take when we decide to take on any magic. Arcane -”

“Jaina, the Void isn’t just simple magic,” Calia explained as one would to a child.

Jaina’s teeth ground down as she fought to keep a responding sneer off her face. “The Void is no different than the Arcane, which can corrupt and backfire just as spectacularly as the incident in Dalaran. The ren’dorei -”

“The ren’dorei meddle with a force that wants to consume all life in the universe. The Void is an abhorrent enemy - after all, isn’t your own nation recovering from such a corruptive influence?”

Katherine, who’d stiffened with the conversation change, now looked like she battled the same scowl that Jaina fought to keep at bay. “Kul Tirans are born to the sea, Lady Menethil. We grow up well aware how fickle the water can be, but we also learn that all tides eventually ebb away. Lord Stormsong’s abuse of his powers is a warning my people won’t soon forget.”

Calia’s eyes glittered, and the first spark of passion rose in them as she pounced on the opening Katherine gave her. “Exactly my point, Lady Proudmoore! The elements are fickle lordlings who care only to expand their influence - “

“Mm. And you think the Light is above such things?” Jaina inquired, her voice a little too sweet.

Calia’s mouth went rigid, her lips pressed in a thin, bloodless line. Katherine’s shoulders dropped in shock, her expression inscrutable as she turned Jaina’s way. Vereesa ducked her head, and fixed Jaina with an incredulous stare as her long hair spilled forward and hid her from the rest of the table.

There was a screech of wood over stone as Tandred stood up. The ghost of their father’s anger was in the blotches of red that grew over his features as he glowered at her from across the table. “That was out of line, Jaina,” he hissed.

Jaina rose up to meet him. Carefully, as if they were in the middle of deliberating over trade tariffs, she cocked her head to the left. “Was it? The Light is no different than the Arcane, the Void, or -”

“How can you even compare them?!”
“Or any of the other elements,” Jaina forged on, ignoring his outrage.

“I understand how you could come to that conclusion regarding the Light, Jaina,” Calia’s expression had returned to its’ earlier serenity, but now Jaina was well aware that her instincts had been correct; that the tranquility displayed was just an illusion - a smooth surface hiding the dangerous current beneath it. “I assume it helps with rationalizing what happened to you?”

Jaina’s answering smile was all teeth. “Something like that.”

To Jaina’s surprise, Vereesa stood alongside her and gently tugged at her elbow. “Jaina,”

Jaina turned her head a fraction, about to boggle at Vereesa’s actions, when she noticed the fluttering of dark wings at the top of the wide-arched windows across from them. A lone bat, no bigger than Jaina’s hand, clung to the iron embellishments and stared into the room with eyes that gleamed a dark ruby.

It was, for lack of a better term, a summons.

Jaina’s attention flickered back to where Calia sat, and Tandred stood with arms folded and his glare reserved only for her. She made a show of taking a deep breath, and then spreading her arms apologetically. “I’m sorry. I must have lost my manners somewhere.”

“Damned straight you have,” Tandred muttered.

Katherine shot her son a reproachful glare and he flinched. After a moment, he sat back down with a sigh.

Jaina didn’t retake her seat. “I have to catch up with paperwork. I’ll see you all for breakfast tomorrow?”

Katherine gave her a suspicious glance. “Of course dear, I’ll be up for a while yet if you wish to catch up.”

Jaina smiled, then gestured for Vereesa to step out with her. “Vereesa, a moment more of your time? I’d like to discuss sending out a request to the Unseen Path concerning an ettin…”

Vereesa blinked at her, having not been aware of any ettins, but ultimately followed her out of the room.

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“What happened?” Jaina asked, having waited until Vereesa closed the door before she launched into action. She extended her hand as she moved across the room to where Sylvanas stood silhouetted against the light that streamed in from the window.

Sylvanas placed a small telescope in Jaina’s hand the moment she reached her side, and pointed out toward the northwest. “Some of your guests are taking a moonlit tour,” she commented, adjusting the telescope as Jaina looked through it.

In the narrow canal between Mariner’s Row and Uptown Borough drifted a lone dinghy. While the ferries were common sights on the waters about Boralus, the lack of a ferryman wasn’t, and neither was the uncanny avoidance of the patches of light that spilled down from the various waterfront restaurants and households.

Even with the telescope, that section of the canal was too dark to pick out identifying details, so
Jaina lowered it and looked to Sylvanas to fill in the gaps, which the banshee wasted no time in doing so.

“Four of the escorting guardsmen who arrived with the Usurper,” Sylvanas explained and only blinked innocently when Jaina scowled at her moniker for Calia. “They’ve changed out of their ceremonial plate. It’s dark and without heraldry.”

Vereesa nudged into the space between them to get a peek for herself. She clucked her tongue in irritation and took the telescope from Jaina. “The brands flare with their use of the Light, so as long as they keep their magics to themselves, they’re going to look like any other draenei.” She lowered the lens. “What do they want with the monastery?”

Anger blossomed in the space behind Jaina’s sternum. “Nothing good.”

Sylvanas shared a look with Jaina, leaning forward so that she rested her full weight on the windowsill. This late, anyone glancing up would only see the three cast in shadow. “I took the liberty of rearranging the detail of our meet-up with Voss. She agreed. I assume you’d know where this is?” She handed a small note to Jaina. Kracken’s Vigil, it read. Jaina nodded while she handed it back over.

“It’s a small island just south of Unity Square.”

“That’s a little close to the city for a secret meeting, isn’t it?” Vereesa turned to rest a hip against the sill to better partake in the conversation.

“It’s completely inaccessible by boat,” Jaina went on to explain. “The water around the island is impossible to navigate without a Tidesage to protect against a rogue wave, and the rocks there are perfect for tearing a ship apart if you drift too far out of the protected route.”

“Then it’s rather lucky we’ve got a mage, mm?” Sylvanas chuckled as she pushed away from the window to collect her things. She’d left Thori’dal back in Falor’Thalas, arguing against Vereesa’s protests that a discreet mission did not need one of the most potent of elven artifacts at the heart of it all. Instead, her bow was carved from a pale wood that hummed with a faint power when Sylvanas’ hand brushed over it. She slung the weapon over her shoulder and secured it with a deft hand.

Jaina fetched one of her lesser staves of power from the workshop, picking up one that whispered with the arcane and whose crystal gleamed with the first touch of frost. It wasn’t her Storm Staff, but she agreed with Sylvanas’ earlier assessment: they didn’t need to drag unspeakable amounts of power behind them for anyone with a lick of talent to follow.

Sylvanas and Vereesa met her in the workshop. Vereesa, like Sylvanas had earlier in the day, paused and stared long at the Staff of Antonidas, her eyes widening a fraction as she took in the arcane that streamed from the weapon down into the rune-work on the floor. Vereesa’s throat bobbed as she swallowed, and Jaina spied the ranger’s hand curving into a fist.

“Right, step this way please?” Jaina spoke up, voice a little louder than necessary. She reached out and guided Vereesa by the shoulder a little more firmly than she would have normally, but the stumble it prompted from the suddenly abashed ranger was more than enough evidence that Jaina had done the right thing.

She tugged on the ley-lines, and her consciousness danced along their current until she found her destination. She concentrated and the salt-sting of the ocean came unbidden to her senses, chased by the wood-rot of delirect ships and the heavy, heady smell of kelp washed ashore only to shrivel
and bake underneath a rare glimpse of sunlight.

She allowed the island to steal more of her awareness, and the angry rush of the waves assaulted her ears. The tide was coming in, the ocean demanding its territory back with grand, sweeping slices. She could hear the low murmur of voices, and as Jaina’s attention became fully split between her workshop and the island, she plucked out the glimmering strands of ocean magic between the pulses of the ley line itself. “We’re expected,” was all she gave as warning. She flicked her wrist, her movement casual as she cast the three of them along the arcane trod.

They landed in the middle of a grove of embattled, stubborn evergreen trees that grew with trunks bent nearly sideways to endure the rush of the sea-breeze. The gentle glow of magic faded from them, and long used to the vertigo of teleportation, Jaina was already working her way down along the scree, using the occasional exposed root to keep her footing along the path.

The two elves behind her were far more quiet, and far more graceful as they maneuvered in her wake. They arrived at the base of the rockfall and found themselves greeted.

The forsaken who waited underneath the sheltering shadow of the rockfall stared at them with a mixture of suspicion and outright distrust. With the little moonlight that reached their position, Jaina could only make out the gleam of their eyes and the dance of pale light over exposed bone.

She rocked back on a heel as they stepped forward. She had long since been aware that the average forsaken had been ravaged by the curse of undeath far less gracefully than it’d touched the dark rangers, or Sylvanas herself, but to see the comparison so suddenly had Jaina struggling for composure. She refused to balk so openly.

The smaller of the two forsaken women kept walking even as her companions stilled. Strangely, though she bore the curse of undeath, her eyes blazed with a pale, white-blue light - not the sickly yellow of the common forsaken, or the burning embers of the dark rangers. It was the same cold flame that sizzled in the gaze of the death knights, or - well, Jaina’s nightmares of the Scourge rarely allowed her to forget the gleam of necromancy in their hollow skulls. And, oddly enough, Jaina felt like they’d met before.

She looked to Sylvanas for the introductions. Sylvanas’ expression was inscrutable as she acknowledged the three undead. “Lord Admiral,” she began, with a slow drawl. “I’d like to present Lilian Voss, one of the - “ her mouth twisted around her words. “Free undead.”

The name along with the face jolted a memory and Jaina gave the forsaken woman a closer once-over. “You’re the one who returned Derek to us.”

Lilian grunted, rolling one narrow shoulder in a shrug. When she spoke, it was with her attention fixated on Sylvanas, her eyes narrowed and one hand resting a bit too casually on the hilt of a pale-steel dagger. “It was necessary at the time. I didn’t do it for you, Lord Admiral.”

Jaina blinked at the dismissal in her tone. “Yes, well, it was appreciated all the same.”

“Yeah,” Voss sneered, and her gaze flickered over to Jaina once. “I’m sure having a body for the funeral pyre helped for the second burial.”

“Excuse - “

Sylvanas took a step forward, situating herself between Voss and Jaina. “Did you bring the Tidesage?” Her words were clipped, the question out before Jaina could finish her retort or Voss was able to encourage another one.
Voss ground her teeth and jerked her head in a nod back towards one of the other forsaken. “Yeah, but only so he can tell you directly to your face where you can shove your request for aid, Windrunner.”

Windrunner? Jaina hadn’t expected the lack of any honorific. Every encounter she’d had with the forsaken, whether loyal to the Shattered Mask or not had been filled with a quiet reverence for the freedom Sylvanas had granted them. Even the forsaken that had sought asylum before Orgrimmar’s capture had spoken of their Dark Lady like one would speak of a nostalgic memory.

If it fazed Sylvanas, the banshee didn’t show it. She just stood there, hands clasped behind her back, head tilted just enough to display the cool arrogance of her elven heritage. “Is that what you desire, Zelling?” She lifted her voice just enough to carry over the sound of the waves. “To tell me off?”

A forsaken man took a step next to Voss. He wore the sea-green robes of the Tidesage order, though time had worn parts of the cloth thin enough that his gaunt frame poked through. He rested much of his weight on a iron-capped staff, the simplicity of the wood belied the stirring of power within it. Out here, surrounded by the bay and underneath the open sky, Zelling could easily swing the balance of any fight into his favor if things went sour.

However, Zelling didn’t meet Sylvanas’ gaze. Instead, he watched Jaina with a placid expression, though curiosity glinted in his eyes. “Lord Admiral,” he greeted her. His words rasped in his throat, and his vowels were nearly lost in the guttural speech.

Jaina straightened slightly with the title. He stared at her without the contempt of the more conservative Kul Tiras, or the hate she’d come to expect from any of the Horde. Instead, he spoke as if there was no history between him and her, just the understanding of their places in the hierarchy of the isles.

So, she dipped her head and made the symbol of respect for the tides, her hand waving out to encompass the water that lapped at their feet. “Tidesage Zelling, I trust the winds have treated you well?”

Zelling’s laugh was as rasping as his words but that didn’t diminish the gentle touch of self-deprecating humor. “As long as the breeze stays light, I manage to keep from being blown away. Lilian mentioned you had need of a Tidesage?”

Jaina nodded, and rounded Sylvanas’ side so that she and Zelling stood without barriers between them. “Yes, I believe I do.”

Zelling’s facial muscles worked as he considered his words. “And you could not approach the Storm’s Wake …?” he trailed off, waiting for her to finish for him.

With a sidelong glance to the banshee, Jaina drummed her fingers along her staff. “I … suppose out of deference for Sylvanas’ wishes.” Voss snorted, but Jaina ignored that. She got the feeling that the forsaken woman was, at baseline, defiant, and stopping the meeting to address the topic of manners wouldn’t be productive. “Also as it’s sort of a … family matter, for the Forsaken, I mean.”

At that, all undead eyes fell on her. Beyond the burning of their gazes, they were too cold, too still, and Jaina had to avert her gaze before she started to fidget.

“Family?” Zelling asked.

Jaina took a breath, studying the rush of clouds along the sky rather than the looks she was
receiving. “Well, what else would the children be considered?”

Voss sucked in a breath through her teeth. She shot an incredulous look Sylvanas’ way. “The children are still around?”

Sylvanas met that look with an impassive one of her own. “The ones that you managed to get out, yes.”

That only served to make Voss’ look grow more suspicious. She folded her arms, her fingers tapping out a rhythm over her elbow as she observed the banshee, looking like she was waiting for the catch - or for the other shoe to fall.

When her glower prompted no answer from the elven woman, she turned it instead on Jaina. Jaina, having become used to a myriad expanse of unpleasant looks over her many years, bore it with dignity. If Voss had a question, she could ask it like a normal woman.

Zelling contemplated her, then he lifted a hand. “Ask your questions, then, Lord Admiral. I will see what I can do for family.”

“It’s my decision, Lilian,” Zelling looked over to Voss as a brother would to a stubborn sister, and though part of his jaw had worn down to the bone, his smile still managed to be soft. “I appreciate the defense, though.”

Voss scowled her answer and scurried back to the comfort of the shadow as Zelling gestured for Jaina to walk with him along the shoreline. Jaina subtly shook her head with both Vereesa and Sylvanas made to follow.

“I’ll be all right,” she promised. Sylvanas levelled a look her way, then bowed her head.

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Zelling was a patient listener. As they walked along the shore, the waves creeping higher now against the ankles of their boots, he canted his head and listened to Jaina’s theories and suspicions about what she’d encountered in Falor’Thalas. She spoke of the strange beguilement in the water, and the two times she’d lost herself down in the catacombs themselves.

“I never felt like I was in danger,” she confessed, once they were far enough that she was pretty sure the sound of the surf would dampen their conversation even for elven eavesdropping. “More like …” she trailed off with a helpless shrug.

Zelling laughed lightly. “I don’t know how Dalaran helped the novices learn how to curb temptation, but for the young Tidesage, we take them sailing around the southern coves.”

Jaina looked towards the south. She squinted, and made out the silhouette of a creature that was far too large to be a bird drifting between cloud banks. It dipped and twirled before disappearing down into the rolling fog off the southern mountains. “With the sirens?” She knew she sounded dubious.

“Exactly.” Zelling caught her expression, and he laughed just that much more. “Oh, don’t worry. I think only one novice managed to escape the net to actually meet one of the beasts face-to-face. The rest of them get a long lesson in pining, and if the sirens are hunting - a good look at nature’s fury.”

Jaina quirked a brow.
Zelling tipped his hand toward the water. “It’s a lesson about vigilance and temperance. There’s a reason why we say a Kul Tiran’s first love is the ocean, after all.”

“So you set a bunch of teenagers on rocks to listen to sirens and that teaches them to, what, really learn how to manage awkwardness around one’s teachers?”

Zelling laughed again. “It teaches them to be wary of the sweetest song there is. Once they’re able to call one of the coastal elementals to their side - we deem them ready to practice with the deeper magics. If they can work through a siren’s song, they can handle the abyss.” He stopped walking. Jaina slowed down as well, watching his shoulders slump. “Or rather, that’s what we assumed.”

Jaina remembered Katherine’s assurance to Tandred, and the recovery work in Stormsong Valley. “That was the trickery of one man, Zelling.”

“One man who managed to dismantle the legacy of an entire people,” Zelling pointed out. “Not all siren songs are enchanting seductions, Lord Admiral.” He hesitated, then looked back the way they came. Jaina followed his gaze, and felt a flush strike along her cheeks.

“Believe me,” she murmured, turning her attention back towards their forward path. “I know exactly what she’s capable of.”

“Do you?” Zelling fell back in step with her. His staff tapped out their pace as they walked. “Or are you so focused on defending against the song that you miss the snake slithering up behind you.”

A tiny ache of worry tugged at her chest as Zelling glanced at her expectantly. Was she ignoring an obvious danger? She thought back to her time in Falor’Thalas, thought back over her interactions with Sylvanas, playing them through. Finally, she shook her head.

Zelling continued to watch her, then reached out a hand to pat her shoulder. “Good, keep that head on your shoulders then. Now, about these scrolls…”

When they returned, it seemed like Sylvanas and Voss had also shared a discussion. The forsaken agent was no longer sulking in the shadows, but crouched over a flat area of wet sand with the banshee, and they were in the middle of sketching out the monastery grounds.

The fact that they had such a detailed map of the grounds should have prickled concern, but Jaina just watched the two bicker back and forth about the best route to avoid two patrols.

Veresea was perched on a nearby rock, far from any chance that she’d get her feet wet and was in the middle of coating her arrowheads with a strange green-black oil that glistened on the metal even after the arrow had been set aside to dry.

Not wanting to disturb the strategic meeting, Jaina went to investigate the alchemy instead. She shuffled up next to Vereesa, mindful of the strange-smelling oil and the arrows drying in the wind. “What’s that?”

“Wyvern’s Sting,” Vereesa explained, carefully angling her next batch away from Jaina. “A nick and as long as the creature’s capable of dropping unconscious, it’ll do so.” She set that arrow down and fixed Jaina with a wicked grin. “I debated poking you with it once or twice, during the campaign in Pandaria.”

Jaina rolled her eyes and gently shoved Vereesa’s shoulder. “Only if you forced a nap for yourself too.”
“I wasn’t a walking zombie,” Vereesa retorted, then realized their company when Sylvanas and Voss both shot her a disapproving glare. When the two went back to their map, Vereesa gave Jaina a sheepish grin, then looked past her. “Where’s Zelling?”

“Opening the door for us, so to speak.” Jaina answered. “There’s an open-air altar that’s near a dock. It’s close enough to the cellar we need to reach without trekking across the entire grounds -”

“...explain to me why murder isn’t on the table?” Voss’ voice broke through Jaina’s own, and she turned to see the forsaken agent scowling at a disapproving Sylvanas. “You realize that literally fixes the entire problem, right? Stab as you go and there’s no guards to deal with your retreat!”

“Now you’re just being childish,” Sylvanas sniffed.

Voss shrugged. “You’d have agreed three years ago.”

Sylvanas hesitated, and her gaze skittered over Jaina’s own, before she answered: “well, times change.”

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The dessicated skeleton swayed in the night’s breeze, the tattered, rotted remains of its robes twined about the bones and trapped in their earthly prison against the harsh spray of the surf and the whipping wind.

Once a place of learning and contemplation of the greater ocean, during the Blood War, the monastery had been subverted by the corruptive influence of the abyss and infested with the strange k’thr - denizens of the depths that had trained and manipulated the Tidesages. During those years, the monastery had been full of life, with novices and apprentices moving through the wide open passages among the tactirn and devoted Stormsong guards while the librarians and archivists worked to uncover and translate the ancient mysteries.

It had been a long three-way debate between her, Tandred, and Katherine about allowing the monastery archives to remain, but ultimately, Brother Pike had convinced the Proudmoore that, with time, the island would become a house of learning and leadership once more.

Now the monastery was a hulking derelict tomb, served only by a sect of fanatical Stormsong Loyalists whose only mission was to keep the secrets of the depths preserved and locked away from the unworthy.

“Well, you can tell a Kul Tiran hung the corpse,” Sylvanas mused, coming up to Jaina’s left. Jaina’s glance slid over to her, and the banshee queen’s profile revealed the slight upward tick of her lips before she elaborated. “The knotwork keeping the body aloft. It must be exceptional.”

“You’re terrible,” Vereesa chided as she sidled up on Sylvanas’ other side, her face tilted up to reflect briefly on their macabre landmark before she turned her gaze to scour the abandoned grounds they’d commandeered as their landing point. “You trust Voss about the security of this place?”

“No,” Sylvanas went to fetch something from one of the larger leather pouches on her hip. “Not in the slightest.”

Vereesa’s ears twitched. “Then why did we agree to it?”

Sylvanas jerked her chin towards Jaina, and continued on whatever task had consumed her focus for the moment. Jaina caught Vereesa’s gaze flicker up to her. She scowled briefly at the banshee
before she answered; “Because the Storm’s Wake and myself vetted the guards and the archivists allowed on the island. We forbade acolytes, so, in theory, the worship grounds shouldn’t see more than the rare patrol.”

“In theory,” Vereesa repeated flatly. The living ranger broke ranks and pointed up toward the high tower in the northern courtyard. “One of us should head up there, serve as covering fire.”

Despite the assurance from the previous dismissal of all but the most barebones of security, and the calm deliberation she observed between Sylvanas and the forsaken Voss, Jaina didn’t quite feel comfortable with breaking their small trio even further, but Vereesa made sense.

Before she could speak up, however, Sylvanas pulled out a small, wrapped figure from her pack. She carefully uncovered it to reveal the small bat Jaina had spied at dinner. This close, she could see the strange angle the creature’s delicate neck rested, and the glazed, sightless stare.

“No need to risk ourselves, Vereesa. This one will be more than adequate,” Sylvanas commented as she cupped her other hand around the bat’s wings and brought the creature close to her face. Jaina recognized the cold command of Sylvanas’ necromancy and within a few seconds, the bat blinked and scrambled to perch upon the banshee’s gloves. With a wordless command, Sylvanas sent the bat flying into the concealment of the colonnade around the worship grounds.

The fluttering of the bats wings disappeared soon enough, and the three women were left standing somewhat awkwardly. A cold breeze sliced over the grounds and sent Vereesa into a shiver, her shoulders hunching up against the offending breeze. She tugged her hood over her ears, then unslung her ironfeather longbow.

“And you’re sure we can’t just teleport to where we need to go and then back?” Vereesa’s voice came off just a bit more petulant than she probably intended, but Jaina paid it no heed. She suspected the elf’s usual enchantments against the cold were with her regular armor - and that even the heavy Kul Tiran cloth she had wrapped around her now wasn’t enough to keep out the night’s chill.

“Shh!” Sylvanas snapped a hand out in a gesture that Vereesa responded to immediately, and Jaina had the vague glimmer of recognizing as one of the ranger signals that Sylvanas had worked through during the possession. She tapped an ear, and Jaina cocked her head to listen - even though she suspected her human hearing wouldn’t pick up whatever had alerted Sylvanas.

Jaina listened to the gentle lap of waves against the wood of their small rowboat tucked half onto the sand in a hidden cove. She heard the softest of scrabbling legs as various small marine critters went about their nightly lives.

The faintest of tremors rumbled underneath her feet. The waves sploshed up over the rocks out of rhythm before settling back into their ancient pattern.

“Vereesa?” Sylvanas asked.

“It wasn’t mechanical - felt more like a pulse of energy.” Vereesa mentioned after a moment more of listening.

“Proudmoore?” Sylvanas turned to her expectantly and Jaina was already halfway through her theory before she realized what she was doing.

“If you felt magic - could be the Tidesage novices at Mariner’s Row,” Jaina considered all the options, and felt that one fit the scenario. “We’ve had trouble keeping up the fishing quotas,” at the
pair of befuddled looks, Jaina fought a smile as she explained. “It’s a rare, but necessary trick. The tidesages send out a lure that encourages the fish of the bay to keep close to the city’s docks and shallows as we get into the colder months.”

Sylvanas looked back to Vereesa, who nodded after a minute longer of listening. “This island has absorbed so much magic it’s hard to distinguish, but I think Jaina’s right.”

Sylvanas tapped her fingers against her hip, but seemed content with the explanation. As there wasn’t a repeat of the strange tremor, the three of them relaxed and returned their focus to their mission.

***

Looking back, the monastery could have been swarmed by hundreds of skilled, devoted Stormsong Loyalists and it wouldn’t have changed a thing.

Their plan was simple, and their execution, flawless. Between the three of them, there had been no risk of discovery. With the two rangers switching off taking point, Jaina had been able to devote a sizable portion of her reserves to an invisibility spell. Cloaked with magic, Sylvanas and Vereesa revealed why the Windrunner sisters had been so widely praised for their tactical skills.

As promised, the guards encountered were left alive, though dazed and bruised. Even without their bows, the sisters moved as one unit, deadly grace exemplified as they traded off the finishing touch of a Wyvern Sting-coated blade.

The archive that Zelling believed housed the scrolls on the relationship between the abyss and the sunlit shallows - the tenebrous veil between the endless chasm of the void and the boundless ocean was breached with a few counterspells and a minute or so given to the reversing of a rather intricate warding rune, then they were down in the cold dark.

Jaina raised her staff beside her to grant her some light to see by as she perused the shelves, her fingers brushing lightly over the parchment as she sought her prize. She skimmed over titles that she would love to read - and the expanse of knowledge at her fingertips had her feeling a little giddy.

Later, she promised herself as she closed in on the final few scrolls. After she could leave Falor’Thalas with her conscious clean.

“Any luck?” Vereesa inquired, leaning against the doorframe and tracking Jaina with only her eyes.

“Just found them,” Jaina answered as she compared the sigil on a scroll-case to the sigil Zelling drew for her. She went to retrieve the texts when another rumble raced through the stones, this one strong enough that Jaina needn’t concentrate to notice it.

“Jaina, what did you do?” Vereesa called out, no longer reclining but alert and keen, her ears pricked up and attentive. Next to her, Sylvanas returned from her quick excursion through the underground tunnels.

“What was that?” The banshee demanded, already looking to Jaina for answers.

Jaina had snatched her hand back from the scrolls when the rumble hit, “It wasn’t me!” She frowned, and leaned forward to poke hesitantly at the cases again. Nothing happened. “Yeah, it wasn’t me.”

“Was it that Summon Fish spell again?” Vereesa shifted from foot to foot as Jaina transferred the
scrolls from their protective cases into the travel pouch she’d brought along for them. She folded the parchment carefully, and tried not to let the elves anxiousness feed her own growing concern.

“It is not called ‘Summon Fish’,” Jaina threw Vereesa a dirty look as she neared them. “It’s -”

“Not the time to debate Vereesa’s cultural insensitivity, we’ve got company,” Sylvanas hissed, and faded into the shadows. Vereesa snapped against the wall, and Jaina ducked against one of the support columns.

Muffled voices and the drum of booted footsteps drifted into the archive from the corridor. Jaina risked closing in to the opposite side of the doorway from Vereesa, her invisibility spell flickering around her form as she poked her head out from behind the frame.

Broken Horn and a svelte female Lightforged walked down the hallway, deep in conversation. Behind them, another pair of the light-bound warriors were escorting two archivists - no - at closer look, Jaina realized they were noviates, dressed in the simple robes of their station and carrying the iconic watery blades of their order. They were gagged, and bound at their hands.

What were the Lightforged doing with them?

As the strange company rounded one of the far corners, Jaina stepped out from the room. A cold hand seized her shoulder and prevented further movement.

“We got what we came for,” Sylvanas murmured when Jaina turned to face her. “We need to go before we’re discovered.”

“I want to know what they’re doing down here, Sylvanas,” Jaina shook off the hold. “You’d do the same thing -”

“Not in the slightest. The mission comes first and the mission hasn’t changed in the slightest. We leave - now.”

Jaina shrugged the satchel from around her shoulders and shoved it into Sylvanas’ arms. The banshee staggered back a step at the unexpected action and scowled as Jaina turned to Vereesa.

“Well?”

Vereesa’s eyes flicked between Jaina and her sister before she squared her shoulders. “I’ll go with you.”

Jaina turned back to Sylvanas, who looked at the two of them like they were mad. They probably were. The practical choice would be to retreat with the scrolls. If this were Stormwind, or another Alliance-held city, Jaina might have seen the logic behind the practicality of Sylvanas’ choice.

This was Boralus, though. Her home, no matter how disgruntled it was to have her there. She couldn’t leave without at least learning what interest the Lightforged had in the monastery. Sylvanas’ eyes blazed bright even as the shadows of her face deepened until all Jaina could make out were the twin flames. She said nothing as she stepped between them.

“Sylvanas -” Jaina went for the banshee’s cloak, but she was already out of reach.

“Our deal’s done, Proudmoore. Zelling can manage the trouble in Falor’Thalas without your aid.” Sylvanas was halfway down the hall, and fading rapidly into the gloom. “You’re free to cause
mayhem in your own land now.”

Jaina took a step forward, but Vereesa caught her elbow. “Let her go, Jaina.”

“But -”

“If we want to save those sages, you need to let her go.” Vereesa repeated, and though it wrenched something awful in Jaina’s chest, she ultimately followed her friend’s advice.

They moved as quick as they could underneath the protection of the invisibility spell.

Down into the lower bowels of the catacombs they went, until the chiseled stone became rough-hewn rock slick with moisture that seeped up from someplace even further down. The stench of rot was prevalent in those winding spaces, and more than once, they’d found themselves suddenly facing a dead end, the echo of their quarry’s steps mocking them as they rushed to recover the trail.

They caught up to the Lightforged in the belly of a natural cistern drained nearly dry. The shimmering suggestion of ragged stone steps gleamed from beneath the surface, suggesting that the pool went deeper than first glance hinted.

In the center, a strange monolith carved into the shape of a wretched monster stretched madly twining stone tentacles up along the roof of the cavern, and stared with hollow-hewn eyes upon the ritual laid before it.

The moment Jaina and Vereesa slipped into the cistern, something dark and hungry stirred. The crawling sensation of being watched clung to Jaina’s skin like a spider’s webbing, and that empty space behind her sternum squeezed around her lungs until she had to force herself to inhale.

She waved off Vereesa’s concerned glance, too intent on what was going on.

Four Lightforged dressed in their dark, unassuming armor stood guard, their brands muted as they watched the arrival of the other half of their entourage.

“What took you?” one of the guards questioned, looking down to the tidesages that were dropped unceremoniously into the water. “Why are they here?”

“Caught them snooping,” Broken Horn explained. “They did something to the guards upstairs, half the patrols are unconscious.” He stepped over the toppled sages. “ Doesn’t matter. It’ll sell the story easier.”

His female companion gave a dismissive sniff. “Good. Get ready then, it’s almost here.”

Vereesa’s eyes narrowed. “They’re not about to do what I think they’re about to do, are they?” She pressed close against the rock her and Jaina sheltered behind. “Are they insane? Trying to summon the Void?”

Jaina wasn’t looking at the Lightforged, or the fallen tidesages. She stared down into the water, and knew that something ancient and foul stared back.

“No,” she said, throat tightening with fear. “The Void’s already here.”

***

The dark tide swallowed the cistern within seconds. As soon as Jaina’s words had slipped past her lips, the depths had churned and bubbled - rising up and up until the tension broke around a horrific
The massive, bloated creature was born from nightmare. Mottled, corpulent flesh seemed to melt down over a hulking, hunched body that threatened to topple under its own weight. Two sickly eyes that burned with the madness of the Old Gods glared out toward the ring of Lightforged, and the shriek that it gave knocked the invisibility spell from around Jaina, leaving them exposed.

Around the Faceless One’s feet the water popped and hissed as it boiled; every lurch of the waves spawning a smaller abomination - gaunt and twisted things caught between human and monster - the k’thir were well known to Jaina.

“Run,” she commanded, one hand gripping Vereesa’s wrist in a death-grip. “We need to run. Now.”

Vereesa didn’t need to be told twice. Not when the cistern was slowly filling with the expulsion of abyssal horrors. Not when the brilliant flare of Light signaled the Lightforged’s fall back, the warriors steadily keeping the abyssal spawn at bay as they moved toward the exit themselves.

Secrecy was no longer an option. With Vereesa still in hand, Jaina teleported them forward just as the water bubbled up to their calves, black and stinking of decay as more and more fed into the cavern. The burst of magic revealed their position, and as Vereesa bolted around the corner, Jaina felt the air behind her shift. She ducked, and the rockface ahead of her exploded as a hammer slammed into it.

Half-blind from terror, Jaina blinked to the left, her knee screaming as she landed wrong. She was hauled to her feet, Vereesa now gripping her as they fled through the catacombs. They ran like their lives depended on it, but the dark tide behind them was faster, and as they tasted fresh air on their tongues, it swallowed them whole.

There was no choice left but to fight.

“Jaina, behind you!” Vereesa’s warning pierced the night. Jaina whirled from her about, her knee buckling as she barely avoided the first spell flung her way. The oily frostbolt broke against the wall as the k’thir spellcaster took advantage of her off-balance. The creature snarled in anticipation as it scampered half on all-fours towards her, launching another spell.

The shard of black ice scraped over her left shoulder, taking with it parts of the protective enchantment that deflected most projectiles. Jaina staggered back with a grunt, then retaliated with her staff, blasting arcane directly into that wriggling mass of tentacles.

The cultist’s head snapped back with a vicious crack and like a marionette cut from it’s strings, their body crumpled into the mud.

Jaina swung her staff up and around as she looked for Vereesa in the disorientating gloom. The ranger was caught in her own scuffle, her bow tossed aside in favor of raw, personal strength as she struggled to retain her footing as the hulking n’raqi had her bent nearly in half.

The Faceless One’s grasping tentacle was flush against Vereesa’s chest as it attempted to crush her against the shore. It’s other appendage was snagged around Vereesa’s arms - doing what it could to keep her short-swords from shredding through its hide even further. Rivulets of black blood churned in the mud. Vereesa let out a curse as she nearly lost her balance.

Jaina blinked to Vereesa’s side and with a word of command, she poured frost into the n’qari’s limb - her own fingers freezing over as she repeated the command again, then a third time. The
creature’s hide cracked and blistered as the freezing cold forced muscle, blood, skin to expand as every droplet of moisture became solid ice.

With her other hand, she blindly traced out a rune of power onto Vereesa’s exposed skin. It flared to life in a brilliant spark of white-hot energy that Vereesa immediately devoured and unleashed in an arcane torrent that flung the n’raqi back down the steps, crashing into the swarm of k’thir right on it’s heels. Vereesa snatched her bow up and with a vicious cry, fired an arrow that slid sickenly home somewhere underneath the n’qari’s left eye.

“Go! I’ll stall them!” Jaina shouted, and sent a jolt of frozen energy into the stone itself. The ice ripped through the catacombs as it raced towards the oncoming tide, and as frost met flesh, the k’thir were trapped as the ice snagged against their skin, holding fast. It wouldn’t last long.

Vereesa obeyed by rushing past Jaina up the last of the steps nodded, lowering her bow as to ease her trek through the quagmire that threatened to trap them if they lingered there too long. She looked back down the stairs as Jaina rushed to meet her.

A shadow fell over the ranger as she reached a hand to help Jaina’s ascent through the rising waters. A flash of brilliant white-hot magic stung Jaina’s eyes - night-blinding her as the darkness was banished in a heartbeat.

“For the Light!” Jaina’s gaze darted immediately up at the shout, and on instinct, she snapped her fingers and commanded time to warp around them.

It gave Vereesa the precious seconds needed to avoid evisceration, but not enough time to dodge the incoming strike entirely. Broken Horn’s axe swung high as it followed the arc of his attack, and as the blade gleamed underneath the dozen of magelight orbs both sides had thrown out to illuminate the battlefield, Jaina watched as something dark and utterly precious splashed out with it.

“No!” She cried.

Already, so soon - too soon - time was threatening to snap back. Jaina watched Broken Horn adjust his grip on the axe, the powerful weapon angled for a second strike that would easily cleave Vereesa in two.

Jaina chilled the ice in her veins to grant her just that little bit more as she threw herself forward into a second blink that brought her teetering on the edge of the stairs, still too far away to do anything but watch as a strange mist began to coalesce between the snarling Lightforged and Vereesa.

As that axe descended, Sylvanas took solid form.

Sylvanas grunted as the axe sunk into the meat of her shoulder, and fell to one knee with the weight of the blow. The dirt squelched underneath her as she struggled to keep upright, and the horrible splintering of bone was a sound Jaina wouldn’t forget for a long while. Darkness shrouded her features, her expression lost to the shadow save for the burning hatred that blazed in her eyes.

Vereesa stumbled backward, both from Sylvanas’ sudden arrival, and from the momentum of the attack itself. Her tabard was torn, revealing the gruesome drive of the broken chainmail up and into the soft flesh of her abdomen. The leather underneath was tattered, falling apart as the ranger pressed a disbelieving hand to her stomach.

Jaina surged forward. She gathered up the long, torn strips of Vereesa’s tabard and pressed them
tight over Vereesa’s own hands, over that gaping wound. Dark, vibrant blood bloomed over Vereesa’s skin which was so pale now. It spilled past that first fumbling press of the tabard, seemingly ignoring Jaina’s attempt to staunch the bleeding.

Jaina braced herself for the banshee’s scream, head ducked against her shoulder to protect one of her ears from the sonic deafening to come.

A second slipped by in silence.

She risked a look up. Sylvanas was halfway mist, black shadows bleeding from the wound and snaking up the axe handle. Her fingers were talons, jagged things that easily burrowed through the small gaps in Broken Horn’s armor, bypassing the solid war-plate as if the Lightforged wore nothing more than smoke.

It took Jaina a moment to realize what Sylvanas was about to do.

“No,” she couldn’t risk pulling her hands away from Vereesa. Sylvanas knew that. Damn it, of course she knew that - that’s why she was about to go and do something so stupid. “Sylvanas, you can’t -”

“- Proudmoore -”

“- you don’t have the reserves left -”

“- Proudmoore -”

“- you possess him and you’ll die - “

“Jaina.” Sylvanas’ glance back to her was too casual for what her last words were about to be. “You need to get Little Moon out of here,” her voice was too gentle underneath that terrifying hood of darkness, like they were exchanging pleasantries over tea.

Not to mention, Broken Horn’s gurgled surprise as Sylvanas’ hand reached its mark deep within the Lightforged’s chest. Softly, along the distant edge of Jaina’s hearing, a wet crunch registered just before the warrior sputtered and splashed silver ichor over the three of them.

Down the ridge behind him, the three other Lightforged had extracted themselves from the k’thir and were now making their way up the path. Any secret of who awaited them there was lost when the nearest one, a lithe draenei woman, shouted and bolted into a sprint.

Sylvanas lost the last shred of her corporal form as she sneered down on Broken Horn’s death throes.

Vereesa squirmed underneath Jaina’s hands, irrationally fighting against the pressure that currently prevented her from bleeding out.

The female Lightforged crested the hill, her weapon flaring as she called the Light to draw around the steel.

Time threatened to break at any moment.

“I’m getting you both out of here.”

With that promise, Jaina ripped away her twenty years worth of training and control. Every lesson she’d taken to heart about balance and keeping the raw current of arcane in check disappeared as
she reached out not only to the ley-lines of her homeland, but beyond, to the cresting waves and churning tide. The pressure behind her eyes pounded against her skull as the arcane flared in her, eagerly escaping the bonds it’d long been trapped within - and then she reached for even more; drawing so much into her that every scrape, every scratch and bruise along her body gleamed with azure power as her body threatened to break apart underneath the stress.

The female warrior raised her blade high. Behind her, her compatriots were right at her heels, their weapons still dripping purple from their last battle. The droplets hovered in the air as time wobbled.

Jaina’s entire body was an electric current, her nerve endings firing non-stop as she reached for the temporal energy that she could taste in the air around them. She drew that into her, coiling it tight over the rest of the power that struggled in the cage of her body. Her heart thundered against her ribs, slamming so fast that she was losing her breath. Her head threatened to split open from the pain. Her palms steamed arcane as her reserves spilled over.

She waited. Just for a heartbeat longer. Just long enough that the last of the Lightforged was right at the precipice with them.

Then energy exploded around her, flashing white-hot and leaving an after-image burned onto her retinas. The wave rippled through Sylvanas, her ethereal nature wavering as the arcane blast nearly stole her along with it. It slammed into Broken Horn, throwing him back like a rag doll against the arrival of his allies. It struck them as well - and though they braced - and Jaina watched as one of them attempted to resist - giving birth to a divine shield that sputtered vainly in the wake of the explosion, ripping apart to become a part of the very destruction it had tried to guard against. There was nothing for them to do but allow themselves to be washed away or stand and be burned in the corona of arcane power.

As she released the temporal energy, the world seemed to lurch into motion, then sped up until every action and every thought was a slice of reality stitched one-after-another in a disorienting strobe.

Sylvanas crumpled into her physical form.

Vereesa writhed, her blood too warm against Jaina’s hands.

The rock beneath them cracked open.

The ley lines itched at the very edge of Jaina’s consciousness.

Jaina shouted a word of power, her body brimming with energy. Time flowed back into the hollow space where she’d thieved from it - and in that ripple of space, Jaina managed to follow the ley-lines back until she could so easily picture her workshop in her mind, with the staff of Antonidas serving as the lighthouse to guide her.

She snagged Sylvanas’ arm, fingers snug against the woman’s skin, just as the teleportation magic stole them away.

***

There was so much blood. Why was there so much blood?

It bubbled up in the most horrific manner beneath her palms. Jaina clasped her hands, one over the other, tightly over the torn cloth from her cloak, but even as her fingers went numb from the force, she watched scarlet wick out until the entire piece of fabric was soaked through with it.
“Come on, come on,” she muttered, and willed ice down through her palms to constrict the major vessel that must have been nicked. She leaned over her palms, her hair falling down into her face as she repeated the cooling spell again, then again.

She couldn’t even spare the risk to glance over to where Sylvanas laid. The banshee was still - too still for Jaina’s liking.

Somewhere, she heard the clang of a door flying open and the thundering of boots. Somewhere, she distinctly heard her mother shouting her name. Light flooded into the workshop, spilling over Jaina.

“Mom,” she risked, breaking both her concentration and her incantation just long enough to dare a glance up toward Katherine. She watched as Katherine knelt on the opposite side of Vereesa. A broken half-sob escaped Jaina as Katherine set her hands over her daughter’s. “Help them,” help me, “please.”

Katherine shushed her gently. “Whatever you need, Jaina.”

Jaina’s eyes were hot with unshed tears. She would not cry. She couldn’t waste the energy on it when Vereesa was bleeding out. She ducked her head back to her task. “I …” she stopped, hesitating. She looked back to where Sylvanas was, then up to her mother. “Vereesa, see to Vereesa. Please.” Katherine nodded, and as Jaina slipped her hands away, Katherine took over, pausing only to untie her cravat and set it over the stained cloth.

Jaina stared at the action.

“I don’t want to risk breaking a clot,” Katherine explained. As her mother knelt into position, the scent of the ocean drifted into the room. Underneath Katherine’s hands, a soft blue glow emanated as she began to croon a song that called the sailors home to rest.

Jaina stumbled over her words. “That’s not - I was - “ she dropped the matter and turned instead to Sylvanas. Here, there was less red, but the lack of the color didn’t set Jaina’s mind at ease. She remembered well enough from the ettin’s brutal slam that Sylvanas didn’t bleed.

Broken Horn’s axe had caught somewhere between Sylvanas’ collarbone and her ribcage. The weapon had torn away to the side, taking much of Sylvanas’ right shoulder away with it. If she’d been alive - she would have never survived such an injury. As it was now…

Jaina hauled Sylvanas up and into her lap, her fingers smoothing over Sylvanas’ cheek as she checked for breath that only seconds later she recalled Sylvanas wouldn’t have. Even after being jostled, Sylvanas hadn’t stirred.

“Fetch Brother Pike, now,” Katherine commanded, her song halting for a second. A backlit guard at the doorway turned heel and rushed out.

Jaina kept staring down at the mess. Her mind stuttered to a halt because what could she do? She wasn’t an alchemist, hells, she wasn’t a healer at all. The only magic that flowed through her veins was connected to the salt of the ocean, or the unyielding demand of the arcane.

Sylvanas needed …

“Jaina?” Katherine called tentatively.

Jaina didn’t respond. She was too busy noticing the odd angle that Sylvanas’ head fell to whenever Jaina removed her hand. She was too busy staring in horror at the gaping wound that exposed
shattered bone; the sharp jut of ribs bent inward and piercing into tissues that would have spelt death for any one of the living. She was too busy prying Sylvanas’ eyes open with trembling fingers and feeling dread at the dull luster she found there.

Jaina struggled and sent out an invasive spell meant to dispel any offensive magics she encountered. It burrowed into the banshee, deeper and deeper as Jaina sought any flicker of life - anything that meant Sylvanas hadn’t truly died.

*There*…

She felt that strange brush of cold command and the heady ozone. She thought of that raging storm out over the water. “There you are,” she cooed, rocking as a powerful sense of relief flooded into her. Her fingertips were featherlight as she stroked the sharp angle of Sylvanas’ jaw.

She was still there.

Jaina paused. The racing thoughts in her mind slowed down as she started to think.

“*Are you still able to eat?*”

“*With a dash of necromantic draining, yes, I suppose.*”

Necromantic entropy. The stark white of Sylvanas’ bone healed within several days and without the use of salves, potions, or other magical remedies.

“*It’s an elemental conduit.*”

Jaina shook herself out of her thoughts. She had an idea. That tingle of curiosity was dancing madly at the nape of her neck and she had absolutely no idea if it could even work, but what other option did she have here?

She summoned a small frost lance to her hand and brought the spike up to her mouth. Carefully, as to not mis-scribe, she dug the runic pattern from the mountaintop over her closed lips. The shock of cold numbed much of the pain of her lips splitting underneath the shard of ice. Jaina felt pinpricks of blood bead up only to freeze.

Then, underneath Katherine’s scrutinizing gaze, she repeated the same rune over Sylvanas’ mouth as she followed the design they’d helped to repair only a day before. She cursed as her hand started to tremble, and every second she had to take to still her movements so the rune wasn’t lost was a second that she risked Sylvanas’ spirit fading.

“Vereessa was going to be fine,” she muttered. “You didn’t have to go playing the martyr.” That wasn’t true. Jaina could still vividly picture the gaping maw along Vereesa’s abdomen and if the broken shambles of Sylvanas’ chest were any indication of the strike Vereesa would have taken, then Sylvanas’ actions had spared her sister a vicious death.

“What are you doing?” Katherine asked, her voice oddly calm for someone watching their daughter reverently trace a glyph over the lips of a very dangerous enemy. She didn’t interrupt, didn’t object as Jaina pressed just hard enough that the skin beneath the ice broke away.

Jaina set the lance off to the side. It clattered as it struck the floor, and shattered into pieces, the shards glittering as they scattered around the women. “Honestly? I have absolutely no idea.”

She took in a deep breath. Leaned forward. Tipped Sylvanas’ chin gently so that their runes would align. With the taste of copper on her lips, Jaina brought their mouths together and exhaled.
Truth be told, looking back on the moment itself, Jaina wasn’t sure what she’d expected. She’d been prepared for about anything the combination of magical schools of theory and practice could throw at her - she’d braced herself for the icy drain of necromantic energy to a vicious jolt of arcane.

Jaina supposed she should have prepared herself for lack of any response at all.

Sylvanas’ lips were cold against her own. They were dry, chapped by the angry winds that whipped around the Sound. Her body laid limp in Jaina’s arms, her limbs slack around the secure hold Jaina braced her in.

Jaina pulled back and stared down at her failure. She didn’t know how to react - didn’t know what to do now that her last-minute gambit had fizzled without even a spark.

“Jaina,” Katherine’s voice was an anchor that Jaina immediately latched onto, and she lifted her head to meet her mother’s steel-eyed gaze. Jaina didn’t understand - what with every perfect reason her mother would have to condemn Jaina’s attempt to save the woman who single-handedly orchestrated much of the grief Kul Tiras experienced over the past few years. Katherine shifted so that she could retain a gentle, steady pressure over Vereesa’s abdomen while granting herself a proper view of the injuries the banshee sustained. “What are you trying to do?”

“I can explain everything later -”

“Jaina.”

“I can’t let her die, Mom.”

Katherine nodded like Jaina had given her an answer she already expected. “Jaina, what are you attempting to do - spell-wise.” Her voice remained calm, and Jaina drew on that stillness to settle the rising, fluttering panic in her chest.

“I - transmutation. There was an ancient troll glyph that served as the - served as the uh,” Jaina ripped her gaze away from the broken halves of Sylvanas’ chest. “The fulcrum of a spell that transformed the power of the wind into raw, arcane energy that could travel along ley-lines.” Right. Focus on theory and explanations. Those were easier to parse through. Slowly, her mind dropped back from the edge of panic as training kicked in.

Katherine returned to her task when Jaina nodded to her. Faintly, like a memory, Jaina could smell the crisp cut of an ocean breeze, the way the wind steals that first breath away; over Vereesa’s pale skin, there was a translucent film that stretched taut along the open wound edges.

With the steps of academic thought, Jaina ducked back to Sylvanas and opened her body to the current of magic within the workspace. Jaina extended her reach out into the workshop, coiling the
loose mana around her bones as she drew it back into her body, and then allowed it to bubble up, spill up and into her very breath. Her mouth went numb from the cold, and her head throbbed with the building pressure. She collected more, and more, then leaned down to Sylvanas again, breathing out the arcane and forcing it into the banshee’s body.

She quieted her thoughts - soothed the nerves until she could only hear the gentle rush of her pulse, the soft sigh as Katherine adjusted her knees. She reached beyond the workshop, following down that previous inquiry until she was seeking out the magic within Sylvanas, chasing after that vibrant, red pulse.

I felt you, she thought furiously, I know you’re there. Take it!

At first. Nothing. Dread seized Jaina’s gut. She was too late; there was just too much damage. She went to pull away, to gasp down a third breath when a hand snagged her wrist and locked her in place.

Slow, as careful as a young bird taking their first flight, she felt a response. A puff of air brushed against Jaina’s lips that wasn’t her own. A soft, tentative query as that hand slid down from Jaina’s wrist to cup along her elbow to draw her closer.

Jaina watched Sylvanas’ eyes flutter open and the terrible crimson fire of her spirit flicker into existence. They were unfocused for just a moment, then locked her within their haunting stare.

The smile that bloomed along Jaina’s lips hurt her cheeks, but she didn’t care.

“Insufferable banshee.”

Even though Sylvanas’ laugh was barely audible, the noise was music to Jaina’s ears. She blinked slowly, visibly collecting her bearings before she turned her head. Her ears pricked forward, and her brow furrowed with a question. “Vereesa?”

Katherine did not look up from her work. “She’s not lost at sea just yet,” she answered. Jaina glanced over to her mother and noted the sweat at her brow and the faint tremble of her hands as she kept them still over the agonizingly-slow healing.

Sylvanas froze at the voice, and her gaze flickered to Jaina’s. Indecision flashed through her eyes before the emotion faded out into sheer exhaustion. She slumped back, heavy against Jaina’s thighs. “Good.”

Jaina didn’t dare move. She just kept still and kept staring down at Sylvanas. Suddenly, she found it hard to break her gaze away.

Suddenly quite a few things were happening at once.

Vereesa stirred, a simple tilt of her head - the gentle furrowing of her brow as pain registered in her awakening consciousness. That led to the immediate removal of one banshee in Jaina’s lap as Sylvanas unsteadily maneuvered herself to Vereesa’s free side. Sylvanas gently scooped up Vereesa’s hand in her own and leaned over her until she and Katherine were nearly shoulder to shoulder.

Sylvanas didn’t seem to notice as she called her sister out of the dredges of unconsciousness. Katherine, however, did. Jaina watched her mother pin an unwavering stare upon Sylvanas’ profile, her expression ironclad and smoothed to unnatural neutrality as she paused in the mending for the sister’s reunion.
There was a quick knock at the door, then the sound of the lock as an attending guard from outside swung it open to allow Brother Pike in. The time at war and the unrecoverable loss of his order had grizzled the veteran Tidesage well beyond his years. Barely older than Jaina’s father, he looked as if he’d walked the world as long as an elf - and without their carefree youth to bolster his steps.

“Lord Admiral,” thought gruff, Jaina heard the exertion in his voice. “Lady Katherine.”

Katherine broke her stare to acknowledge Brother Pike with nary a flicker of attention before she started to move and allow the Tidesage to take her place where she knelt. As she straightened, she winced but made no further complaint of the time spent with her knees against the cold stone of the floor.

Brother Pike knelt into place and assessed what her mother had done. The rush of the tides as he called upon his magic brought the scent of surf and storm into the room. Jaina took a moment to tilt her head up into the breeze and take that second of comfort for herself.

Katherine, despite the cold stare she kept affixing upon Sylvanas, had moved to study the scattered scrolls and the lone book that served as the loot they’d dragged from the monastery bowels. “Do I even want to know?”

Jaina wiped the back of a hand against her brow. “Probably not.”

Katherine grunted and proceeded to collect them in a more suitable traveling arrangement. “Your friend is a bit beyond what the Tide can heal without being immersed in water -”

“Where do we need to take her?” Sylvanas cut in, her gaze lifting to meet Katherine’s.

Katherine paused, her fingers hovering over one of the last scrolls. Then, as if she just realized who exactly Sylvanas was, she turned to face the banshee fully. “You are the Warchief.”

Oh no. Jaina started to stand, but Sylvanas gestured for her to stay still. She carefully set Vereesa’s hand back down, and absently tucked a strand of matted silver hair from her sister’s temple before she rose to meet Katherine’s height, and then some.

Yet, her height wasn’t being leveraged for intimidation at the moment. Sylvanas stood loose-limbed and with her palms extended out in peace. “I am.” She paused, and a self-derisive smirk curled along her lips before it left, “Or rather, I was the Warchief.”

“You were the one who ordered the Horde to dredge my son’s body from the ocean.”

Sylvanas nodded. “I also ordered him Risen.”

Not helping! Jaina thought.

“It was the quickest way I could dismantle the strength of Kul Tiras from within,” Sylvanas continued, and Jaina briefly entertained the notion that the banshee was suicidal. She’d brought her back with her mind addled.

Katherine’s eyes narrowed, and in the dim light of the workshop, the lingering glow of the Tides in her gaze left Jaina unnerved and unsure of her mother’s next move. Or what madness had taken over Sylvanas.

“You forced me to choose between my children,” Katherine said, finally.

Sylvanas inclined her head.
Katherine took a step forward. “Now here you are, and it seems I’ve another choice ahead of me.”

Sylvanas opened her mouth but said nothing. She inclined her head a second time, “It seems you do.”

Jaina held her breath.

For his part, Brother Pike had lit one of his sea-lanterns and had set it near Vereesa. The eerie, low light rippled along the elven woman’s too-pale skin like they were near the shore. He focused on his task.

Katherine took another step forward. She was close enough to strike Sylvanas if she so chose to do so. Instead, Jaina’s mother stared pointedly at the horrific damage that sliced through the upper half of Sylvanas’ torso. Katherine took in the exposed ribs, the shredded musculature that looked more like withered leather than the vibrant powerhouse that would support the feats of archery the banshee was known for. There was an odd charing along the bone, now that Jaina had a different angle to look.

The high, piercing clang of the alarms cracked through the room. As one, Sylvanas, Katherine, and Jaina moved to the window to gauge where the noise originated.

“There,” Sylvanas pointed.

Mariner’s Row was ablaze, and even from this distance, Jaina could make out the hulking shape of one of the giant Faceless as it sludged out of the water. Around it, darker forms scattered as they poured onto the shore and surged into the few defenders.

Flashes of brilliant-white light illuminated the alleyways, suggesting that the Lightforged were already there at the head of the battle lines.

Jaina’s fists curled tight enough that her knuckle popped. Sylvanas glanced down at the noise, then back towards the distant trouble.

Katherine looked back to the scrolls she’d previously collected.

“Mother, I --”

“I don’t want to hear it, Jaina.” Katherine’s voice was strained, and she struggled with something internal. “We’ll keep Vereesa safe until she’s healed but you…” she paused and took in a steadying breath. “You need to go.”

Jaina balked. Was she being banished? “I can help.”

Katherine shook her head. “You need to get … this woman out of the city before the coastal defenses are activated.” She pointedly did not look at Sylvanas.

“What?”

Katherine sighed as if Jaina was missing the obvious. Perhaps she was. “You obviously want her to live.”

Jaina didn’t understand what that had to do with defending Boralus from whatever abyssal invasion the Lightforged had wrought from underneath the monastery. Her confusion must have been apparent over her features, because Katherine smiled, and it was at once both sympathetic and sad.
“Mom?”

Katherine brought Jaina away from the window and stood before her not unlike when Jaina had first come to Boralus, or when she’d heard her mother’s voice in the depths of Thros. Both times, Jaina had dreaded what her mother would say, and right now? She didn’t feel any different.

“I don’t trust her, Jaina,” Katherine said.

Jaina bowed her head and tried to think of any protest she could form. A touch to her chin had her glance back up.

“I trust you, though.” Katherine cupped Jaina’s chin, and that smile wavered just long enough for Jaina to understand exactly the risk Katherine believed she was undertaking. “So go, complete whatever it is that has you so preoccupied.”

“But Boralus?”

Sylvanas answered that one for her. “I don’t think the trouble will sneak past the dock district.”

Jaina didn’t know how to reply to her mother’s request. There was a terrible sensation gnawing in Jaina’s gut that if she left, she would never see her again. But instead of further protest, she merely threw her arms about her mother’s shoulders and held on tight. She tried to impress the memory of that hug deep into the grooves of her mind.

Tides help her, but her mother seemed to be doing the same. Katherine’s arms were iron about Jaina and held her tight enough that Jaina struggled with taking a deeper breath.

Soon, too soon, Katherine pulled back and smoothed the crinkled fabric of Jaina’s cloak. She straightened the buckle, and then touched the Kul Tiran amulet gently as it rested against the hollow of Jaina’s throat.

Katherine turned to Sylvanas. “Be worthy of her,” is all she said before she took several steps back.

Sylvanas jerked at the subtle command but remained silent. The look on her face was contemplative as she watched Jaina collect the Storm Staff from the central dais.

Even through the material of her gloves, the thrum of electric energy sizzled from the staff into her palm and rejuvenated Jaina.

She turned as Katherine handed her the weathered satchel and scroll cases, and tried to offer her mother encouragement with a smile that she knew didn’t reach her eyes.

Katherine tried to smile back, then at the last moment, ducked forward to brush a kiss over Jaina’s temple. Jaina tried not to react to the crack in her mother’s voice. “Go.”

Tides help her, she did.

With a pull at the strings of magic, Jaina snagged the frayed edges of space and time and dragged them together. With luck, she’d have yanked her and Sylvanas westward, toward the places of power in Drustvar that resonated as bright pinpricks of light along the leylines that stretched throughout the isles. Intricate arcane runes flashed to life over her skin and danced upon Sylvanas as well.

The world collapsed in around them, and then they were gone.
In the space between two heartbeats, the comforting interior of Jaina’s workshop was replaced by the crackling heat of a nearby bonfire, and the stench of wet, sickly flesh and the rot of vegetation.

This wasn’t Drustvar.

Jaina’s eyes widened. Arcane gathered in her hands as she pulled at the leylines again. The delicate sigils flared along her skin. She released the spell in a violent burst of energy and found herself --

Exactly where she now stood.

“You see?” Calia's voice was syrup. “She was going to leave.”

Jaina slowly turned and released the arcane only to replace it with the beginnings of a frost spell. Ice flurried around her hand as she came face to face with not only three of the Lightforged she’d encountered down in the depths of the archives, but with her brother and Calia as well. Behind them was a veritable wall of infantrymen. Some faced down the enemy from the enclosed bay, their pikes and longswords a steady defense against the encroaching abyssal creatures.

Others were spun to face her, their eyes white from exhaustion and terror. Confusion scrawled over their various features as they tried to understand why their Lord Admiral was bound within a confinement rune.

An uncanny stillness settled over the scene.

Sylvanas was nowhere to be found.

Jaina supposed that was for the best, honestly.

Tandred strode out from the crowd, dusted with soot and awash in the grime that came with battling on the muck of the shoreline. He sheathed his sword as he approached, and his expression morphed into something akin to heartbreak, or betrayal.

His gaze immediately dropped to the satchel she carried, and when he sighed, it was with the weight of someone uncomfortable with the weight of what they were about to do. “Jaina …”

Even her name was spoken with a heaviness to it; like she was a child being scolded for having their hand caught in the cookie jar.

She stiffened, indignation igniting in her veins. He had no right to talk. That frost remained coiled about her glove as he continued to advance on her. She wondered if he was trying to channel the legacy of their father in the squareness of his shoulders, and the solemn furrow of his brow; but all she saw was the little brother who once tagged along after her as she went down to the docks to learn at their father’s side.

Calia followed in Tandred’s wake, visible over her brother’s shoulder as she approached Jaina at a more leisurely pace. She had the air of someone who already knew how the scene was going to play out.

Jaina nearly hurled the frost lance just because of that look.

“Before you dive into your lecture, Tandred, ask yourself why the Lightforged were already conveniently on patrol exactly where the k’thir appeared.” It was a futile attempt at swinging his - and the public’s opinion on her side, but Jaina had to try.

“How did you know it was the k’thir that plagued us? I did not send a runner to the Keep.”
“I’ve fought them before, and I know their magic.”

Tandred didn’t believe her, it was evident in the way his stance shifted, and his stare remained fixed. “Or you were aware of the k’thir before this attack.”

Jaina’s heart leapt into her throat. He couldn’t be implying that she had - no. Tandred might have disagreements with the Tidesages or her stance about Kul Tiras’ culture remaining distinctly untouched by mainland beliefs, but he was her brother. They disagreed, but that ensured their decisions were made with reasons and support behind them, and not the sycophancy of familial authority.

He was her brother, and Jaina knew that if she spoke the truth, he’d understand.

He had to understand.

Her gaze skittered around the periphery. Where had Sylvanas gone to? Had the banshee teleported along with her?

Dread clutched at her heart with cold fingers. Had Sylvanas gone elsewhere? After all, Jaina’d been redirected here - brought forth like a misbehaving apprentice. Or had she disappeared, leaving Jaina to the whims of the crowd? Jaina supposed she couldn’t blame the elven woman; after all, Sylvanas had made no promises to Jaina - and she’d even left during their monastery excursion.

But she came back, she thought, a spark of hope igniting only to be doused quickly as a part of her traitorously reminded her that Sylvanas had returned for Vereesa, and Vereesa was safe now.

“Jaina?”

Jaina snapped back to the present. “Yes, I was down in the monastery when the k’thir were summoned,” she revealed and noted the gasps of some of the infantry behind Calia and Tandred. She also noted the subtle narrowing of Calia’s eyes. “The k’thir were summoned to Kul Tiras by the Lightforged.”

“Impossible!” Tandred snapped. Calia said nothing. “The Lightforged are our allies and the saviors of the Blood War. I don’t know what game you’re playing, Jaina but --”

“But nothing! Ask yourself who benefits most from the k’thir swooping in, Tandred? Who suddenly has a moral prerogative to suddenly declare martial law and lend their might back to Kul Tiran tactics?” Jaina glared over his shoulder to Caila as she suddenly realized what the plan had been.

“… Kul Tiras has resisted the proselytizing of the Light since the Legion assaults - Stormsong might have damaged the reputation of his House, but you couldn’t wash away the ocean in our veins unless you could prove that it wasn’t a one-time problem. A corrupt lord comes along every decade. A House of Nobles can be forgiven, but --”

“I knew I should have examined you myself in Dalaran,” Calia jumped in, and her voice carried with a magical enhancement that drowned out the rest of Jaina’s revelation. “Ever since your exposure to the Void thanks to the carelessness of the ren’dorei, you’ve been … troubled, Jaina.”

Jaina scowled, “You have no idea what you’re talking about?”

“Don’t I?” Calia tilted her head; her voice going almost-sickeningly sweet. “You attacked two Paladins on the streets outside the Legerdemain Inn unprovoked,” she set her staff at an angle to balance against as she ticked off her observations on her fingers. “You were trapped for an
indeterminate amount of time with an actual abyssal entity without any precautions.”

“It wasn’t that long.” Jaina cut in.

Cali’s responding smile chilled her, “But you’re not sure, are you?”

Jaina balked. It’s true that she hadn’t paid too much attention to the actual time - after all, she’d gone right back into dealing with the negotiations and her translation project. Even without the blip of statis, she often had time run away from her while she worked.

At Jaina’s hesitation, Calia smile turned sharp and dangerous. There was a hard glint in the liquid gold of her gaze. “Then that period of isolation, and of course, you disappeared.”

“Priestess Swiftarrow checked me out,” how in the Tides had Jaina found herself on the backfoot?

A small commotion beyond the backline of infantry caught her attention. One of the k’thir collapsed, untouched by the pikemen who stood as a steady bulwark against their swarm. It became desiccated, flesh drawn tight into crinkled sheets of dried skin.

“The Priestess Swiftarrow is well known for her associations with the Void.”

“Swiftarrow has a personal commendation from Turalyon and the Lightforged thanking her for her sacrifices on Argus,” Jaina countered. “If you can’t trust the judgment of your own High Exarch -”

Cali waved a hand, dismissing the argument. “You need to be seen, Jaina. I - no, we’re,” she gestured to Tandred, who stood off to the side, his shoulders squared off against her. It was clear that if sides were to be drawn, he’d already picked his. “We’re worried about you.”

“I’m sure.” The frost had never left Jaina’s hand, and now it crept up like a glove around her wrist.

Another k’thir dropped, twisting in an invisible wind. It buckled against the spear wall, slumped over in death.

Tandred looked between them. Jaina’s heart lifted momentarily. Was that doubt in his eyes?

“Jaina, let Calia look you over. If you’re truly untainted - truly untouched by the madness of the Deep, then we can look into your accusation. It … isn’t unheard of for commanders to be unaware of plots hatched beneath their noses.”

The Lightforged that weren’t engaged in the mop-up of the k’thir turned to Tandred with a sharpness to their glares, but Calia only watched for Jaina’s reaction. And her smile - that smile grew as wicked sharp as any blade she could have drawn.

As Jaina’s countrymen waited for Jaina’s response, Jaina realized that Tandred had undoubtedly backed her into a corner unintentionally. Without a doubt, Jaina knew that agreeing to allow Calia to ‘assess’ her would be disastrous. Swiftarrow had asked her consent before exploring through Jaina’s memories. Jaina firmly believed that whatever loyalty she could request of their former friendship would not protect Jaina’s innermost thoughts from the priestess’ perusal.

As seconds ticked by without her answering, either way, Tandred’s face fell, and Calia, well, Calia knew this battle had gone in her favor.

“FALL BACK!”

The alarm rang through the bulwark as the line of infantry collapsed in the middle as the N’qiu
surged forward. Like a wave, the soldiers rippled to accommodate the sudden loss of their center, and even the Lightforged turned back around to support the crumbling front.

Jaina, already hypersensitive to the residual magic in the air, froze as she heard the soft, controlled whispers of a cold command buried deep within the explosive dominance of divine energy as the Lightforged joined the fray.

Tandred turned, and barked at a soldier who stumbled back from the lines, and rushed to join his companions against the renewed assault.

Even Calia turned to locate the source of a terrible scream, the sound wet and violent in the middle of the battle. Holy energy flared to life around her hands as she reached up towards the heavens to pull down restorative magic onto the field.

A tiny bat zoomed by, seemingly dazed by the flash of bright light, and ducked into the safety of a closed alleyway.

_Run_, Jaina’s mind whispered.

No. That wasn’t her voice.

RUN. NOW.

Ice shattered around her feet as Jaina dismissed the frostbolt for another spell. Her fingers danced in the air as she wove out a new pattern, one designed to have an onlooker’s eyes slide off of her.

The air shimmered with a faintly violet hue as the invisibility spell completed. Jaina’s spellweaving didn’t end there. She counted on whatever wards the Lightforged had built to entrap her would draw their attention back.

Sure enough, she noticed Calia pause and sent a questioning glance back towards her, and that’s when Jaina unleashed three mirror images that stared back at Caila, then bolted - each of them in a different direction.

“Retrieve her!” Calia shouted, turning about to deal with the complication that Jaina threw in her way. She outstretched a hand, and Jaina could feel the tendrils of purification snake past her to catch onto the fringes of one of the illusions. It unraveled into violet spellthreads that drifted away on the wind.

Jaina waited, holding her breath, then risked moving in the direction of that dispelled image. She walked, counting down in her mind how much longer she had until she couldn’t keep the invisibility up any longer. Every step, she expected to be revealed - but in the chaos of the fight, quick reaction was taking over cold logic.

She made it to the shadow of an overhanging roof and ducked behind the pillar just as the illusion slipped from her skin. She couldn’t teleport, and she expected them to have the exits from Mariner’s Row on lockdown.

And by now, the defensive wards around the harbor would have fully activated, serving as homing beacons for any magical interference within the city limits to assist the guard in locating and coordinating defenses. It had proved invaluable during the Horde’s final push into the Sound, and at the time Jaina had been proud of her creation - but now? Now it only crippled her options.

Well, she’d always done her best work under pressure.
Jaina worked another rune into the air, and with a jolt of arcane pushed another three illusions into existence. Those she sent towards the water, and towards the southern gateway, and on each of them she set a trigger - that when Caila purified the spell, it would cause another explosion of energy - and even more illusions to break away.

Jaina ducked into the darkness of the building behind her and took the precious seconds she’d earned to unbuckle the mantle of the Lord Admiral, letting the pauldron and the heavier gauntlets fall at her feet. She tucked her cloak tighter even as she loosened the ties of her bodice to give her lungs more room to expand - allow her arms that much more freedom.

Let them chase the mage while the woman escaped.

She moved along the wall, quiet as a mouse, as several soldiers darted past. They shouted when they spotted the fleeting image of her cloak disappearing towards the docks, and their pursuit kicked up further dust and smoke as they rushed by.

Jaina turned to snag onto one of the dangling rope nets, used to both display and dry off tools of a fisherman’s trade down here in the Row. The net creaked dangerously as she tested her weight on it, but it held firm.

Slowly, she pulled herself up onto the second story, hoisting over the edge just as the battle spilled into the street she’d ducked into.

She didn’t stop there but hurried along the rooftops with the muscle memory that any child of Kul Tiras developed. The smaller jumps between houses came quickly to her, and she paced herself along with the bobbing torches of the soldiers in the streets below.

The pulse of her illusionary sacrifices tingled along her skin and kept Caila’s position constantly on her mind as Jaina maneuvered deeper into Boralus, towards the high, impressive sea-gate. Her lungs burned in her chest, and her calves ached from the constant running, but she kept moving forward and upward.

Jaina hadn’t climbed anything since she’d lived in Dalaran, so she struggled as she went from her rooftop path towards the high, defensive walls. Centuries of exposure to the biting winds and salt-waters had eroded the stone’s once-smooth edifice enough that there were several places Jaina could hoist herself up onto.

The climb quickly sapped what little reserves of strength she had, and every pull upward left her panting hard and terrified that her grip would give out on her.

“Shit!” She misjudged a higher handhold, and the threatened fall sent her heart up into her throat as she caught herself on a lower ledge. She clung to her position for a few terrifying seconds, her eyes closed tight and her body trembling with the effort.

The tiny bat darted into view, offering up a little squeal that drew Jaina’s attention down toward the water.

There was one small skiff on the waves, steadily holding a position as the turbulence from the shoreline battle rocked against its hull.

The lone figure within it, a narrow-shouldered guard, stared directly up at her. The very same narrow-shouldered guard that had caused the center to fall apart.

She froze, but the bat continued to circle about that direction, offering up squeals that carried too high-pitched for Jaina to hear.
Jaina stared up at the length of the wall that she still had to climb. Once up there, she could make her way north toward the Trade district and locate a horse or a gryphon.

The bat squealed again and drew back her attention to the skiff out on the dark waters.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she complained, glaring faintly at the bat, and took another look up at the height of the gate. As she stared down her climb, her shoulders screamed their protest at any further hauling.

The skiff bobbed in the waters below.

Jaina let go.

Wind rushed past her as she angled down towards the water. She hit the surface hard enough that her lungs lost their volume of air, and when she broke the surface, she coughed against the seawater lodged in her throat. A wave pushed her below the surface again, and she bobbed up into another coughing fit.

She fumbled with an arm, blindly, and felt it hit something solid. Her fingers closed around the end of a pike, and she used that as an anchor to hoist herself towards whatever awaited her on the other side. Something snagged her cloak as she bumped against a hull, and hauled her up and into the boat.

Jaina rolled onto her side and spat water from her lungs, sucking down lungfuls of air. Her entire body shook with the effort, and it wasn’t even a minute before she’d crumpled down with exhaustion.

Streaks of darkness swam over her vision, and Jaina didn’t know how long had passed before she could do anything more than breathe. She heard the gentle lap of water against the hull, and she felt the skiff rock to the waves.

She spied a rope tying the small boat to a rickety dock, the wood long-eaten by time and tide, and covered with the slick green of algae that came with neglect. The soldier was nowhere to be found.

Jaina lifted into a sitting position and stared around at her new surroundings. The rocky shoreline with the scent of smoke on the wind gave her little to go on, and the mist that had crept over the water sometime during her recovery prevented her from seeking out distant landscapes to orient herself.

She turned toward a scuffling noise up on the dock itself and found the soldier being set carefully against the wall of a rotten-wood shed.

Sylvanas cocked her head down at the unconscious man, then turned about to return to the skiff. She paused mid-step when she realized Jaina was staring directly at her. For once, the banshee looked caught off-guard, then carefully made her way back to the boat.

She coughed, and it directed Jaina’s eyes to the pale, closed skin over her shoulder. The open, ugly wound that exposed rib and muscle was gone, replaced by a thin, translucent layer of skin that seemed to gleam when caught underneath a rare stolen beam of moonlight. Sylvanas had managed to heal herself - but when? How?

Jaina looked past the banshee to the soldier, and was it a trick of the mist, or did they seem a little gaunter in the hollows of their cheeks?

“He’s alive,” Sylvanas’ voice was loud in the silence of the night, and jolted Jaina back to notice
her. “I didn’t think you’d be too pleased if I’d caused the deaths of any more of your countrymen.”

Jaina didn’t know how to answer that. She was still struggling with catching up with the events of that night - and that Sylvanas was up and moving and not dead and unnaturally still. She watched the banshee take the final steps toward the skiff. When Sylvanas bent down to untie them from the dock did Jaina finally break free from whatever spell had befallen her.

“Wait.”

Sylvanas stopped and straightened as Jaina climbed out of the boat to stand right before her. She didn’t move as Jaina reached out to smooth her fingers along the broken line of Sylvanas’ leather armor, but she winced in sympathy when that path caught Jaina’s skin against one of the fractured pieces of chainmail.

Jaina didn’t mind the sharp pain, just finished the path of that freshly-closed wound until her hand settled at the nape of Sylvanas’ neck. The position forced her to lift onto her toes and brought them close. Staring directly into Sylvanas’ eyes felt too intense, so Jaina ducked her head forward until their foreheads touched.

“You came back,” she breathed.

Sylvanas shook her head carefully. “I’d never left. I had to ...repair the damage.”

That explained the stumbling k’thir. Jaina eased out another shaky breath and tried to force the adrenaline of the night out of her system. The chill of Sylvanas’ body was refreshing, and the banshee did little to interrupt Jaina’s centering.

They stood like that for a while, until Sylvanas gently pulled away to stare down at her. “We should go before he wakes up.”

As their eyes met, Jaina's heart sped up to flutter against her ribs like a trapped bird. Suddenly, she was suffocating with each breath she took, and the way that Sylvanas' hooded gaze dropped to her chest only made her heartbeat that much more frantic.

"You're shaking," Sylvanas' voice was a questioning whisper, a soft rustle of air against Jaina's cheeks - they were that close now. "Are you afraid?"

No, Jaina thought, the word furiously imprinted on her mind. When she spoke, she found her answer shocking. "I thought you had died."

Sylvanas smiled with a gentle twist to her lips that teased the hint of fangs. "I'm already dead, Proudmoore -"

"Jaina," Jaina cut in. "Please, call me Jaina."

Sylvanas lifted a hand to trace the scars along Jaina's lips with her thumb like she was memorizing the pattern, and perhaps she truly was. Her eyes were intent on the motion, the burning fire behind her pupils illuminating along the banshee's cheeks; almost like she was as flushed as Jaina felt. “As you wish, Jaina.”

Jaina's breath caught in her throat, and her voice hitched as she struggled to find something to say. She failed, and the words died on her tongue.

Sylvanas didn't seem to notice the quiet. Instead, she tilted Jaina's chin up to better study the scars left behind. Her hand was gentle against Jaina's jaw like she was well aware that the mage was as
ready to bolt like a nervous filly.

"I don't know how I feel about this," Sylvanas mused aloud, her thumb still resting against the fullness of Jaina's mouth. "You risked everything you care for, Jaina, and for what?"

Jaina shrugged, and Sylvanas tsked at the lack of an answer. Jaina swallowed, the material of Sylvanas' glove pleasant friction against her lips. "I'm not sure yet."

Sylvanas hummed, and the sound sent a frisson straight down Jaina's spine. She broke their gaze to gesture toward the scroll-cases. "You don't have to come with me to finish this."

Jaina tried to laugh, but it came out more like a squeak. "I know."

Sylvanas glanced back to her, "But you're going to, anyways?" She asked it with the gravitas of someone who already knew the answer Jaina would give. "Foolish mage."

Jaina only offered up a fierce smile in return. A smile that Sylvanas eventually returned as she set her forehead back against Jaina’s. Her hand dropped from Jaina’s chin to settle against the swell of her hip. It was chaste, and yet the touch burned against Jaina’s skin like fire.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this took forever. We can blame a whole lot of work stress, and the inability to push through a rather nasty case of writer's block. My thanks to QuickYoke, ObsidianWarlock, and Raff for all of their encouragement - and to the rest of you who kept up all the good words as well!

Let's get into this end-game, shall we?
A strange shadow swooped over the coastline and drew Jaina’s attention up and towards the sky. She paled when she saw the vessel that hovered over the Bay, and fear trickled down her neck like ice water.

Sylvanas lifted her head, her ears twitching forward as she followed Jaina’s sightline.

“Well now, that is a display I have not seen for quite a time,” Sylvanas shifted, keeping Jaina close with a loose arm at her hip. Her gloves were warming with every second of closeness. “Is this display of force for the farce in Boralus, or because you managed to slip their net, I wonder.”

“Both, probably,” Jaina muttered. Her mind had already shifted to escape routes that could still feasibly work. They’d lost the use of the skiff - it’d be too easily seen without the obscuring magics of a Tidesage. Jaina was well aware that any honest display of power beyond a cantrip would light up her position as bright as any flare over the open waters.

As if Sylvanas was reading her mind, the banshee gently nudged Jaina to meet that smoldering gaze in return. “Do you know how they managed to trap you?”

Halfway through shaking her head, Jaina paused and reconsidered her answer. “I taught Tandred how to manage and maintain control over the magical defenses in case I wasn’t around. I placed a layer of reroutable energy and misdirection on the leyline nexus in and closest to Boralus, though they were designed to divert translocation from the outside back to their origin points and …” she trailed off, realizing that Sylvanas probably wouldn’t want to listen to her prattling on further, however when she drifted off, Sylvanas nudged her again.

“And?” Sylvanas prompted.

Jaina blinked. She wasn’t used to non-mages actively wanting to follow her down theory paths. “And … it is entirely possible to use my arcane signature into the spellweaving so I’m considered a hostile entity attempting to breach through the wards.”

Sylvanas frowned. “How long would that have taken them?”

Jaina hummed lightly in thought. “A day or two? That’s with direct access to the runes that activate the conditions - but they would need someone who’s versed in runework, translocation, and arcane theory.”

Sylvanas returned her focus back to the newly arrived Vindicaar. “Vereesa told me that it appeared like they hadn’t expected you to be here with Tandred when you met Calia at the entrance?”

Jaina nodded.
“Interesting.”

“What are you suggesting?” Jaina pulled away, enough to get a good look at Sylvanas’ expression. The arm at her waist resisted the retreat but allowed her the freedom of movement. “I checked those wards before I went to Dalaran.”

“Then Calia has wanted you as a prize since then,” Sylvanas said with such casual demeanor that it sent a second chill down Jaina's spine. “Even longer, if she’s been courting your brother so.”

Jaina's immediate thought was to protest, to tell Sylvanas she was too paranoid, too overzealous in her distrust with the priestess. However, her recent interactions with Caila prevented her from disagreeing. “What makes me so important to the Lightforged?”

Sylvanas didn’t answer the question. Instead, she lingered there as support for a little while longer; then finally left Jaina entirely to go scour the skiff for what little provisions might have been stowed away. A small cheese-cloth wrapped lunch, a flask, a small tinderbox, and a knife. These, Sylvanas tucked away before she stepped onto dry land where Jaina waited.

“Feel like you can manage a walk?”

Jaina rolled her shoulder and felt the burn in her knees. “Depends on where we’re walking to,” she admitted.

Sylvanas shrugged, already turning to head deeper into the shadow of the trees. “I don’t believe we’ll be quite welcome in the larger towns, and from what little I gleaned during the war, Drustvar is still mostly wild old growth.”

“What would we need in Drustvar? That’s quite a ways to walk, Sylvanas.”

Sylvanas nodded, already several steps ahead of her. “It is.”

Jaina half-jogged to catch up, cursing the banshee’s long-legged stride. “Yes, but why are we walking to Drustvar when there are more parties sympathetic to gold closer?”

Sylvanas sent her a sidelong glance, “We’re a little short on funds right now, and you are currently a disgraced Lord Admiral who would probably fetch a decent gold bounty to conveniently return to the concerned arms of your family.” She slowly, and tilted her head at such an angle that Jaina immediately became suspicious that Sylvanas was actively considering that option.

“Sylvanas, no.”

“What? It should be kept on the table,” Sylvanas pressed.

Jaina glowered.

Sylvanas sighed and conceded the point.

Jaina fell quiet as the ramifications of what happened struck her again. For several minutes, the pair walked the lonely coast into Drustvar without conversation.

It was when the mist rolled off the bay that Sylvanas led them off the open rocks and through a narrow crevice. The sound of falling water caught Jaina’s attention and she paid more attention to the rockface as they navigated the uneven terrain.

“Places of Power,” Sylvanas announced as Jaina scrambled over an unusually large rock to slide
down into place next to the banshee.

“Sorry, what?”

“My reasoning. From the reports I received during the war, Drustvar had several places of power that could easily serve as an anchoring point.”

“I - yes, there are, but they’ll amplify any spellwork I do - and that’s exactly what you want.” Jaina jogged a half-step to catch back up.

“How soon do you think they could respond to such a display?” Sylvanas’ voice was a gentle sing-song, a tone that Jaina now associated with the banshee winding up a clever trick.

Jaina found herself perking up - eager to follow the path Sylvanas was leading them on. “Not sure - depends on how established their crystal beacons are.”

“We should test that theory,” Sylvanas sighed. “Yet, that might tip our hand.”

Jaina thought back to her plan concerning Alleria and the monastery vaults. If Sylvanas was right and Caila had placed that teleportation trap in motion sooner - it would have snagged all three Windrunner sisters in the web, and from what little rumor Jaina had dealt in, she knew that the Lightforged only needed a nudge to finally go over Turalyon’s wishes and bring Alleria to heel.

She voiced that aloud, then lamented. “Nevermind, Vereesa already tried to reach Alleria.”

“That was before the Lightforged attacked Little Moon,” Sylvanas said, and her voice held the same conviction as Vereesa’s had only just that afternoon. However, Jaina didn’t feel that would be wise to point out.

“All right, you work on reaching your sister and I’ll get us to a Place of Power.”

Sylvanas tipped her head and disappeared between two large boulders and toward the sound of a distant waterfall. Jaina waited until she was out of sight, then turned to scour the rocky skree they’d been traveling along.

She found what she was looking for in a narrow, cylindrical rock. Smooth to the touch, it glimmered with just a hint of salt and moisture. When she picked it up, she carefully wound a portion of spellthread about its middle and allowed it to dangle. When she was satisfied with the balance, she took her time inscribing an enchantment along the outer curve of the stone, and once completed, smiled at the soft glow the runes gave off before quieting.

Sylvanas had returned by then, and gave her craft a curious glance.

“You said you wanted a place of power, so I’ll find you a place of power.”

The night bled into the early hours and Jaina could feel sleep pressing against her eyelids every time she closed them, but they still had a while to go. Sylvanas had sent the little bat, who Jaina had dubbed Moth, out to Boralus to establish contact with one of the ren’dorei traveling through there, and that left them with little scouting prowess beyond Sylvanas’ natural talent.

Which wasn’t shoddy.
To pass the time, they’d stumbled on casual conversation, a light and breezy back and forth that had Jaina laughing more than any time she’d remembered in the past. Sylvanas had a wickedly dry sense of humor, and her insight into past situations was uncanny.

Right now, they’d found themselves discussing companions - Sylvanas dropping the occasional insight into the dark rangers that still served her, and observations on the past when Jaina had been courted by two princes.

“It was the scandal waiting to break. I had a bet running with Rommath that you would have been announced at the midsummer festival and you had to go and ruin my fun by turning him down.”

“I am very sorry that I happened to destroy your chance at - what - revenge by not accepting Kael’thas’ courting gift. Next time, I will run it by you before I make such a choice. Lor’themar is single, right?”

“And completely disinterested in the feminine genders, I’m afraid. Though, who knows, he might make an exception for you.”

“Why’s that?”

“You breathe arcane, Jaina,” Sylvanas was casual in her explanations, stopping momentarily to scoop up a flat-edged rock. When she righted, she continued; “It’s probably why you and … Kalecgos pair so well.” When Jaina didn’t answer, Sylvanas glanced her way, and her ears flickered warily. “I’m sorry, was that too personal?”

Jaina risked a look, then was taken aback by the earnest expression she found. “I … no,” she stammered before collecting herself. “No, Kalec and I haven’t been - I mean, it’s been a while -”

Sylvanas ‘ahhed’ in response. Then a beat passed. “Vereesa’s interested in you.”

Jaina chuckled. “I know.”

“Is it mutual?” At Jaina’s second look, Sylvanas feigned innocence. “We have a long walk! I am simply trying to pass the time.”

“You are simply trying to meddle,” Jaina corrected her, and found herself smiling at the mischievous glint that darted through those crimson eyes. She didn’t answer right away, and only when Sylvanas went back to surveying the coastline ahead of them did she speak up. “It could have been, a long time ago. The timing is never right.”

“Is?” Sylvanas canted her head.

Jaina risked a third look towards Sylvanas to confirm it for herself. At the curious gaze she got back, she nodded, resolutely. Then, she decided to turn the tables. “What about you?”

Jaina watched as Sylvanas bristled, as a shadow crossed over her. She sighed, and looked out over the bay to watch the play of moonlight and shadow over the waters.

“In life, Nathanos was … very dear to me.”

Jaina turned her head slightly to listen.

“He was very skilled with the bow - even by elven standards, and he loved the forest as I had.” Sylvanas’ voice went soft as she spoke, and Jaina marveled at the softness that came over the elven woman.
“How did you two meet?”

Sylvanas grinned, “the same way I tend to meet almost anyone. I shot him.”

“You what?”

“It was just after Alleria’s memorial service, and I wasn’t expected back in Quel’Thalas for another week or so. I wanted to know what she’d found in Lordaeron that had made her so willing to leave Silvermoon, Quel’Thalas… Azeroth. Us.” Sylvanas ducked her head down.

Jaina reached out a hand, and brushed her fingers along Sylvanas’ shoulder. Sylvanas slowed her pace enough that Jaina could remain sidelong. “And you found it?”

“No,” Sylvanas said, voice lifting. “But I found pleasant company and a distraction from the responsibility that was suddenly set on my shoulders.”

“So, you shot him?”

Sylvanas laughed, “I thought he was a troll! I was hunting along a strip of the old growth when I began to notice I was being followed. I doubled back to stalk my stalker and pinned a very surprised young human man against a pine tree.”

“And from there, it’s history?”

“Something like that.” Sylvanas’ smile was a soft one.

“What about … after?”

Sylvanas tossed a look her way. “After our freedom from the Scourge?”

Jaina nodded.

Sylvanas shifted her shoulders in a half-shrug. “Relationships are complicated enough when you’re alive. When I broke Nathanos free from the Scourge, he looked at me like I was this …savior. I could do no wrong in his eyes - and I could not …” She broke off, gaze skittering out over the water. “I would not take advantage of that for the sake of old memories.”

“Oh.”

Silence fell again save for the babbling of the river. Along the higher cliffs, Jaina could just barely make out the outline of the old, worn fencing that lined the cobblestone roads.

“So, what’s stopping you from approaching my little sister this time?”

“Really?” Jaina could see the smile playing at Sylvanas’ lips even from the angle she stood at. “I’m not answering that.”

“I answered yours.”

“Which was very appreciated, and I thank you for allowing me the insight into your past.”

“Hmph. Is it my nephews? I have been told they have inherited the Windrunner tendency to be --”

“Trollspawn? That’s what Vereesa called them.”

Sylvanas’ smile grew wider. “That sounds about right.”
“No, it is not because your nephews happen to be trollspawn.”

Sylvanas gasped in such a dramatic way that Jaina thought she’d overstepped with that, only to catch the delicate forward cant of Sylvanas’ ears which she’d learned came along with elven mischief. “My nephews are not trollspawn, how dare you.”

“... they might not be, but you are.”

“Possibly. You are avoiding the question.”

“That’s because I’m not going to answer it!”

Sylvanas hummed. “Do you have qualms against a woman lover? I know humans tend to be prudish --”

Jaina groaned, and wished she’d stayed behind in Boralus; torture at the hands of the Lightforged would be preferable to this brand of teasing. “If we head south along the western coast, we could reach Freehold within the week. There’s an old friend -- what is that look for?”

“Is there a place of power close to Freehold?”

After thinking on the map of the leylines, Jaina shrugged. “There’s a mountain spring somewhere in the mountains north of it, I think?”

“Mmm.” Sylvanas eyed the Vindicaar which had remained a constant in the skies above the bay. “Probably not the best option. I still think heading further into Drustvar is more suitable.”

Jaina disagreed. She stared into that dark forest and remembered the crawling chill of the Blighted Lands racing down her neck. If she closed her eyes, she swore the mist crept closer and licked around her ankles. “You haven’t explained why you’re so adamant on a place of power.”

“Once you tell me what prevents you from courting Vereesa, I will tell you.”

“Sylvanas.”

Sylvanas sighed, and came to a stop. “Portals need anchoring points - I learned that much as Ranger General.”

“I would teleport us away if I wasn’t so certain that the Vindicaar up there is actively keyed into translocation into and out of the Broken Isles. Falor’Thalas might be warded, but a regiment of Lightforged stomping just outside the runes will sooner or later stumble in.”

Sylvanas sucked on the back of her teeth. “Yes, that does put a crimp in the plan.”

Jaina nodded, glad she was beginning to see it her way. “If we can get far enough out to sea - I can teleport us. Without a Tidesage to guide them, they’ll have a hard time picking up the trail.”

“Can you teleport a galleon?”

“I made one fly, so, does that answer that question? Wait - why do you want to steal a galleon? We could easily slip out in a schooner or one of the fishing vessels designed for deeper waters.”

“Wouldn’t be large enough to support an extraction.”

“Extraction?”
Sylvanas turned to her with a gleam in her eyes. It wasn’t mischief, and it wasn’t malicious. It was some expression that Jaina had yet to see and catalogue in her growing list. “Our family is still in Boralus, is it not? And I’m sure your mother has already managed to collect herself a small herd of stray humans not entirely keen on living underneath the watchful gaze of the Light.”

Jaina was at a loss for words. She struggled, and nothing came to mind. She extracted herself from Sylvanas’ side to take a few steps further, hoping that distance would bring clarity. The soft fall of Sylvanas’ steps alerted her to the elf’s movement, and she held up a hand, not looking back at her. “I need a moment.”

“I - very well,” Sylvanas sounded a little lost as she spoke, and the footsteps receded to a respectable distance.

For several minutes, neither of them said much of anything. The wind rustled through the autumn-touched branches, and the soft rush of the distant river pouring into the bay banished away the otherwise silence of the forest.

Jaina only spoke when she was certain she could formulate sentences that made sense. She turned on a heel, her hand gripping tight to the Storm Staff for strength as much as balance, and set a harsh assessment over the elven woman who appeared to nonchalantly be more interested in the flight pattern of a nocturnal bird than Jaina herself. “Where would they go?” Out spilled the first question.

Sylvanas shrugged, the very picture of nonchalance. “Away from the Inquisition for starters? I still need to hammer out the details.”

“Oh, do you? There’s no elaborate plan already calculated and in place?”

Sylvanas’ eyes narrowed, “No.”

“You could have fooled me.”

“My apologies, Lady Proudmoore. I will be sure to wait until all the details of my diabolic plan have been worked out before I approach you next time.”

Jaina scowled, and tried to take a moment to temper her voice, to keep the bubbling arcane locked down. All they needed was an ill-timed lash of magic to draw the Lightforged like moths to a torch. “Can you blame me when it’s the impression you give?”

Sylvanas’ eyes narrowed to slits of burning red. Her ears pinned back, and the first lick of shadow darted along her skin. She seemed to be on the same wavelength as Jaina concerning magical outbursts because Jaina watched as she visibly drew the shadow back within her corporeal form. “Forget I even mentioned anything, Lady Proudmoore.”

However, Jaina’s dander was up, and the jittering energy from the escape was now back and firing on all synapses. Sylvanas wasn’t Caila - but she felt like a good enough target. The sudden reversal to her title only pushed Jaina’s temper over the edge.

“Actually, you know what? I don’t think I want to forget. I still intimately recall the last plan concerning my family.”

“This is not the time --”

“Not the time?” Pressure pushed against Jaina’s eyes, and arcane trickled like ice along her spine. “Please. This is the perfect time.”
“If your criteria is to bring the Lightforged down on our skulls? Yes, I agree.”

“Derek’s grave is full of ashes,” Jaina growled, “and my mother bears the scar across her neck from his parting gift; and you want me to gossip about my love life like we’re old friends?” She advanced, and the arcane slithered from her spine along her arms until it sparked like lightning between her fingers. “I can go a step backward. There are veterans of the Battle for Lordaeron who still suffer after-effects from the Blight -”

“Lordaeron belonged to no one but -”

“And Teldrassil? Was that another one of your detailed plans?” Jaina stepped forward as she spoke, with every word punctuated by a growing measure of magic. The hair on the back of her neck rose up, and energy prickled along her arms. “Or was that spur of the moment?”

Unsurprisingly, though Sylvanas’ mood had been light with her first suggestion, every question Jaina slung landed like a barbed arrow into the banshee until she stared back at Jaina with two red-hot coals and the threat of shadowy tendrils licking at the space surrounding her.

Jaina tensed, preparing for the counterattack. She wanted the counterattack, because throwing down was easier to process that this heavy pressure that threatened to steal her breath away; was easier than dealing with the wetness of unshed tears.

She watched, ready, as Sylvanas made her move.

First, the banshee dropped her bow carefully against a stone path marker. Next came her quiver, the arrows bouncing as it landed next to Sylvanas’ feet. She took a step forward, her arms outspread, her palms facing Jaina.

Jaina’s eyes narrowed.

Sylvanas approached her like one would a wounded animal; slow and with exaggerated movements that couldn’t be misconstrued.

Jaina’s hand grew encased in a glittering second skin as frost materialized at her fingertips.

Sylvanas reached out a hand.

Jaina went to throw the ice lance - the spell danced right at the edge of her mind, the runes flared to existence along the length of her fingers.

Fingers that were suddenly, gently, taken ahold of.

Sylvanas’ hand clasped around Jaina’s own, and the frost dissolved into the air around them. Jaina could taste the magic as it flickered into the night.

Sylvanas’ thumb smoothed over the inside of her wrist. The threat of shadows had faded, and the coals of the banshee’s stare had cooled to embers. “I know that there is quite a bit of history that easily justifies a frostbolt or several, but I think it would be wiser to air out the grievances of the past when we don’t have a priestess stalking your every movement.”

A beat passed, and Sylvanas’ eyes flickered to Jaina’s free hand. “Or you could just embrace your Kul Tiran heritage and punch me.”

Jaina let out the breath she’d been holding, and with it, the tension flowed from her like the tide until all she felt was the bone-aching exhaustion of emotional fatigue. “We don’t solve all our
problems with bar fights.”

“Are you sure? I walked past at least five when we arrived here this afternoon.”

Jaina hoped that the glare she tossed towards Sylvanas actually had bite to it. “You did not.”

“I did! And then three more as I searched for a way to assist your escape.”

“Is that why you took so long? You stopped in for a rousing round or two?”

“I am afraid you discovered my secret.”

Jaina’s laugh was weak, but it came regardless. She swallowed back another sigh, then tilted her head up. “What do you get out of this?” Her voice sounded quiet and pathetic to her ears.

Just like before, Sylvanas kept Jaina balanced against her with one hand chastely at Jaina’s hip. “Better company, I suppose.” Her double-toned voice was just as quiet, though it wasn’t thickened by tears as Jaina’s.

Jaina’s glare was feeble, but she managed it all the same. “I’m serious,” she tried to take in a breath without it shuddering in her lungs. She wasn’t successful. “Please.”

Sylvanas’ expression softened, and she inclined her head. “I wanted to offer them - Vereesa, your mother, and your mothers’ strays -- do not glower at me so, if she is anything like you are, she will have a collection of pitiful-eyed humans in need of shelter. I have an entire city warded and hidden away from all but the most well-versed scholars of quel’dorei history.”

“You would grant them sanctuary in Falor’Thalas?” Jaina asked. “It drove your people mad.”

“Yes, well, that has been the point of this entire exercise has it not? Reinforcing the wards and establishing a firm resistance against the whispers of the Void?”

“Something like that, yeah.” Jaina searched Sylvanas’ eyes for answers as she continued. “However, this entire exercise also came about because we did not want a bunch of unruly adventurers walking into the city. I think a gaggle of Kul Tirans counts as exactly the thing you didn’t want.”

“Is a gathering of Kul Tirans a gaggle? Would it not be a crew?”

“Sylvanas.”

“And you realize you all but admitted to the bar fighting.”

“Sylvanas.”

Sylvanas reached out carefully and tucked away one of the loose tendrils of white away from Jaina’s face, then Jaina felt the cool brush of leather against her ear before Sylvanas pulled her hand back.

“Maybe I figure if they are half as interesting to bother as you have been, it will be a welcomed change of pace.”

It must have been the aftereffect of adrenaline, but Jaina found that she welcomed the touch more than she probably should have, and with a cough disguise that revelation, she took a step back. “Right, we - we really should talk -” at Sylvanas’ arched brow, Jaina knew she flushed and stammered through the rest. “About the past. Our past - pasts! Our respective pasts before we
decide on any future … stop laughing at me!”

Sylvanas shook her head, ears canted forward again along with a faint smile. “I would never dare to laugh at you, Lady Proudmoore.”

“You are --”

“An insufferable banshee, yes I know.”

Jaina snorted.

Eventually, as the night gave way to the first shimmering teases of sunlight, they left the comfort of the worn paths and delved deeper into the shadows of the thickets and undergrowth. Birdsong awoke around them, though the notes floated strangely on the air, like they had weight to their melodies.

Their journey passed in comfortable silence, and though Jaina drew magic from both her staff’s reserves, and the small dusting of energy that seemed abundant in Drustvar’s forests, as the sun crept higher and the shadows stretched shorter and shorter, the exhilaration of the previous night was beginning to run dry in her veins, and she was no undead.

For a moment, she was struck with jealousy at the lack of need for sleep.

“What?” Sylvanas didn’t even look her way. When Jaina didn’t answer, the banshee flicked an ear in her direction. “You sighed. Loud enough to startle the entire forest.”

“Do you need to sleep?”

Sylvanas shook her head, “Not for physical reasons, no.”

Jaina sighed again. Pointedly. She was proud when that elicited an amused snort from the banshee.

“Very well, I suppose we can indulge your needs.”

“And you need to see if Alleria responded too.”

Sylvanas’ step faltered. She recovered, quick enough that Jaina was certain the misstep hadn’t even happened, but the startled, suspicious look she gave Jaina was plain enough. “Are you quite certain she’s essential to the plan? I mean, yes, Vereesa was wounded, and that will draw her ire far beyond any reservations she has with me but -”

“If you’re so keen on stealing my mother and Vereesa out from underneath Caila’s watchdogs, we’re going to need the Void.” Jaina cut in before Sylvanas’ complaints really took off.

“I don’t --”

“I know it will work. I already tested it once. Extensively.” At Sylvanas’ continued suspicion, Jaina’s voice went as sugar-sweet as the smile she gave. “How do you think I stole back the Abyssal Specter?”

The surprise that quickly turned to frustration that morphed to an outrageously false calm was a sweet sense of satisfaction that perked Jaina’s mood for the next hour.

They found respite in a strange grove filled with a warmth and gravitas that felt different than the heavy mist that plagued the rest of Drustvar. As they ducked underneath a low-hanging oak branch, Jaina stumbled as a wave of power crashed into her. She braced against a tree, sides
heaving as she adjusted to the rush. It was like she’d dove headfirst into liquid Azerite.

Sylvanas paused next to her, brow furrowed. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Jaina gasped.

Sylvanas didn’t look convinced, and pulled out her bow. As the banshee reassessed their supposed haven, Jaina recovered enough to shake her head and rest her hand carefully at Sylvanas’ elbow. She kept her hand there until the slant of Sylvanas’ ears steadied out, and the tension left the archer’s form.

As Sylvanas set about establishing a perimeter, Jaina snooped further. All she found was a herd of curiously calm deer that watched her with attentive gazes, but made no moves to shy away from humans so close. “Huh.”

“We had reports from the Honorbound about strange animal behavior, but I presumed that came along with the local coven.” Sylvanas had returned from her quick scouting, her ears high and alert. Even as she spoke with Jaina, her ears twitched towards sounds that human hearing couldn’t possibly pick up.

“The Order of Embers abolished the Heartsbane,” Jaina explained, “I don’t think this is related.”

“Even in Quel’Thalah, the deer were not as bold, nor did they stare at me so.” Sylvanas shouldered her bow and quiver. “Perhaps they are blessed by one of your Druids?”

“Perhaps,” Jaina mused.

Sylvanas kept an attentive, almost hovering eye on her as Jaina moved further in to settle against an overturned log. When she was convinced that Jaina wasn’t about to topple over, she came to perch and crouched easily upon the very same log.

The deer watched them with steady eyes.

“So.”

“So.”

Sylvanas had to go first, Jaina decided. So she stayed quiet as the banshee fussed with her hands, with the frayed edge of the enchanted cloak, and with a stray twig that snapped off when she touched it.

“I do not know what you expect from me,” Sylvanas started when the silence had stretched long past uncomfortable.

Jaina angled towards her. “I - just - it’s hard to consider the woman who burned Teldrassil with the woman who just offered to risk her safe isolation for, lack of a better term, her enemies.”

“You will have to, because they are one and the same.”

“I don’t believe that.”

Sylvanas’ look was droll, “Proudmoore, you have only spent little over a month with me. You have nothing to base your beliefs on.”

“I disagree.”
“Of course you do,” Sylvanas muttered.

Jaina was adult enough to ignore that. “What happened with Teldrassil?”

Shadow flickered around Sylvanas’ shoulders, and she looked like a brooding raven. “Teldrassil was never supposed to burn,” she said, her voice so low that Jaina could barely hear it over the ethereal echo. “It was to be the perfect hostage, a bitter dagger hanging over the boy-king’s head. It would have poisoned the Alliance to a stalemate as Tyrande clawed through the boy-king’s attempts to keep peace.”

Jaina frowned, but didn’t interrupt.

Sylvanas shifted, facing her directly, and focused all of her attention upon Jaina. It was intense. “You have led troops into battle, Jaina, so tell me: as a Commander, what do you fear most?”

Jaina took her time before answering. “Morale.”

“Why?”

“Because it will …” she trailed off as Sylvanas watched her, and nodded. “It will drain the fight out of your troops before they even see battle.”

“Exactly. I believe you were expecting this when you struck deep into Daza’alor to assassinate King Rakastan --”

“I --”

Sylvanas cut her off with an imperious jut of her chin and a simple look.

Jaina hated that had been her plan precisely, and it was so easily seen through. “I - I left the city intact after I murdered their King. You burned the heart of the kaldorei, but allowed them a hero to rally about.”

“I was so pleased you had blundered. Had you occupied Daza’alor, the war would have been won in little less than a month for the Alliance.” Sylvanas looked up into the canopy above them, and her ears twitched still to the forest around them.

“Huh. Will you pardon me, I need to speak with a bronze dragon about a city.”

“Shush.”

“It has absolutely nothing to do with what we just talked about, I swear.”

Sylvanas scoffed. “I forbid you from going back in time to win the war.”

“You can’t forbid me from going back in time.”

“I just did.” Sylvanas eyed her. “And if you go back in time to try and win the war, I will go back even further and obtain my victory there.”

“Oh? When would you go?”

Jaina thought at first the banshee hadn’t heard her question. So, Jaina leaned her head back and allowed the first stirrings of sleep to sweep along her.

It was when she was drifting between dreams and wakefulness that Sylvanas answered her.
“I would travel back to the night I wrote out my need for aid, and I would make sure I sent one to a lonely little port-town established on the coast of Kalimdor.” Jaina wasn’t sure, but she thought she felt fingers card through her hair, tucking it back from her face right as sleep claimed her fully.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

It's been 84 years...

Working is hard, guys. Here's a chapter to make up for my absence! Thanks to ObsidianWarlock for a second opinion!

Somewhere between the strange, slanted shadows of the late afternoon; something stirred. Jaina wavered on the edge of sleep when a subtle pulse of energy rippled through the otherwise quiet woods - and it was enough to drag her fully awake.

Cracking open one eye, Jaina observed the dancing patterns of light and dark around her, concerned that she’d find herself face to face with trouble - with a cohort of Lightforged; but found the forest calm. As she watched and listened, birds lazily trilled along the branches, herds of deer casually grazed, and in the far off, sea birds cried out incessantly - all seemed well.

Jaina’s instincts suggested otherwise. She’d gone through enough in her life that the calm no longer lulled into a sense of complacency when her gut warned her of the storm that was sure to follow.

She remembered falling asleep, her head drifting off to the side, and coming to rest against where Sylvanas sat to watch. Now, she lifted her head up from the strong curve of Sylvanas’ thigh and squinted as her eyes adjusted to the afternoon light. “Did you feel that?” She rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Sylvanas didn’t respond right away. “Sylvanas?”

Jaina turned.

Sylvanas had not moved since the night before. Hunched over, her head was propped in the cradle of her hands while her elbows rested atop her thighs. A curtain of ghost-blonde hair sheltered her face from Jaina’s sight; and the only indication that Sylvanas was, well, present was the quiet thrum of necromantic magic that coursed through her body.

The banshee was resting. Jaina hadn’t realized that forsaken could rest. Then again, prior to their misadventure with the Ettin, Jaina hadn’t understood that forsaken needed to eat, either. So she hesitated; if Sylvanas was unperturbed enough that she could take a moment to rest - then was Jaina overreacting?

No, she eventually reasoned. Sylvanas’ apparent calm wasn’t enough to soothe the tickle of concern that went along Jaina’s neck, and so Jaina stood up. Her hip was stiff, and her side that had been pressed against Sylvanas’ leg was cold. It took longer than she liked for the stiffness to leave her joints, and she grimly remembered that she wasn’t eighteen anymore - camping trips on the cold, hard ground meant stiff joints and sore muscles.

“The next grand adventure will be in Dalaran - with a thousand pillows, and bubble baths.” Jaina muttered, rolling her neck from side to side to work at a kink that kept her from stretching her neck too far to the left. As she grumbled, a yawn broke through and she decided that her best course of action before she faced any sort of threat would be to find the small pouch of rations Sylvanas had pilfered. Whatever threat the day held for her would not be faced on an empty stomach.
The leaves rustled above her, and she glanced up at the noise.

The little bat that Sylvanas had brought with them made his way to a low-hanging perch by crawling along the branches and dislodging leaves in his path. As he moved, Jaina noticed that there was a little pouch tucked just behind the ruff of fur at the nape of his neck, and it swung with extra weight.

“Hello Moth,” Jaina greeted the small creature. Surely, it hadn’t been his arrival that woke her. Right?

Moth’s beady gaze swiveled to her and he chittered a quick, pleasant noise before he simply dropped directly into the cup of her hands from his branch - she barely caught him in time. He was warm from his basking in the sun, and with his constant chattering, it was hard to remember that he was as dead as the banshee who had rescued him from his untimely grave. With a shake of his head, he popped up and turned so she could reach into the pouch and retrieved several small wooden discs with notches along the surfaces.

“What are these?” Jaina wondered.

Movement flashed at the corner of her vision.

“Oh, good, you are awake. Moth’s back and he’s ...collected coins?” Jaina turned to greet Sylvanas.

And her words died in her throat.

Striding through the dappled, copper light, Alleria Windrunner looked perfectly at home in the grove. Dressed in unassuming leathers that were trimmed with a brilliant emerald, and with her pauldron and bracers gilded with gold, she looked much like the Farstriders of Jaina’s past. Her hood was tugged down, and though Alleria’s blonde was more of a rich honey hue, the sisterly resemblance to Sylvanas was uncanny - down to the furrow that marred her brow as she stepped beyond the thick undergrowth.

“Lady Proudmoore.” Alleria greeted, hesitating only a fraction. Her ears flickered forward, then up in puzzlement before they settled on a neutral position.

“Lady Alleria,” Jaina returned the greeting. She stifled another yawn as the ranger strode closer, sparing a glance for the deer that watched her crossing with a steady interest beyond a typical creature’s notice. “Thank you for coming so quickly.”

Alleria waved that off, “Save it, I should have just listened when Vereesa tried to grab me yesterday.”

Tides, had it really only been yesterday Jaina had been planning her small heist? Jaina shook her head, ready to cut that line of thought off before it could really sink in but -

“Yes,” Sylvanas lifted her head up, “you should have.”

Alleria’s ears pinned low against her skull as she shot a dark look around Jaina towards her sister. Before she could retort, however, Jaina jumped in.

“You’re here now, Lady Alleria, that’s what matters.” Jaina hoped her smile didn’t come across as exhausted as she felt.

Alleria didn’t look mollified, but neither did she rise to the bait Sylvanas dangled so enticingly in
front of her. “When Vereesa asked me, I thought it dealt with one of her archeological jobs, and while I enjoy working with her - there was simply far too much at stake in Dalaran to just leave.” She leaned against a tree and stared morosely down at her feet. “Then I got Sylvanas’ message.”

Sylvanas sighed and rose to her feet. Unlike Jaina, she didn’t yawn or stretch; just appeared immediately ready to face whatever the day was about to throw at them. She looked like she wanted to say something else, her expression twisted with - what - empathy? Concern? But what she asked was: “Were you followed?”

“No.” Alleria glanced up, gaze determined. “I’m certain.”

“Oh? While I know Jaina is brewing up a complex plan for the retrieval itself that involves you intimately, and while I might have been out of the loop regarding the political nightmare of the past few years - I distinctly remember the void being one of a few sore points for the Lightforged. How are you so certain they didn’t pick up your,” Sylvanas’ nose crinkled as she stared down it at her sister, “Signature?”

“Seriously?” Alleria’s ears flattened, then canted out and upward. When Sylvanas didn’t drop the subject, Alleria sighed. Her gaze skirted askance from her sister and from Jaina, and up into the canopy. “I didn’t exactly … use the Void to travel here.”

“Oh, so you simply jumped through a portal? Might as well have dove into a moonwell for all the arcane you just poured over you.”

“I didn’t use one of the portals, Sylvanas. Before, I know how to be discreet.”

“Then how?” Jaina asked before Sylvanas could get another snipe across.

Alleria’s lips pressed into a thin line. She dug the tip of a boot into the dirt, then said; “Turalyon gave me access to the --”

“Turalyon?!” Sylvanas threw her hands up, and her ears mimicked the motion, straightening into daggers. “Lovely! We might as well have invited the Lightforged on this camping trip with us. Or, no, better yet, Jaina should have just shackled herself for Calia when we were in the city.”

Alleria shook her head, her jaw tight with fierce determination. “Turalyon wouldn’t give me up to the Lady Menethil, Sylvanas. He wouldn’t give up Vereesa, or Lady Proudmoore if I ask it of him. Yes, he still commands the Army of the Light but whatever this personal business Lady Menethil has with Lady Proudmoore isn’t his concern.”

Sylvanas scoffed. “You cannot be that blind, Lady Sun. The man locked you in solitary for hundreds of years because his precious Light told him to.”

“That - he… we’re trying to work past that.” Alleria said.

“Are you? How exactly does a couple ‘work past’ that sort of betrayal, if I may inquire?”

“You may not.”

Sylvanas said something in Thalassian that immediately caused Alleria to blanch, then flush with anger, but she didn’t respond. Then, Sylvanas moved to stand by Jaina’s left, eyeing her sister like one does a condemned criminal. “You should go before they figure it out.”

“What?” Alleria pushed away from the tree. “No! Little Moon’s hurt, and you might need my help to to get her out safely.”
“Jaina and I can manage it just fine.” Sylvanas’ voice turned sickeningly sweet with her next words. “Besides, you have a history of leaving when it’s convenient for you. It’s so easy for you to abandon your oaths, your city, your family …” a sneer curled at the corner of her mouth, “Your son.”

“Sylvanas,” Jaina admonished.

Alleria moved quicker than Jaina’s eyes could track, only being able to catch the afterimage of the Farstrider as she charged forward to meet that implication head-on.

Sylvanas stepped in front of Jaina and went to meet Alleria’s charge, fatigue banished from her graceful features. She bristled, and the shadows around her stretched long and rich.

The space between the sisters grew dark and heavy, weighted with the possibilities of entropy and madness. Jaina stared into the depth of those shadows and wondered if she was actually looking at the twinkle of stars or if it was her mind simply playing tricks on her.

There was no spell Jaina could conjure that would divide the sister’s ensuing conflict and keep them hidden from any keen-sighted watch so instead, Jaina shoved her way back between the sisters.

On one side, the cold entropy of the Void licked at the edge of her consciousness - and distant whispers beguiled from places unseen. On the other side, there was little difference in the chill - save for the odd tugging sensation as Sylvanas’ necromantic nature tugged at the fraying threads of arcane that drifted around Jaina.

“Enough!” Jaina set her hands upon both sisters’ shoulders, pushing hard enough that she’d be noticed. “Do we really have this luxury right now?”

The diffuse glow of Alleria’s eyes did little to hide the dangerous constriction of her pupils as her attention swept over Jaina, and down to where Jaina’s hand pressed against her pauldron.

Sylvanas snarled wordlessly down at her, her eyes blazing. The last time her gaze had burned so, Jaina had been shoved from the tower. Jaina didn’t back down, though. She straightened to the full measurement of her height and stared back at that fire.

“You died, Sylvanas, trying to save Vereesa. I don’t know which of the gods were watching over you when I got you back.” Jaina dropped her hand to grip Sylvanas’ own, imploring her to listen with a firm squeeze of her fingers. “Alleria’s here now, and she wants to help. Let her help.”

Sylvanas took in a steadying breath, then tipped her head. She stepped back, and the shadows dissipated around her. Still, Jaina didn’t let go until the chill that emanated from the banshee no longer carried the cold command of necromancy.

Jaina caught Alleria staring - caught Alleria’s eyes dropping to their hands. She coughed, and let go. “So if you two are really intent on solving your sibling rivalry, then do so after we pull off our impromptu rescue mission - please! Go right ahead - but I could really use both of your help right now, so Sylvanas; if you would kindly not antagonize her --”

“Mm.” Sylvanas tilted her head up and away. “Very well.”

“Thank you,” Jaina drawled, unamused with the dramatics.
“I hate to say this because it will inflate her horrendous ego, but Sylvanas might be correct. I’m not sure I can be that much use to you.” Alleria’s ears were still pinned back, but when she looked up, her eyes were settled back to the customary gleam that most elves had, and the Void had retreated from the edges of her form. “The Vindicaar is attuned to the arcane, and if they are hunting for you, and on high alert; then they will notice an increase in Void activity. Sylvanas mentioned little about what happened last night - but she did say that the Void was involved?”

Jaina nodded. “The Lightforged summoned the kthir to stage a false flag attack on Boralus.”

Alleria froze, not comprehending. “They what?” She looked to Sylvanas for confirmation.

Sylvanas nodded.

Alleria’s ears swiveled, then she sighed. “Be that as it may, you and Umbric were lucky with the Zandalari with that portal business.”

Jaina already planned around that dilemma. “I’m counting on them reacting to the void, actually.”

Once she had the sisters’ attention, she laid out the initial rundown of her plan.

To their credit, neither of them interrupted her. They crouched on either side of her as she knelt down to sketch out a rough diagram in the dirt. As she designated various landmarks of Boralus, the pair waited patiently.

Jaina’s plan revolved entirely around the simple fact that the Vindicaar could triangulate arcane power. She assumed that the Lightforged under Caila’s command were treating her like a mage, which, granted, she was one - but she was capable of using her talents beyond spellweaving. Not to mention the two rangers - both of them masters of their craft.

Sylvanas hummed softly. “It is risky to rely solely on the assumption that they would not believe you capable of trickery beyond the illusions and runework you’ve already shown.”

“Risky, but not entirely guesswork. The Light is incredibly single-minded in its pursuit and that bleeds into the Lightforged themselves. For all the blessings the Army receives from their Reforging, the ability to maintain one’s flexibility -- “ Alleria trailed off, scowling at Sylvanas. Puzzled, Jaina couldn’t figure out why until:

“You are such a child, Lady Moon.”

“I said nothing.” Sylvanas protested.

Alleria rolled her eyes. “I refuse to even say it now.”

Sylvanas smirked. It was the tiniest of expressions, but Jaina noticed the quirk at the edge of her lips.

“What I was saying is that if you do not maintain your ability to adapt,” Alleria stressed the word change with a glare thrown Sylvanas’ way for good measure, “Then you’ll be less adept at it - like neglecting a muscle or a skill. Most of the Lightforged from Argus did not maintain that skill.”

“And the ones who chose to be Lightforged here, on Azeroth?” Sylvanas asked.

Alleria shrugged. “A toss up. I haven’t worked as closely with them as I have - had - with the Army of the Light.”
“Mm.” Sylvanas returned to the sketch of Boralus. “Jaina, I believe that a scaled up version of the trick you perform with your illusionary selves might serve as an appropriate method of escape.”

Jaina agreed with that course of action and weighed in on the Lightforged, herself. “They might lack flexibility -” she paused, then managed to just hide her grin when Sylvanas’ ears twitched just a hair forward.

Jaina must not have hidden her grin that well, for Alleria’s drawn-out sigh reminded Jaina of the times Katherine caught her and Tandred in mischief. Did all mothers just innately learn that? “You’re both children.”

Jaina, who had not grown up long with an older sibling, but had grown up with older apprentices who were as frustrating as blood relatives could be, simply ignored the complaint. “As I was saying; I already performed that diversion once. They might be slow to adapt, but they’re not stupid. They won’t fall for the same trick twice in less than a day.”

Sylvanas fixed her with a dry look. “Which is why we should access one of the many portals. Alleria’s void-tears might throw them for a loop, but they will be expecting a diversion. I do not believe they will think you careless enough to risk using the portals themselves to escape.”

“How will you account for the extra energy in sending the refugees through?” Jaina asked.

“We divide the refugees among the portals -”

“And the void-tears,” Alleria finished. “If the Lightforged are stirring up mischief, then I want to recall the ren’dorei in Boralus before they become conveniently collateral.”

“Your people can open their own tears, right?” Sylvanas’s ears twitched forward when Alleria nodded, and her voice lightened with pleasure. “Wonderful, that will sow even more confusion for the Lightforged, then.”

Jaina sat back on her haunches and decided to simply watch the sisters go back and forth as they delved deeper into their impromptu rescue attempt. There was a weightlessness to Sylvanas’ movements that she would have never connected to the banshee in a million years.

“The entirety of Mariner’s Row is brimming with void energy and if we -”

“Mmm - we can’t risk the humans, but the ren’dorei can handle any lingering effects. Though what about -?”

“There are smuggling canals right beneath the keep and that northern section. Would those work?”

Alleria’s ears swiveled with the racing of her thoughts. “Possibly - it would be the smuggling in that would be the tricky part.”

Jaina’s heart twisted painfully. How long had it been since the sisters could bounce back and forth off the other’s ideas?

“Jaina?”

“Huh?” Jaina startled out of her thoughts to see both sisters staring at her, Alleria concerned, and Sylvanas, well, her expression was inscrutable. Her ears were relaxed, though? That was a good sign, right?

“What say you? You’ve been quiet.” Alleria pressed, voice gentle.
“Oh! Sorry, no, I was listening to the two of you.”

Sylvanas’ expression shifted, though it was still unreadable. “I know this might sting your pride, but you’ve led from this city for the past three years.”

“Alongside my brother,” Jaina corrected.

Sylvanas didn’t blink as she answered: “As I said, you have led Boralus for the past three years. You know your weak-points, tell us how to press them.”

Sylvanas was right, even thinking that there were faults in Boralus’ defenses rankled at Jaina’s pride in her ability to keep her people safe. She was, self-admittedly, a little frantic after Theramore - especially after Theramore. The war with the Horde - with Sylvanas, in fact - had only turned her desire to prevent another Theramore - another Teldrassil - into a near-obsession.

So, Jaina shoved her pride as far down as she could manage without losing the last of her dignity, and then wracked her brain for all the trouble areas. Sylvanas was right, the smuggling routes would be a smart point to press. There were also the hills just north of the Tradeswind Market. A pair of nimble elves could easily navigate the perilous ridgelines down into the city proper.

“You know, Sylvanas, you don’t need to breathe.”

“I appreciate you pointing out the obvious, Jaina,” Sylvanas drawled, her amusement as dry as bone, “That was one facet of my state of being I had not noticed.”

Jaina flashed her a look. “I was referring to several underground canals throughout the city.”

“You mean the sewers.”

Alleria snorted. “It would suit your attitude, Sylvanas.” When no quip followed, Alleria’s ears pricked forward - curiosity, Jaina assumed, or a natural cant for interest?

Sylvanas noticed as well. She cleared her throat. “Yes, well, a Queen knows how to be regal no matter the court she holds.”

“Uh-huh.”

Jaina shrugged, “Those are your options.” She lifted onto her feet. “I’ll let you decide your course of action.”

“Where are you going?” Alleria asked.

“Opening up a dozen portals will completely drain my arcane reserves, not to mention that many portals in such a small radius could threaten to split the fabric of reality,” Jaina went for the small satchel she’d snagged from her room before they’d left. While it wasn’t the elaborate runic workshop in her quarters, it had just enough of her inks and enchanting material to muddle through what she required.

She felt the eyes of the Windrunners on her as she pulled out her portable inscription set. “Wait, you make it sound like - are you … not coming with us?” Sylvanas asked that, confusion laced in her words.

Jaina wanted to say ‘yes, of course, I am’, but as she listened to the plan, and put in her own additions, she’d realized that they would need so much more than simple misdirections to truly circumvent the threat that the Vindicaar posed. “No.”
“No?”

Jaina took in a breath and turned around. “While I would love to get right back in there underneath Calia’s nose and snatch my mother out of that zealot’s way, I’m of more use out here.”

“Jaina -”

“Let me finish, Sylvanas.”

Sylvanas’ mouth snapped shut. She gave a curt nod.

“We could do all sorts of trickery to sneak in, and it will simply waste time to even try to accommodate my lack of elven agility, my need for breathable air, and we’ve ignored the simple fact that I radiate so much arcane that we cannot be certain that my walking into Boralus won’t be noticed.”

Alleria dipped her head, acknowledging that point.

Sylvanas, however, looked unhappy. Jaina could understand, after all, it would now be Sylvanas risking her neck, alone. Before Jaina could address it, though, Sylvanas spoke up.

“It is not a waste of time; nor is it accommodating any lacking in a skill you think you have - you do not, by the way.”

“Syl-”

“Furthermore, if Alleria trusts her shining beacon of a mate to the point that she will risk his assistance with helping Veressa then we have a way in that will disguise your arrival.”

“I understand that you’re frustrated.”

“I’m not frustrated.”

Jaina gave her a look.

“I’m not.” Sylvanas met that look with one of her own. “I’m concerned, Jaina. Even if the evacuation goes off without a hitch, you will have no support here.”

Alleria coughed and rose to her own feet. “Are you in contact with Vereesa, Sylvanas?” When Sylvanas nodded, Alleria gently pressed the question. “How are you sending them?”

Moth chirruped and maneuvered along his bough until he was right above Alleria. He swung upside down and spread out his wingspan, showing off the little harness tucked around him.

Jaina remembered the coins she’d pulled from the pouch and pulled them out of her pocket. “Oh, here.”

Alleria took them without even a sideways glance to Sylvanas. “I’ll translate these, then send some instructions back along with your bat.”

“His name is Moth,” Jaina supplied.

“Jaina named him,” Sylvanas elaborated.

Alleria gave Moth a puzzled look. Moth just flapped his wings in return. “Right. Well, then, er Moth, if you wouldn’t mind coming along with me?”
Moth swooped down from his perch to alight on Alleria’s bare shoulder. She didn’t even flinch when he shifted his feet to maintain his balance.

Jaina waited a minute after Alleria had left before she turned to Sylvanas. “You know, I’m not even the one who was hurt last night,” she teased, trying to keep her voice light. “If anyone should be concerned about splitting up, it should be me, right?”

“Jaina, for all I know my sister is currently devising a way to use you as a distraction so our extraction of Vereesa will be successful.”

That was a new twist. Jaina drummed her fingers against her arm. “This is the same sister who performed high treason in allowing you to escape to exile, hid your continued existence for three years, and is, right now, possibly committing treason a second time for you?”

“For Vereesa.”

Jaina scowled. “You’re splitting hairs.”

“I’m what?” Sylvanas blinked up at her.

Jaina was about to launch into an explanation of the idiom. She caught herself, and her scowl deepened. “What I’m trying to say is that I don’t think Alleria is going to betray you at last minute.”

Sylvanas looked askance, “I am not worried about her betraying me.”

“Well, you could have fooled me.”

“I’m worried that she will betray you.” Sylvanas’ look was earnest and open, and that scared Jaina.

“What?”

“If you believe that I am too pragmatic, then you have not fought long alongside my sister. Alleria was the one who taught me how to separate duty from emotion, to hold my resources as arrows in the quiver to be spent. If something goes south - you are far less of an asset to her than Little Moon.”

Jaina didn’t quite know how she was supposed to react to that.

Sylvanas continued; “Alleria seems to think that she needs to atone for leaving Quel’thalas - and being overbearing concerning Vereesa is what she believes her best way to the redemption she seeks. If she has to choose which of you to sacrifice to the Lightforge’s bloodlust… well.”

“Oh.” Jaina sat down, her legs suddenly feeling heavy. She tucked her head into the cradle of her palms and stared at the dirt. How did one answer that?

A gentle hand cupped at her chin and tugged her to look up again. Sylvanas knelt before her, her crimson gaze soft. “I do not think you are incapable of defending yourself, Jaina. You were a formidable opponent during the Blood War, and you quite held your own when my temper got the better of me in Falor’Thalas.”

There was a sudden flutter in Jaina’s chest.

“I also do not think Alleria’s first thought will be to immediately turn you over, yet I do not want you caught unprepared should the worst come to happen.”
“Well, then, I hope Moth’s capable of learning how to teleport.” Jaina’s throat felt tight.

Sylvanas’ soft laughter was smooth against Jaina’s ears. “I am afraid he does not quite display the aptitude for that sort of study.”

Jaina returned the laugh and sighed. “Well, at least he gets his charm from me.”

“From you?” Sylvanas’ eyebrow rose. “Did you develop a knack for necromancy during our little adventure?”

“Oh course not. I, however, named him.”

Sylvanas rolled her eyes, “I suppose you are correct - if one assumes Moth is a proper name.”

“It is a proper name.”

Sylvanas made a soft ‘ah’ noise. “Now I see why the Forsaken chose such strange names during their Awakening. At first, I thought it was because their minds were not quite what they were prior to death. It is a relief to know it is simply a human defect.”

“Defect?!” Jaina playfully pulled her chin up and away from Sylvanas’ hold. “How dare you. Just because the elves need to have sun charts aligned perfectly in a triangular acknowledgement of the child’s birthday, and the first moment the sun’s rays touched their skin and - and - “ she peered down at Sylvanas, “ - help me out here, I don’t have the biology to make this as pretentious as I know your naming ceremonies must be.”

Sylvanas’ eyes narrowed, but the relaxed tilt of her ears gave away her pleasant demeanor. “Very well, when this is said and done, I shall make sure Moth has a proper name after I consult the alignment of the sun.” She paused, “Just a curiosity; when exactly were you born?”

“I knew it.”

They shared a smile, and yet Jaina they still needed to address Sylvanas’ earlier points.

“You wouldn’t tell me about your concerns if you didn’t also have a way to address them,” Jaina ventured.

Sylvanas hesitated. “Have you ever heard the expression ‘Dark Lady watch over you’?” When Jaina nodded, Sylvanas continued. “As the first banshee, I have the ability to, well, keep in touch with a soul that I have had contact with.”

“So, someone you’ve possessed?”

“Yes, or risen.”

Jaina thought back to the mountain. “How do we do it?”

Sylvanas blinked, not expecting agreement so quickly, or at all, Jaina thinks. “You are … all right with that? It is not something I can take away once established.”

Jaina wasn’t sure. However, what other choice did they have? She didn’t want to think that Alleria could turn her over to the Lightforged; they’d worked closely together during the war, and that meant something, right?

Sylvanas touched her chin again to regain her attention. “I shall let you think about it.” She rose up and though Jaina knew she didn’t need it, rolled her neck from side to side before she pressed her
palms against her lower back and stretched there too. “Meanwhile, I should keep Alleria out of trouble.”

Jaina darted out a hand, snagging light at Sylvanas’ wrist as she turned to leave; “Wait.”

Sylvanas did so. She kept eye contact as Jaina stood up and did not move. Jaina felt the natural chill of the banshee’s skin against her own, but she found it didn’t bother her. Not really, not anymore. “Why did you tell me?” When Sylvanas opened her mouth, Jaina squeezed her wrist just light enough to pause whatever was about to leave her. “Truthfully.”

It worked. For a while, Sylvanas made no movement, nor did she speak. Instead, she simply watched Jaina, studying her like Jaina was a puzzle to be solved. Then, she lifted her free hand and carefully wound it through the loose tendrils of hair that had escaped Jaina’s braid during the night. The touch was so startlingly gentle that Jaina bolted from it - only to grasp Sylvanas’ other wrist to stop her from pulling away.

Jaina’s heart beat loud in her chest. Something twisted painful and sweet against her lungs, causing her breath to come in sharp, slow gasps.

“You are worth far more than an arrow in the quiver.” Sylvanas’ thumb brushed against her cheek. Then, she retreated, following the path Alleria took, and Jaina almost called her back.

Almost.

Instead, Jaina threw herself into her work. She might not have access to the inexhaustible supplies in her workshop, but she had brought along her virtuoso inking kit and it was more than capable of doing what she needed. She’d also brought along velum, and her enchantments.

She based her design off of the hearthstone - focusing on several integral differences to the powerful magic. Pulling from her studies in Dalaran, she adjusted the cadence of the pattern so that it would attune to more than one person - similar to her mass-teleportation spells.

As she let those runes settle into the stone, Jaina turned her attention to the dilemma of thwarting that triangulation nonsense. At first, she struggled with various ideas, growing frustrated - then furious as she eventually tossed them all. Every single plan was tainted by the impersonal shadow of that damned ship lurking above the Sound. No matter what spell she thought of - it could be traced back to its origin point, and this wasn’t exactly leading a surprised mob through the maze of dock-streets.

She had personally seen the effectiveness of that damned ship once Turalyon had finally commissioned the Vindicaar into service at the end of the war- and she knew with cold finality that it was a variable she couldn’t just ignore. The Shal’dorei had underestimated it, and the resulting waste of Suramar was a devastating reminder of the technology and war-machines that had once held back the heart of the Burning Legion - and the commitment the Lightforged had to victory.

Her hands stilled as she rummaged through her pack.

Jaina could still remember the way the arcane slid through her body as the ship siphoned it. When she turned her head, she caught the glimmer of sunlight off the storm crystal in her staff as if to remind her how it had once burned so brightly after exposure to azerite.

Jaina knew, if she really wanted to, she wouldn’t need any mana potions or rejuvenation charms to support her channeling spells to help the elves in Boralus. All she would need to do is just open herself to the ley lines fully once again; reestablish her connection to the pulsing heart of the world.
What is the Vindicaar compared to the might of Ra-den’s fury, after all?

“No.” Jaina forced her attention away from her staff. That wasn’t her, anymore.

She shook off the memories and went back to searching for the remainder of her viridescent inks. Now wasn’t the time to dwell on such thoughts.

“Shit,” she muttered as she nearly dropped the ink vial. Why were her hands shaking so much?

“Lady Proudmoore?” Alleria’s voice broke through the forest. Jaina snapped her head up and away.

“Yes?”

“You might want to see this.”

Jaina set the inks aside. She smoothed out her robes and tried to still the trembling in her fingers. When she walked to, and then past Alleria, she favored the eldest Windrunner sister with a smile she didn’t really feel, and didn’t pause to see if it’d passed muster or not.

She stepped out onto one of the bare foothills and found Sylvanas staring down at the distant Sound through a spyglass. Sylvanas must have heard her arrival, for she handed the instrument over to Jaina without a word as Jaina came to her side.

She pointed, and Jaina lifted the spyglass.

“They weren’t there last night, were they?” She pulled back enough to see Sylvanas’ expression. The banshee shook her head.

“No. The waters were quite still.”

Jaina returned to staring out into the water. It was faint, but she could discern the tell-tale rippling as it moved from the western strait and into the open bay itself. She didn’t need to look closer. Her time in Nazjatar had taught her how to recognize even the most subtle of naga movements.

She lowered the glass, and handed it back to Sylvanas.

“Well now, that changes a few things.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

I managed to get an update (and the 100k word breaker one too!) before the one year mark!!

I apologize for the long waits. Writers Block + Work is an exhausting combination but here it is and I hope everyone has a blast reading it.

As this was mostly written at work, there are typos and grammar errors so I apologize in advance for those.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The three of them gathered on the shoreline as the last of the naga ducked beneath the distant waters with only a gentle ripple to tease their movement. Jaina could make out the flash of brilliant scales for a little while longer, but finally lost them beneath the waves.

“Well,” Alleria blew out a breath. She stood with her arms akimbo and her expression frozen somewhere between frustration and amusement. “This certainly puts the Lightforge’s actions in a new perspective.”

“The K’thir alone will wreak enough havoc to keep the Seaguard distracted, if not occupied, so why bring in the additional conflict with the Naga? Tandred doesn’t need any more convincing to allow Calia her base of operations.” Jaina stared out to the distant city as her mind worked feverishly over the complications introduced by the appearance of a potentially hostile third party.

“I don’t think they planned for the Naga to sniff around.” Alleria replied. “Turaylon has placed some bodies on the coasts but the Naga have been rather quiet - though I only have a few years to gauge that one. What do you think, Lady Moon?”

Sylvanas ‘hmmed’ as her reply. “Unsure. I have been out of touch for quite a while. *Have* the naga been much of a nuisance for the coasts?” She turned and directed that question to Jaina.

Jaina took a second to skim through the memory of her most concerning reports for the past year or so, then shook her head. “No. Once we put a stop to Azshara’s ambitions with the Tidestone, the Naga seemed to just disappear. They didn’t bother our trading routes, there were no longer any sightings of them on either of the routine or spontaneous patrols the Fleet took around the Isles.”

“So, probably safe with the assumption that they’re an unexpected third party to this little affair,” Alleria summed up with a tidy nod. The eldest Windrunner returned to staring out over the Sound, her ears twitching at noises Jaina couldn’t make out even with arcane enhancing her perception.

Sylvanas stood next to her sister, hands folded across her chest while her gaze systematically scanned the water. Her stance was loose, but Jaina caught a glimpse of the hard set of her jaw. Both elves seemed lost in thought.

Which is why when Alleria suddenly clapped her hands together, Jaina jumped.

“Right! So, hear me out - I know you two were thinking on taking things slow. Feeling out the
water, so to speak.”

“Alleria…” Sylvanas sent her a sharp look that Alleria easily ignored. “Whatever you’re thinking: no.”

“Uh-huh. Disapproval noted. Now, Lady Jaina,” Alleria spun on a heel and turned her glowing gaze over to Jaina. “My recommendation is two-fold --”

“Mine is to not listen to a word she says,” Sylvanas interrupted with a lazy drawl.

“Ignore her.” Alleria waggled her fingers in Sylvanas’ direction. The manic gleam of her eyes reminded Jaina of a cat scented on a mouse. “I think that caution is not the best course of action.”

“You never *have*.”

“Which is why I was your best Farstrider - anyway - Lady Jaina, I understand why you want secrecy - I do,” Alleria stressed, “and if we weren’t talking about The Inflexible Lightforged Army I wouldn’t bringing it up at all.”

Jaina figured she knew what Alleria wanted to suggest. After all, they had worked together closely during the Blood War, and Alleria’s aggressive presence on the frontlines along with her knowledge of guerrilla tactics *and* her sister’s way of thinking had been enough to press an already lethal advantage for the Alliance into a fatal blow on the last resistances of the Horde.

After all, Alleria had been the one to proposition Jaina’s coordination with the Lightforged Magi at the final assault on Suramar, and it had been Alleria who’s battle-plan that spearheaded the three-pronged assault on Orgrimmar. Jaina’s barometer for impulsivity in elves had been Vereesa for years - up until the moment Alleria arrived on the scene and threw off all of Jaina’s parameters.

“I will take your suggestion under advisement,” Jaina said.

Alleria’s ears swiveled hard. Even Sylvanas’ pricked forward at the smooth, political tone.

“Understood and appreciated. Lady Jaina,” Alleria’s voice tilted towards the same cool undertones, but Jaina found that she didn’t care. Alleria didn’t have face herself in the mirror after the deed had been done. Alleria had eagerly charged onto the front lines, cutting down the Horde that had mustered in defense of the Shal’dorei city.

Sylvanas remained uncharacteristically quiet, though she watched the two of them like a hawk.

“Well, then, consider my next ‘suggestion’ with the same sort of advisement: the Vindicaar’s arcane conduit is going to be destroyed within the span of the next few hours. If you --”

“I *knew* it!” Sylvanas hissed, “You only showed up because it benefited your agenda.”

Alleria determinedly kept her gaze away from her sister’s glare. “I admit that there is a synergy between our goals, yes -”

“What’s your plan, Lady Alleria?” Jaina cut through the sisters bickering before it could ramp into something nasty.

“Vereesa told me a bit about Falor’Thalas and what you were researching there, Lady Jaina. I realized that it could align --”

“No. Absolutely not --”
“Sylvanas, let her finish.”

Sylvanas’ ears pinned hard against her skull as she flashed Jaina a look of utter betrayal.

Jaina tried to drop the rigid formality of the Lord Admiral before she continued, “I just want to hear her out, that’s all. Trust me?”

Sylvanas took in a long, unneeded breath, then inclined her chin just a fraction of an inch. It was as much of an assent as Jaina would probably get, concerning the circumstances. Jaina looked back to Alleria for the eldest sister to continue.

Alleria took a similar breath to her sister. “I’m worried - no, I’m terrified for my ren’dorei. I’ve done my best trying to pass on Locus Walker’s teachings but they’re just not enough. There are factions within the ren’dorei that are certainly... unstable, I suppose.”

“How does Falor’Thalas factor in?”

“Containment.”

“That doesn’t give me anything, Lady Alleria.”

“For the Ren’dorei.”

Jaina blinked. Even Sylvanas looked taken aback. Alleria, for her part, looked relieved to be speaking on the subject with someone. Alleria crossed the shore until she stood facing away from the water, staring back at the forest. Somewhere above them, a crow cawed incessantly.

Sylvanas broke the silence. “More of them are losing themselves, aren’t they?”

Alleria nodded.

“What are the correlations?”

“It’s occurring mostly through the second-generation - er - those who come to the Void to be taught. It doesn’t have any particular patterns after that. I believe that the ones who were struck by the eldritch blast that first made the ren’dorei are considered ... marked.”

“Marked?”

Alleria nodded again. “They have a patron, so to speak. The residual energy from the Nexus Prince that died in the blast must have had some sort of stabilizing factor on the first-generation.”

Jaina frowned. She could easily follow Alleria’s reasons for her deductions, but not how Falor’Thalas fit in. A glance over to Sylvanas showed the banshee listening just as attentively.

“You’ve had Vereesa looking into this, haven’t you?” Sylvanas asked. “That’s why she was so worried about you - this is her theory.”

“I agree with her theory,” Alleria turned back around. “I think that’s why Locus Walker ultimately wanted me to siphon off energy from the Dark Naaru on Argus, and why he’s been resistant to the amount of newcomers we’ve had approach us.”

“Vereesa’s worried this will happen to you.”

“Syl, *I’m* worried it will happen to me,” Alleria cut through. “Not if. When.”
“So have your warlocks summon up a nasty creature or two and allow your worshippers to have a feast.”

Alleria opened her mouth, the retort just at her tongue, then just let the jab go, resorting instead to a simple glare directed her sister’s way. “Sylvanas, if it were that easy...”

“You wouldn’t need to come to me for assistance, yes, I know.”

Alleria pursed her lips, but she didn’t have a further comment.

Jaina worried at her lip. After what she experienced in Dalaran, Alleria’s fears were sound. “So - what’s your plan then?”

“It’s pretty much what my sister’s doing with the Forsaken - hide them away until we can figure out how to stabilize them. I know you’re looking into the wards around the city -”

Damn it, Vereesa, Jaina thought.

“No.” Sylvanas said, though it wasn’t as firm as her first refusal. Alleria caught on because that glare morphed into something more pleading. She stepped forward, closer to Sylvanas. “Absolutely not.”

“What better defenders could you have than the ren’dorei? They’re resistant to the Void and of all the people upon Azeroth - we understand what it’s like to be looked at as monsters.”

Sylvanas’ gaze sharpened. “No, you don’t.”

“No? I can assure you that my people know exactly what it’s like to have all your loved ones watching you with fear and pity in their gazes as they wait for the monster they know you are to rear its’ head.”

“Where was this sympathy four years ago, dear sister? Where was it right around the time you were accusing me of destroying all ounces of ‘the Sylvanas you used to know’?” The space around Sylvanas shifted toward the shadows and, hell, if Jaina wasn’t allowed to have magical outbursts - neither was Sylvanas.

Instead of quelling Sylvanas’ growing ire, though, Jaina turned the weight of her attention onto Alleria, who seemed to be ready to meet that growing darkness with her own. Like her sister, the air around her was twisting into that entropic inky space and as it expanded, Jaina swore she could hear those strange nonsensical whispers.

“Sylvanas has a point, Alleria,” Jaina jumped in, and stiffened as that dangerous gleam turned to fall on her. “You have never been one of the voices supporting the Forsaken -”

The endless dark that threatened to spill from the line of Alleria’s silhouette thrummed. Then, it disappeared. The sunlight resumed glittering on the bay. The birdsong returned to the trees. The wind that rustled through Jaina’s hair was born of the natural world, not the dark.

“You’re right.” Alleria lowered her hands, flapping them at her sides. “You’re absolutely right.”

Jaina watched her, wary of the sudden change, but allowed her own guard to drop little by little. “I - let me think on it, Alleria. Let us talk about it. It’s Sylvanas’ refuge, after all.”

Alleria’s eyes flickered over to Sylvanas. Sylvanas quirked her brows in return which prompted a drawn-out sigh from the eldest Windrunner. “Very well. You’ll have a short window to do
whatever it is you decide. If you decide.”

She turned on her heel. From her hip, she pulled out a small beacon that Jaina recognized from her own time working with the Lightforged. As Alleria strode away, she activated it, and a shimmer of golden light cascaded from the device.

It was strange to watch Alleria’s shadow disappear into the brilliance of the light, and the afterimage stayed with her long after the Light-Beacon closed.

Sylvanas was next to her, hands braced on her hips, but she wasn’t watching the same spot that Jaina had been. No, her gaze was lifted to the Vindicaar itself. It was like the elven woman was waiting for the axe to fall, and every passing second drew a tighter tension about her shoulders.

“Every instinct I have cultivated since my death is screaming at me right now,” Sylvanas said without prompting. She barely turned her head to look down at Jaina.

“You're still concerned about Alleria’s motivations?”

Sylvanas hesitated before answering. “I want to trust her,” she averted her gaze with the admission; like it was some shameful, dirty secret she’d just revealed; she braced herself, waiting for Jaina to think less of her for it.

“She’s your sister, you’re not committing a crime by wanting to believe in her.” Jaina reached out to tangle their hands together. She squeezed Sylvanas’ fingers, trying to transfer something similar to hope to the banshee. Affection was quickly becoming startlingly easy between them. Now thought led to action without any hesitation, and Sylvanas? Sylvanas was so receptive. She turned into those touches like a sunflower did to the sun, and Jaina had caught her searching for Jaina’s eyes during the conversation with Alleria, like she had been trying to confirm that it had really happened.

“I am not so certain that she is still the sister that I knew,” Sylvanas confided as she returned the squeeze. When Jaina pulled her hands back, Sylvanas kept the contact until the last possible moment. “And now, thanks to *you*, I am worried that I’m painting her with the same brush I accuse the living of doing so to my people.”

“Trust your gut. You know her. She’s your big sister.”

Sylvanas snorted. “As if you can talk.”

“What does that mean?”

Sylvanas shifted, facing her. “You are one of the most powerful mages known to Azeroth and you refuse to allow yourself to reach even a fraction of the power available to your fingertips. You consulme to trust Alleria when you resist trusting yourself. You practically shut down at the thought of acting on her idea.”

Jaina balked. “It’s different.”

“No, it really is not.”

“Yes, it really is.” Jaina knew she sounded petulant, but Sylvanas couldn’t possibly understand the weight of a mage’s power. How easy it was to draw just a little more to secure success; how simple it was to kill without effort. Hundreds of lives swept away in an instant with a single rune cast. “I’ve done some horrible things with that power, and it’s too easy to use it. I --”
“Jaina.” Sylvanas cut through her words, “I do not want to belittle your martyr complex, and I am quite sure that the self-deprecative speech you are about to give me is incredibly heartfelt - do not glare at me -”

Oh, Jaina would do more than simply glare.

Sylvanas seemed immune to the ocular attempt on her unlife, for she continued, “I am Azeroth’s most renowned destroyer of towns, peoples, and ideals. I promise you that if I notice you slipping towards world domination, or if I sense the urge within you to burn down a city or a tree…” now it was Sylvanas squeezing her fingers while she let out an overly-dramatic sigh. “I will gently nudge you onto the path of boring, banal goodness once more.”

There it was again. That bittersweet twist around her heart. Jaina sucked in a breath and mentally willed herself to - well, she didn’t know what she wanted to stop herself from. They were about to do something incredibly foolish, after all, and if she was captured or brought low - why resist what was slowly becoming an inevitable endpoint?

“I don’t even need a hypothetical link to see the flurry of thoughts running through your brain … right… now.”

The tips of Sylvanas’ ears fluttered. It was a movement that Jaina had never seen before on an elf.

Of course, she’d never kissed this particular elf’s cheek before, either. Sylvanas’s skin was cool underneath her lips, and softer than Jaina expected. She lingered there, raised up on her tiptoes with her hands balanced at Sylvanas’ shoulders, not sure how Sylvanas would react.

Sylvanas, for her part, was frozen in place. She was already uncannily similar to a marble statue, but now she was still-life. Then a gentle purple hue lifted onto her cheeks and the softest beginnings of a smile curved at the corners of her lips.

Her hands came up to rest chastely at Jaina’s waist. No. Chaste described the exhausted lean into her the night before. Now, Sylvanas held her as if she was spun from delicate Pandaren silk, as the only indication that Sylvanas was touching her was the chill that seeped through her corset.

Jaina chuckled and leaned back fully on her feet. She kept her hands at Sylvanas’ shoulders, ignoring the bite of the metal along the inner edge of the pauldrons as she shifted her weight.

“Huh, if I had known it’s been that easy to stop your sass all along,” She teased, her words lilting with the grin that she could feel stretching at her cheeks.

That seemed to knock Sylvanas back into motion. The banshee tilted her head back to throw on an imperious air and did her best to level a look down her nose at Jaina. It was ruined by the mauve flush at her cheeks that Jaina noticed spread down along the line of her throat and blossomed out over her chest.

“Shut up, Proudmoore.”

Jaina laughed. She tapped her fingers along Sylvanas’ shoulders before letting go and stepping back. Sylvanas didn’t drop her hold in return. She kept her hands at Jaina’s waist and seemed to struggle with what to do next.

Jaina watched the cascade of emotion with a calm she’d hadn’t expected. Sylvanas looked unsure, mostly with herself, as if she couldn’t quite understand what she’d done to deserve such an action.

Finally, reluctantly, Sylvanas released her. “I…I should go,” Sylvanas swallowed. “I mean - once Alleria disables the Vindicaar’s arcane detectors --”
“Hey,” Jaina went for Sylvanas’ hands, brought them up and for the third time, squeezed her fingers until the banshee paid attention to her, not the concerns that wracked through her mind. “All you need to worry about right now is grabbing our family and getting back to me safely, all right?”

Sylvanas stared at her with an inscrutable emotion before she bowed her head. “Very well.”

“Excellent, but first follow me please? We still have to establish the arcane link.” The waters of the bay lapped at Jaina’s calves and spilled up and over the tops of her boots as she waded into the deep until her waist was submerged and the chill claimed her lower half. Her breath came in sharp, quick gasps as she acclimatized to the cold.

When the shock faded and Jaina could think beyond the single-minded desire to seek warmth, she tossed a glance over her shoulder to where Sylvanas still stood on the shoreline. Sylvanas stared down at her gauntlets, expression shrouded by her hood and the curtain of her hair.

“Sylvanas?”

Sylvanas looked up, surprise flitting across her features. She took her time in removing her gauntlets before carefully setting them aside on the shore.

“We don’t have to do this,” Jaina insisted. “Not if you don’t want to.”

Sylvanas shook her head. “It isn’t about what I want or do not want, Jaina.”

“Then what?”

“Are you so certain that this is what you want?” Sylvanas asked suddenly, her head darting up to pin Jaina’s gaze with her own. “It isn’t something I can remove once it’s in place.”

Jaina smiled softly. “I appreciate your concern but yes, I am all right with the link –”

“Even though it’s with me - with a corpse?”

“It would surprise you but the doubts I might have with this course of action have nothing to do with your current lack-of-living status.” Jaina shrugged off her pauldron, and then slipped off her jacket, draping it over an arm. “It isn’t even your status as ex-Warchief.”

“Yet you have doubts.” Sylvanas pointed out as she stepped into the waves, as if that confirmed whatever assumptions she’d already cast over the affair.

Jaina watched as she approached, the water barely breaking around her movement. Jaina started to avert her gaze then stopped herself. Why should she? They were, essentially, about to commit to a rather serious intimacy - so what if she wanted to admire elven grace?

So Jaina allowed herself to openly stare, and hoped the appreciation came through her gaze. When Sylvanas noticed, Jaina chuckled as those slender ears pricked forward attentively. Curiosity changed the sharp angles of Sylvanas’ expression to a soft approachability that seemed so out of place on the banshee.

“Of course I have doubts, don’t you?” Jaina reached out as Sylvanas waded closer, and tugged the banshee along the last few inches. “From what you’ve described, we’re about to transcribe an arcane link between us that’s anchored in the resonance of our souls. It’s a field that has barely any
research into it - and there are more than a few ways this can go wrong; for either one of us.”

A small furrow appeared between Sylvanas’ brows. “That … is not at all what I was expecting.”

“I suppose I’ve decided that all that other stuff,” Jaina waggled a dismissive hand to emphasize her point, “was already figured out when I agreed to actively commit treason by working with you and not revealing your position to the Alliance roughly two months ago.”

Sylvanas snorted, “Fair point.”

When Sylvanas still hadn’t moved after a second, Jaina lifted up on tiptoe to meet her eyes. “I’m serious as a Kul Tiran Shipwright about a commission, Sylvanas. Say ‘no’ and we don’t have to do this - I refuse to have you thinking you’re bound to another’s will again.”

“That’s sweet,” Sylvanas drawled, clearly not on board with the honest display as Jaina was - then grunted when Jaina squeezed their hands a little harder than she should have. “Ow.”

“Stop deflecting.”

Sylvanas’ look bordered on the petulant. “I am doing nothing of the sort.”

“Liar.” Jaina accused without much feeling behind the word. After another moment of awkward silence, she blew out a breath. “So, how do we…?”

“Follow my lead.” Sylvanas’ fingers turned to mist within her grasp. The line of her body became as soft as shadow as Jaina watched, and bit by bit, that chill dripped into Jaina’s veins. It felt like stepping into a glacier-fed spring.

This time, prepared for it, the introspective retreat wasn’t as jarring to her conscious perspective. One moment, she was alone in her thoughts, and the next, there was that sense of the storm - the ozone crackling with potential.

“You’re lucky I grew up by the ocean,” Sylvanas spoke, and Jaina heard the reflection of her voice as if it were her own thoughts, “otherwise, you’d be far too salty for my tastes.”

“I’m not dignifying that with a response,” Jaina retorted. Sylvanas just laughed, and for once, it was free of any weight to it.

“You just did.”

“Your sister is right, you are a child.”

“Too late to back out now, Proudmoore,” Sylvanas’ voice within her mind was a smooth soprano and lacked the ethereal echo of her necromancy. “I’ve perfected my sense of humor over millennia.”

“Mm, it did sound a little outdated.”

Though Sylvanas’ glare could have burned through adamantine steel, the mirth that radiated through that subtle link stole away the edge. So much so that Sylvanas registered her lack of appropriate terror and her eyes narrowed with displeasure.

“Oh, see, now that will not do at all.”

Jaina simply grinned. When Sylvanas pulled away she took the cold with her.
“How do we know it worked?” Jaina, ever interested in new arcane theories, was already testing out the metaphysical nature of the bond. Sylvanas tilted her head to the side, working at her bottom lip with a fang as she considered how to answer the question.

“You reach out to the ley-lines, right?”

Jaina nodded. “I can’t see them, but I can tap them.”

Sylvanas opened her mouth. Though better about what she was just about to ask, but it was too late: that flush returned to her cheeks, and Tides help her, Jaina giggled.

“You want me to try and tap you?”

“I did not say that.”

“You were thinking it”

“I was not thinking that!” Sylvanas protested. “I was merely trying to remember the proper syntax in Common for what I was going to say -that’s all.”

“Mm. I’m sure.” Jaina nodded, and tried to put on as much dignified airs into the motion as possible. When Sylvanas’ ears drifted back, Jaina dropped into an easy-going smile. “However, it’s not too far off the mark, is it?”

“I find myself regretting this choice already.”

“Liar.”

Sylvanas quirked a smile.

Jaina eased out a breath, then stretched out that awareness of the magic around her. There, like a song was the ocean, always present - stronger now since her return to Kul Tiras. Then, like spiderwebs, the tantalizing crackle of the ley lines, rich with arcane. Her brow furrowed as she allowed her senses to drift further.

A sensation of sunlight tickled at her awareness, demanding attention. The gravity drew her whenever her control slipped a little. It was harmonizing, complementary. Jaina remembered it from the few times she’d required the aid of a Priest to help with a critical wound. Jaina drew back from that golden lure. She knew Sylvanas’ necromancy - the cold command that brushed over her skin - and with only a moment’s thought, it was there, tucked right against her ribcage as if she’d called on it herself.

A dangerous thought crept through her. Could she? Her eyes flicked to Sylvanas’ face.

The Banshee shrugged, as if aware of the dangerous question Jaina was thinking. “Besides you, I only share this awareness with the Dark Rangers and the children. None of them have magical talent.”

“I wouldn’t dare to try -” Jaina stammered, immediately trying to think of the right way to apologize for her instinctive curiosity and how to swear that she would never, ever go --

Sylvanas’ hands anchored her shoulders. “You might have to one day.” And, that was that.

Jaina wanted to press the subject but this wasn’t the time nor the place. Perhaps after all of this, they could broach that awkward commonality of their pasts. She risked a look up to the shadow of
the Vindicaar then allowed a tremble of vulnerability to enter her voice when she asked:

“You swear that you won’t allow another Suramar?”

Sylvanas’ hands moved from Jaina’s shoulders to cup her chin upward, her thumbs smoothing over the sharp angle of Jaina’s jaw. “I swear.” Her touch remained as her brow crinkled with concern. “They might come for you.”

“I know.” Jaina felt the pressure push against the back of her eyes and saw the blue-white glow cast over Sylvanas’ skin as she allowed the magic to gather. “I’ll be ready for them.” She matched Sylvanas’ answering smile with a feral grin of her own.

Jaina called upon the achingly familiar weave of a teleportation spell and tore open the space between reality.

Aware of the countermeasures in place, Jaina threw all of her focus on the dissolution of the rerouting trap. It lurked there in the web of her charms and safeguards like a spider, primed for the faintest tug to spring the snare. Only this time, Jaina dashed from one point to another, and then immediately through to another - never stopping. As soon as she felt the world solidify around her, she tore through it again. And again.

She balanced on the surface tension of the water, teasing the waves that she’d break underneath them before she moved on. Somewhere between the fourth and the fifth teleport the snare struggled to keep her pinned.

“Fly fast,” she bade Sylvanas. The Banshee Queen gave her a solemn nod before the trap snapped closed. It went to re-calibrate on Jaina’s position with the next spell, not aware of the prize that slipped underneath it’s’ all-reaching power.

Taking one step, Jaina went from the shallows of Tiragarde to standing over the abyssal rocks that had stolen many a careless ships’ legacy. Another step, and Jaina strutted along the cobbled rocky shoreline where just a day ago, she’d been warned about a Siren’s Lure.

Each step took her somewhere within her kingdom, her boots always striding through the water. As she walked from place to place, the ripples of her spells aftershocks began to collide. The spells splashed against one another as Jaina continued her mad dash. When Jaina’s own mental tally of where she’d been began to blend with her where-she-would-be and where-she-was-now, she knew that she could catch her breath.

Just a breath.

For her sudden burst of arcane prowess didn’t just draw the attention of the Vindicaar, no. It would have been felt by even the novices among the Alliance champions and --

She rolled out of the way as a dark shadow materialized in the water just beneath her feet. She stepped through and appeared on the top of a half-submerged rock nearby as a graceful serpentine head broke through the surface, orange-jeweled eyes squinting against daylight.

The Naga Sorceress held a readied spell in her hands, the runes shifting lazily despite their stasis. That baleful stare was sent around, and settled uncomfortably long upon the point of balance that Jaina kept under an improvised invisibility spell.

Seconds passed.

It was the cool surety of the motion that alerted her to the crest of the wave, and as Jaina dived to
one side, her invoked ice barrier severed the tips of a trident - the frozen metal clinking as it bounced against the rocks.

The myrmidon was not a picture of grace. The Warrior-Guards of the Naga were monstrous, their serpentine heritage exaggerated beyond simple genetics. This one hissed, baring daggers for fangs. This close, Jaina can see herself in the naga’s scales and though her ice barrier holds, there’s a worrisome creaking as the myrmidon sets more and more of his bulk against her shield. A growing sense of the stagnation of her movement starts to tick in her mind. Jaina twists, shooting off a warning set of arcane missiles as the sorceress joins her battle-companion.

“There you are, you slippery little eel,” The sorcesses Common was poor with her words nearly lost in a sibilant hiss. “You won’t be going anywhere now.”

Claustrophobia bubbled within her. Jaina brought up another facet of her awareness to counterspell the stasis that weaved against her thighs. The pressure of the arcane thundered into a full-blown migraine.

“I have no quarrel with you but if you don’t back off - I will happily show you the true meaning of being cold-blooded,” Jaina growled.

The stasis spell fell to tatters around her legs. The sorceress drifted closer, wary. “You don’t just throw that much power around for the thrill of it. You might be strong, but your pitiful mortal body will break sooner or later.”

She wasn’t wrong. Maintaining the various spells was sapping at Jaina’s reserves. Soon, it would be her own body that would become the conduit for her casting. Still, the naga would have to gamble on when that would happen - and how long Jaina could endure such a state.

“I’ll say it again: I have no fight with you, Sorceress. Let me go.”

The myrmidon snarled something in the naga’s language. It didn’t sound friendly.

The sorceress ignored him in favor of coming closer. Like the others of her kin, she wore little in ways of clothing to better serve underwater movement. Despite the serpentine flair, she carried the aesthetic beauty of all elf-descendants. Her expression turned curious.

“Tell me what you hunt, human. Perhaps we seek the same thing?”

The ice barrier cracked - the trident crept another inch close to her skin.

Jaina decided that honesty would probably keep that trident from burying into her flesh. “I’m not after the K’thir, but I know who summoned them - and where. Let me continue what I’m doing and I’ll tell you.”

The sorceress pulled up just short of being abreast. She treaded water and made it look like she was dancing. “What’s the catch?”

“You’ll be facing down Lightforged.”

“What do I care about Eredar?” The sorceress gestured and with that, the myrmidon backed off. With a nasty pull, he retrieved his trident, and took some of Jaina’s Ice Barrier with it, the frost snaking around the spines of the weapon before dripping away. “Now, where do I find the Beckoning Stone?”

Jaina detailed the Stormsong Monastery, and the underground tunnels. There had to be an
underwater access if the K’thir had erupted into the central chamber.

The sorceress fixed Jaina with a haughty sneer. “If you come after us, we’ll see just how many
spells you can weave at once, human.”

Jaina returned the stare. “Gladly.”

They disappeared without a ripple. Jaina’s Timewarp warbled. That was enough of a close-call for
her. She Blinked forward so she wouldn’t sink beneath the waves herself. She Blinked a second
time to keep up the momentum before she did one final teleport - landing in the place of power she
and Sylvanas had rested in the previous night.

Jaina’s skull wanted to explode. Every pulse of magic caused another surge of pain to lance
directly across her optic nerve until it struck at the back of her head. It seemed that even a few
years was more than enough for her body to forget what the rush of a titan’s cast-off power was
like. This was Pandaria all over again.

Her vision greyed out, the corners fading entirely into a blur of washed out color. The headache
reached down along her neck and hooked itself right between her shoulder blades. Every turn,
every shift only brought pain.

Still.

She could claim victory.

Her body felt like it broke in two during the escape, sure, but the evacuation had been successful.

Something brushed at her fingertips. She glanced down, oh so carefully, to spy Moth licking gently
along the back of her knuckles before he curled up against the curve of her hand.

“You gonna take a break with me, little guy?” Jaina asked, wincing with the crack of exhaustion
that struck through her voice.

Moth looked back at her. He chirruped - a mournful sound for an otherwise chipper batling, then
stared into the thorns that barricaded the thicket around them. He watched for something - but
what, Jaina couldn’t figure out.

Sylvanas would be in Falor’Thalas now, dealing with Katherine, Vereesa, and the other refugees
by herself. Jaina chuckled thinking of that conversation.

Moth shifted against her hand, tucking his head against her fingers. Soon, Jaina felt a slow,
rhythmic rise and fall of his entire body as he slipped into slumber. That distracted her,
momentarily. Obviously, the little bat wouldn’t need to breathe - was it more for comfort? Instinct?
After all, Sylvanas still breathed, even when half her chest was broken open and her lungs weren’t
functional in the slightest.

Just a little longer to catch her breath, then Jaina would head to the arranged point with Alleria.
That’s what she told herself. Just a little longer to let her head stop pounding so hard.

She leaned back, closed her eyes, and tried to steady her breathing into something sustainable. In
and out slowly, one-two-three. She’ll get through this. It’s not as bad as when she first aligned a
mass teleport on the fly as a student. This is manageable.

This is…
Dark. Cold. Jaina’s eyes opened on a veil of mist. She jerked up, panic gripping her for a second. She fell asleep? How long? She looked up toward the sky, hoping to gauge something by the moons or the stars and found …

The swirling vortex that haunted the Shadowlands churning into the nether.

Dread crept into her bones. She knew that sky like she knew her darkest fears.

“No.”

She got to her feet. Moth was nowhere to be found. The trees clawed their branches towards the grey sky as they miserably tried to achieve their own escape.

“No. Nononono. Impossible.” Jaina spun in place, panic now gripping along her throat.

How was she back in the Blighted Lands?!

How? It wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be.

“Oh, but it is,” comes a voice she hasn’t heard for years.

“You’re not real.” Jaina didn’t even bother to turn around. She still carries the scars from her first imprisonment. “You weren’t real then, and you certainly aren’t now.”

“You can hear me,” the voice comes closer, along with the crunch of leaves under weighted combat boots. The soft clink of plate-metal has Jaina’s eyes falling shut in a desperate attempt to avoid seeing the apparition before her. “Open your eyes, and you’ll see me again.”

“I don’t want to see you again.”

“Jaina.” He - no - It still lingers on the first syllable of her name. She had loved it when she was younger - the Lordaeron accent so much smoother than the rough Kul Tiran brogue she’d been embarrassed about as a child.

“No.” Jaina’s resolute. She’s been through this before - she can endure until --

“You expect Katherine to find you a second time? How can she when she doesn’t even know you’re lost?” That wasn’t Arthas. “You have a strong will, but even you can’t hold out for eternity in this place.”

Jaina paled, and opened her eyes. She found a man who looked heart-rendingly like Arthas had when they were young, but his eyes … oh, his eyes burned with orange coals.

“You.”

Arthas’ laugh was a smooth, rich chuckle. “Ah, so you do remember our brief encounter, Daughter of the Sea.”

“What can I say, you made a lasting first impression.” Jaina’s gaze narrowed. “N’zoth.”

N’zoth, or, well, his avatar, smiled. It’s wide and boyishly-charming. It disturbed her to see it, so Jaina cast her sight beyond him and found them surrounded by an expansive clearing, with a raging bonfire blazing in the center. Dark figures, nameless and faceless danced in wild abandonment about it.

“Yes, this is still the Blighted Lands,” N’zoth answered before the question even burbled
completely into her mind. “For the ancient Drust, it was simply the Otherworld - where spirits act out their lives just as they’d done while they took breath. Gorok Tull saw it as a prison, a place of madness and isolation, but I, however…”

He offered his arm for her. Jaina, not seeing a better option, risked to take it. As she did, the scenery around them changed. Gone were the barren trees and the fireside dancing. In their place was the grand ballroom of Lordaeron, the walls arching up grey-sleek and smooth between the wide, richly embossed tapestry.

The firelit dancers were now finely-dressed nobility in sweeping skirts, spun gaily around the room by partners hidden away by masks. The music slid along her senses, beguiling her into taking that first spin around the floor.

N’zoth smiles at her through Arthas’ eyes as they settle into the simple steps of the waltz. “I’ve been watching you for a while, Daughter of the Sea. I have to admit, I’m glad to see that self-imposed exile has not diminished your talents with the arcane.”

“Would you like a demonstration?” Jaina snarled, “Because I’d be happy to show you.”

“Now now, there’s absolutely no need to get violent. I simply wish to talk.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

Jaina scowled.

N’zoth canted his head, studying her. “Did you know that you’ve got a touch of the Void on your arcane signature? It’s so refreshing to feel such a direct connection to the cosmos.”

“What do you want, N’zoth?”

N’zoth’s eyes narrowed with that statement. “Well, that answer will take far too long, Daughter of the Sea.”

“With me. Here.”

N’zoth spun them to the center of the dance. All around them couples glided past, their faces hidden away and the colors of their formalwear blurring together. “I want you to seal away the creature that rests below the Tirisfal Mountains.”

Jaina didn’t believe there was any point in lying about what she may or may not know about the Void below the elven ruins. “Why?”

“Again, I ask: why not? Isn’t it already your agenda - to twist those wards not only to section off the city from the world like the Nightborne - but to keep that whispering dark at bay?”

“Doesn’t that go against your plans?”

“What do you know about the plans of a God, Daughter of the Sea?” N’zoth stopped, his voice deepening like the depths of his abyssal domain. All around them, the room continued to spin. Quicker, and quicker until Jaina couldn’t even make out the individual dancers any longer.

“I know not to trust them.”

N’zoth laughed, a booming noise that hurt her ears. “Wise of you.”
Jaina hummed noncommittally. “I’m waiting for the catch.”

“No catch,” N’zoth resumed their part in the dance. “There’s no need for secrets between us, I think. Not when you and I can assist the other in achieving their ambitions.”

“I don’t have ambitions, N’zoth.”

That amber gaze fell upon her. “Don’t you?” He tugged her close. He even smelled like Arthas had - the armor-polish, the woodsy scent of the Prince’s daily patrols with the knights. “Protecting your family? That’s a noble ambition if I’ve ever known.”

“And what price are you demanding in return?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” N’zoth inquired. “I don’t want them interfering with the rise of my empire.”

Jaina knew there had to be more to it than that. “So, why not simply destroy them?”

“How quaint that you think you can kill a god. Do you mortals truly think that your victories over the others will be so forever? Do you think that my brothers are vanquished and their kingdoms laid to dust?”

Jaina honestly hadn’t given it much thought.

N’zoth chuckled. “Of course you did. Well, allow me to enlighten you on the realities of the Gods you face: they slumber, but they will return, and when they return - they will reach for their own kingdoms and petty goals. I want to have my rule secured by that time.”

“You’re telling me that what lies beneath Tirisfal is an Old God?”

“That would be telling, but rest assured, Daughter of the Sea, that God or Not, you do not want that essence released from its prison.”

Jaina’s mind began to shift into gear. On the surface, it sounded like N’zoth’s request ran perfectly parallel to Alleria’s request with isolating the ren’dorei. On the surface. However, underneath were sinister implications that made Jaina’s blood run cold.

Jaina slowed the dance. “Don’t you have another patsy? What happened to your pet Queen?”

N’zoth’s cheerful demeanor faded, just a bit. “I would prefer we keep this a pleasant conversation, don’t you? After all - isn’t it nice to spend time with your first love as he was before the Legion’s … corruption?”

“All you’ve told me, N’zoth, is that you’re scared of whatever lurks in Tirisfal. You could have sent that through a proxy.”

“I am not scared. I am concerned - as should you be. I can assure you, that if you allow that creature a chance to escape and you’ll wish that the Black Empire would have been all that you’ll face in the coming years. Daughter of the Sea - you do not want to be caught in the middle of two gods battling for dominance. Not when you care for your fellow mortals so.”

“No deal, N’zoth.”

N’zoth scowled. “This is the only time I’ll be willing to lend my assistance so freely, Daughter of the Sea. Are you so certain you want to refuse so hastily? After all, you’re not my only avenue towards my goal - just the most efficient.”
Jaina laughed softly. “Who? Certainly not Azshara - she’s been lost ever since Tyrande struck her through. Your corrupted Tidesages are gone.”

“Why, there’s a mortal saying that covers it wonderfully. It goes: The enemy of my enemy is my ally. You’ve been so insistent on keeping the Lightforged away from Tirisfal. It would probably cause you no end of grief if they’re … encouraged to snoop a little closer.”

"Bullshit. I think you’re bluffing, and I think you're scared." She said finally, and the dance around them died. The torches burned down and cast long, mournful shadows across the floor. As the darkness fell over the other dancers, they seemed to wither away until they were little more than ghosts of the past staring at her.

"I do not get scared."

"No? Then why bother coming forward at all? You're worried about whatever is sealed below the Glades and it seems like you're offering quite a bit for something so simple. After all, you call yourself a God and you believe yourself victorious. It took you eons with your weakened prison to even come close to the recreation of your empire."

"Daughter of the Sea, I come as a friendly party. Do you want me as your enemy?"

"You have *always* been my enemy N'zoth." Jaina took several steps back. She couldn't call on her magic here, but she had her will.

N'zoth's gaze turned molten with rage. The light was all but gone now, and the ghosts carried a hunger in their expression that sent the first fizzle of fear down Jaina's spine. Yet, she couldn't back down now.

"If that's how you want to play this out, so be it. There are more than you, Daughter of the Sea, who are amenable to my ministrations."

Jaina stubbornly jerked her chin upward out of his grasp. "Go to Hell."

With that, the Old God snarled and the room around her collapsed into darkness. There was the hiss of magic, and in the inky void, Jaina watched as one by one, the eyes of the dead opened. All of them burned with sickly yellow gluttony and they began to crowd around her.

"My dear - you're already there." N'zoth laughed, and the amber gleam of the god's awareness began to fade from Arthas' eyes as he pulled away into the void. "Allow me to grant you a taste of what I can offer you. When was the last time you experienced happiness, my dear archmage? You might reconsider my offer when you realize what I can restore to you. After all, my dear, I have all of eternity, - what do you have left?" There was a dangerous pause, then: "what does your family have left?"

"Damn you!" Jaina surged forward, but the Old God's presence was gone. She found herself clutching the lapels of an Arthas who stared at her with such boyish charm that it shook her.

"If you wanted a dance, Jaina, you only needed to ask," he plucked at her hand and lifted it as they spun back into the dance. The lights flared up again, blazing over her memories. She protested, but the words died on her lips as she fell back into the steps she remembered as a girl back when the only worries she truly held were ensuring that she made her family proud - made her mentors proud.

Around and around they went, the dance sweeping her up in its wake until she couldn't remember anywhere else she’d rather be.
"Isn't this nice?" Arthas inquired, bringing her close enough that their conversation was a whisper underneath the violins. "Nothing else matters right now. Not the kingdom, not your studies, not Uther's droning lectures... all you have to worry about is making sure you don't step on my feet again."

Jaina laughed. "I step on your feet? One of us has talent, Prince Arthas."

Arthas bowed his head. "You're right, of course. I'm not used to the weightlessness without my boots."

They continued around the room. As they swayed to the music, Jaina felt like there was something missing. It came to her in the strange flickering of the torchlight that turned Arthas' hair from his rich honey-blond to a pale, wax-white. As he twirled her out, then back in, she swore that the guests carried a sick hunger that gleamed yellow in the firelight.

Every glimpse under the glamour reminded Jaina where she was, and the more she chased those fleeting images, the more she remembered that this wasn’t where she was meant to be. Where she hadn’t meant to be for decades.

Very well…

The wind picked up, the windows flung open to let in the cool countryside air. As the breeze rushed around her, it carried with it the scent of the ocean. The sound of sea birds breaks through the melody as the music shifts from the winding dream of Lordaeron to a jaunty tune. Gone were the string quartet and the sections of woodwinds - replaced by a single fiddle and an accompaniment on the flute.

Laughter steals her breath as Jaina is tugged forward through the stone archway and out underneath the open night sky. A fire blazed merrily in the central court, the driftwood crackling under the flames.

Pained’s eyes were lovely, the silver shimmering with the firelight, and she pressed a mug brimming with cider into Jaina’s open hands. “You told me to give you an hour. I did exactly that. Now, come and join your people?”

Jaina looked out over a sea of faces that she loved dearly. Kinnidy was perched on the corner of a market stall that had been cleared for what appeared to be a rowdy game of Hearthstone if the cheers were anything to go by. Pained slipped past her to greet several of the new arrivals from Teldrassil, the young Kal'dorei recruits shy but wide-eyed as they stared at the festivities from the safety of the shadows.

A silver peal of laughter steals the spotlight. Vereesa danced just a step ahead of Rhonin, her eyes dancing with mischief as she keeps a scroll inches from his reach. She leaps to scramble across a log-turned-bench and loses her footing when he ices the oak beneath her. They tumbled out of sight.

The sea-salt air stings as she takes a deep breath of it. She can’t bring herself to step forward and join the crowd. She watched from the side-line, and her heart hurts at how they can still find these moments of happiness even with the threat of Deathwing looming overhead.

Live every moment like the last, she remembered Aegwynn’s advice. It was something Jaina struggled with daily, but here, surrounded by the people she served, she thought she was finally beginning to understand how to do just that.
Her eyes skimmed the statue of Daelin Proudmoore and she wondered, as she tended to, about the what ifs concerning him. What if she’d been able to convince him that Theramore could have thrived as a truly neutral city - a place where the Horde and the Alliance could work to remake the world together.

She thought back on her mother’s disapproving stare. The bite of the necklace as Katherine ripped it from around Jaina’s neck. The cold mist that crept at the edge of the pier.

Laughter stole her breath away as Jaina was tugged underneath the open night sky. A fire blazed merrily in the central court, the driftwood crackling under the flames.

Pained’s eyes were lovely, the silver shimmering with the firelight, and she pressed a mug brimming with cider into Jaina’s hands. “You told me to give you an hour. I did exactly that. Now, leave those meddlesome thoughts and come and join your people?”

Jaina looked out over a sea of faces that she loved dearly. Pained slipped past her to greet several of the new arrivals from Teldrassil, the young Kal’dorei recruits shy but wide-eyed as they stared at the festivities from the safety of the shadows.

Kinnidy gambled away her earnings on the outcome of a Hearthstone match. Pained welcomed a group of wide-eyed kal’dorei, their armor starched and barely-used. Vereesa laughed, her game of keep-away threatening her balance as Rhonin kept pace with the athletic elf.

“Little Moon hates being alone. I never realized how good Rhonin was for her until he was gone.”

Jaina startled at the voice.

Around her, the fire blazed high and danced with a series of illusions as the magisters challenged each other to send the flames into even-more elegant spirals and designs. All around her, the sea of quel’dorei swayed with the thousands of hues between the dark stretch of twilight, to the pale white of the sun’s zenith. The colors of the sky and sea filled Sunfury Spire as Belore cast a dazzling crimson over the entire affair. Jaina spied azure, turquoise, cerulean, teal, and shades that she’d never before seen as the dancers spun around. She gathered her skirts and whirled to face the person behind her.

Sylvanas’ silver-gold hair flowed freely about her shoulders and contrasted beautifully with the blue and gold of her ceremonial leathers. Her eyes, glowing the same soft blue as many of the elves around them, crinkled with fondness as their gazes met.

“I can’t tell if this is your dream or mine, now. Curious.” Sylvanas stood with her arms behind her back. Her ears twitched, though, and gave away the note of nervousness that carried through her frame.

“Does that matter?” Jaina held out her hand. She smiled, and felt warm when it was returned.

“No,” Sylvanas took her hand and stepped closer. “I suppose it doesn’t.” She let one hand settle to the curve of Jaina’s hip as she led them through the steps of a concentric waltz, the steps something fanciful and filled with wide, sweeping turns. The music swallowed them within its melody and what little conversation they managed drifted between them during the lulls.

At first, Jaina didn’t know what she wanted to do with her hands. Did she set them upon Sylvanas’ shoulders? Or does she link them about the woman’s neck? Her thoughts race - what was appropriate for elves? Jaina knew, vaguely, that they had a thing about their throats --

“Would you like to stop?” Sylvanas slowed their steps. Jaina fiercely shook her head.
“No, no. I just,” Jaina felt foolish as she asked, “Where can I touch you?”

“Where would you like to?”

Jaina’s eyes shyly dipped towards Sylvanas’ neck.

Sylvanas didn’t look taken aback, nor did she patronize Jaina with a small smile. Rather, she lifted a hand and her fingertips left a burning trail as they traveled up Jaina’s arms to link about her wrist. She gently tugged until Jaina’s hand curved about her neck. It brought them flush together, Jaina’s hips nestled against Sylvanas’, and she could feel the smallest motion of Sylvanas’ thighs as the elven woman picked up the pace again.

The soft blue gleam of Sylvanas’ eyes turned purple as they danced beneath the final glimmers of the sunset. Almost turned crimson, even.

As the music faded from one song into the next, so too did their steps. However, instead of politely breaking apart, they lingered together. Sylvanas was so warm, and though the azure gleam of her eyes was vivid this close to the Sunwell, Jaina swore she could see past it.

Sylvanas’ gaze kept darting to her lips, and when they swayed together, Jaina could feel the rabbit-patter of the ranger’s heart against her chest.

It felt right to lean up. It felt right to tilt her head just to the side so their mouths would fall together.

It was stopped, by a gentle hold. Sylvanas stared down at her with an expression that burned Jaina to look at. There was unmistakable want there, but beyond the heady glaze in Sylvanas’ eyes, the rest of her was stiff and unapproachable.

“I suppose it was too much to ask for just a little while longer.”

Jaina frowned, not following.

“It’s selfish; and unfair to you.”

Oh. Oh. Embarrassment flooded through Jaina, and she immediately stepped back. “I’m so sorry, I thought - I don’t know what I thought.”

“It’s time to wake up, Jaina.” The gentle teasing was gone, replaced with a wistful determination. They had stopped somewhere on the outskirts of the crowd, tucked between two rearing horse statues, the hooves kicking out towards the glittering ocean beyond the Spire. “You shouldn’t be trapped here,” that was followed by a long pause, and then Sylvanas gave off a bitter laugh. “I don’t even deserve to be here.”

“What does that even mean?” Jaina didn’t understand. And when Sylvanas dropped her hands away, Jaina followed as if chasing the sun itself over the horizon. She went after Sylvanas onto the balcony, where they were both cast into lavender shadow.

“It means that as much as I want to continue this dance, as much as I want to - “ Sylvanas’ eyes dipped down to Jaina’s lips before she wrenched her gaze away. “I can’t, in good consciousness, because this isn’t real.” She laughed, disbelieving, “And I can’t believe I even thought I could indulge.”

In the twilight, Sylvanas’ skin was less crimson, more marble, and as she stood stock-still at the terrace, she looked as if she was carved from the same stone as the horses that flanked her.
One of the horses was missing its head, the forehooves kicking out over a broken railing. Jaina frowned.

Around her, the fire blazed high and danced with a series of illusions as the magisters outdid themselves, twisting the flames into elegant designs and spirals.

“No.” Sylvanas’ voice dragged her back. Jaina still stood on the terrace. Jaina still wore the blue and gold silk of the elven dress, and her back was slick with sweat from the braizer’s cloying heat, but this time, Sylvanas wore the simplistic leather of a ranger, all the better to keep unnoticed in the city streets.

Her skin was marble, dusted with the faintest blush of purple. Her cloak billowed in the evening breeze, and whipped around the broken pieces of her cuirass, revealing the pale and freshly healed skin beneath it.

Sylvanas bent over the railing, staring out at the sunset. Her posture was pulled in to herself, her shoulders hunched over, her arms tucked together, her head ducked low. Even the slant of her ears aided in the imagery of a woman who wanted to not be seen.

Jaina didn’t understand. Hadn’t they just been dancing, enjoying the sunset? She took a few hesitant steps towards Sylvanas, unsure if she should reach out to her - or even if she could.

“When I realized what was going on, I thought it would be so simple to pull you out of it.” Sylvanas’ voice was rough, and thick with emotion. She still wouldn’t look back at Jaina. “I underestimated whatever is keeping you here.”

“Keeping me where, exactly?” Jaina decided to take that final step forward, and rested her arms on the balustrade next to Sylvanas. She looked down at the crashing waves and marveled at the delicate dance of colors that cascaded through the water as it crested and ebbed. She had always been distantly aware that Silvermoon was a coastal city, but to see how the city seemed to naturally spill into the ocean, with the various docks and piers - the districts with their high spiranets.

“Here. I remember all of the humans allowed into Silvermoon after the Second War and you, Jaina Proudmoore, have never set foot in my homeland - have you?”

Jaina started to protest. Surely she’d been to Silvermoon before! “I’m here now, aren’t I?”

“Are you?” Sylvanas asked, head tilting to offer up a burning side-long glance. “This is the first dance of Midwinter, before Belore sinks into the ocean and the elves suffer through the coldest, and longest night of the year. At midnight, the enchantments are dropped until Belore returns in the morning.”

Jaina frowned. She’d never heard of that tradition.

Sylvanas shrugged at her puzzlement. “Why would you? It wouldn’t be something celebrated in Dalaran - the elves there actually understand what the seasons are.”

“Then - why am I here?”

“This was my favorite night of the year when I was younger,” Sylvanas said. “I loved the pageantry, the frantic giddiness of the festival as the enchantments were brought down and the noble houses experienced cold and - granted - mild hardship for a night. It brought us together, from common laborer to the King himself. For one night, we were one people enduring the elements.” Sylvanas paused. Then, she allowed herself a wistful chuckle. “My mother would make this mint hot chocolate and we’d all huddle up after the dances tired us out.”
Jaina frowned, “Did you not want me to see this?”

Sylvanas’ head jerked up. “What? No. No, I don’t care if you see this.”

“Then why are you pulling away from me?”

Sylvanas scoffed, it was a softer sound that her usual scorn. She looked down to her hands, her knuckles blanched from the pressure she pushed on them. “Because this is a beautiful lie. I wanted to …” she tugged at her lower lip with a fang. “I wanted to enjoy it. Just for a moment. Remember what it was like to be alive and to truly feel the pleasure of someone’s company who wanted to be around me. Desired me for me - not for the name, the title, the infamy… it’s selfish, I know,” her voice dropped to nearly a whisper, “But … happiness comes rare nowadays.”

Jaina’s heart kicked up in speed. “You didn’t exactly answer the question…?”

“I find myself unable to lie to you, Jaina. Or, no, let me rephrase that. Common is so … “ Sylvanas’s ears were twitching now. “I find myself not wanting to lie to you, Jaina. You have been impossible to deal with since this whole thing started but you have this determination about you. You want to do the right thing - to the point that you make a martyr look selfish.”

Sylvanas turned and Jaina was fully faced with the cold truth. The warmth of the Ranger General was gone, replaced by the Banshee Queen. “I find myself wanting to believe in you - in what you say - and reminded that perhaps, not so long ago, I used to believe those very things myself.”

Jaina flushed, but said nothing. She wanted to hear what Sylvanas had to say. Instead, she reached out to lay her hand carefully over Sylvanas’ forearm.

“I had hoped that maybe there might be something growing between us. I can’t describe it, I don’t think you could either - but I want to believe you’re feeling it too?” Sylvanas’ voice cracked on the last word. “I want to explore that - this. I want to explore this, and as soon as I think that maybe there’s a chance that you might actually want to …” she trailed off. “You are not allowed to get underneath my skin, Jaina Proudmoore, and then go get yourself locked in a prison of happily ever afters. I’m going to be selfish about this: I refuse to let you waste away here even if that means we simply remain unlikely allies in this whole drama.”

Sylvanas looked around them, at the memories of a city she could never return to. “So, unfortunately, that requires me waking you up, Jaina, and that involves returning to our Azeroth with the High Inquisitor of the Lightforged really invested in your recruitment, your family divided, exiled from your homeland - again.”

“And you,” Jaina added.

Sylvanas winced. “Yes, and me.” She pulled her arm out from underneath Jaina’s touch.

Jaina took in the twilight around them. By now, the only illumination came from the multitude of bonfires, and the shimmering of enchanted lamps that dotted along the archways and promenades. Down below on the water, small sailing vessels lit by the same sort of enchanted lights drifted lazily on the currents. “None of this is real, is it?”

Sylvanas lifted a hand to brush the back of her fingers delicately along Jaina’s cheek. Her touch drifted down, and feathered along Jaina’s jaw until she tenderly cradled Jaina’s neck, tilting her chin upwards. “Well, no, I very much enjoyed our dance, but I realize that I am no fairytale prince. Choosing me? You will not have a happily ever after. We honestly might die before Midwinter comes around.”
“I’m too stubborn to die,” Jaina murmured, tilting her head into Sylvanas’ touch with a slow nuzzle.

Sylvanas chuckled softly. “Indeed you are.” She stayed there for a little while longer, then started her retreat. She stopped when Jaina reached up to keep her hand where it was. She blinked, quick and uncertain when Jaina closed the distance between them. “What are you doing?”

“I would hope that would be obvious. I believe this is what you called ‘Choosing You’?”

Sylvanas flushed. It was a pretty, purple hue on her. “That’s fair.” She admitted, and scrunched her nose when Jaina laughed. When Jaina hadn’t moved, however, Sylvanas’ ears swiveled upright and slightly canted forward. Interested. Attentive. Curious. Yet Jaina could also see the fear tucked right behind the rest of it. If anyone was ever going to make the first move, it would have to be her.

That was all the permission Jaina required. She lifted up on her tip-toe, cupped the back of Sylvanas’ neck, then kissed her.

After a moment’s surprise, Sylvanas kissed her back.

They stayed there, gently indulging in the sudden discovery of each other, for a little while longer until Jaina finally dipped her head away, and with a full-fledged smile, started to write out a teleportation spell.

“Let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

See, I can totally write them kissing! It's not just hand holds up in here!
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

A combination of trauma season butting up right against flu season + the disappointing end to BfA led to a writer's block that took a while to get out of. Many thanks to everyone online that helped me get past that slump - and, for Christmas joy - the next three chapters will be released every other week!

Enjoy!

Two weeks after their flight from Kul Tiras, and Jaina’s anxiety was as high as she’s ever experienced it. Surprisingly, the Kul Tirans had been steadily resistant against the strange and eldritch potential of Falor'Thalas. After all, Katherine commented over a quick dinner, the sea-farers were long used to the gentle whispers at the edge of dreams, and the alluring temptations of the dark waters just beyond the shore. The strange creature that slumbered fitfully beneath the stones was no different than the ocean’s mysteries. Jaina didn’t have her mother’s confidence in the bulwark of their nation’s cultural quirks lasting long against a dreaming void-entity, but what other choice did they have at the moment?

Instead, Jaina found that the worst of her problems she faced were the sort of issues that every burgeoning township experienced; with all of the mundane complications and complaints that came with such an influx of, well, life.

On better days, it reminded her of the first stumbling months of Theramore - only there, she’d had the luxury of wanting to be known and putting herself out onto the political map. She’d once lived for the trade reports and diplomatic intrigue. The establishment of a treaty for lumber between the fledgling Horde and the Kal’dorei had her as giddy as the first time she’d managed a successful portal.

Here, however, while the chase had considerably cooled since Alleria’s meddling with the Vindicaar, Jaina spent much of her nights awake and terrified that the next report would be the one to reveal the Lightforged at their door, or the madness that had plagued the ancient elves was now rippling through the living population, or any other complication that could strike as soon as her guard dropped.

Such were the troublesome thoughts that bubbled through her mind. Jaina groaned, and gnawed on the end of her quill; scowling when she found half of the feather’s barbs were bent and broken as she went to scratch out yet another aborted composition to Silvermoon. Jaina knew she should be far more focused on properly wording her tentative approach to the elves, and yet her mind continued to remain distracted with ever-increasing-in-complexity scenarios about how they would eventually meet their end.

And - Jaina scowled at the intrusive flight of ideas - that didn’t even touch the lead-stone in her gullet ever since N’zoth’s brazen approach in the Blighted Lands. No, she corrected herself. N’zoth’s kidnapping of her to the Blighted Lands to what - lock her in a dreamworld of happily-ever-afters until she decided to join him? It didn’t make sense, and that only added to Jaina’s ever-growing list of ambiguous concerns.
“I never lived with mages - do they not need to sleep, or something?”

Jaina’s head snapped up at the voice hard enough that it shot a nasty spike of pain through her neck.

Lillian Voss stood at the archway that led to the outer balcony. Unlike the other Forsaken, her eyes gleamed a cool blue as she ducked underneath the heavy tapestry serving as a buffer against the winter’s chill.

“Welcome back,” Jaina drawled, giving up on her latest attempt. She crumpled the paper and tossed it towards the pile of its many, many siblings. She held out one hand expectantly for Voss’ delivery while she used the other to work out the tension set into her temple.

“I’m going to take that as a ‘yes, normal mages do’ and then further extrapolate that you’re doing something you probably shouldn’t just to keep up these all-nighters that are starting to make the Dark Rangers feel ashamed.” Voss looked pleased with her deductions as she handed over a small stack of parchment neatly tied up and categorized by nation.

Jaina had been surprised by the sheer amount of information Voss still had access to even in her supposed exile, but the rogue’s network had proved to be a blessing; providing them insight into the world without tipping their hand in return. She’d never asked where the information came from - and wasn’t sure she wanted to know in the first place.

Her mission accomplished, Voss decided that her next move would be to settle in place - sitting on the only clear spot in the room: the top of an overturned crate. She folded her legs up beneath her and fixed Jaina with a rather eerie stare while Jaina rifled through the various status reports and updates.

Jaina tried her best to ignore it. However, Lillian Voss wasn’t exactly easy to ignore, especially when she kept her eyes trained on one’s every move.

So, putting the best Lord Admiral inflection to her voice, Jaina barely flicked a glance away from her work. “Did you need something, Voss?”

“Nah. Just waiting on Amelia,” Voss inspected the nails on one hand. “She’s working on some project with Cynara and Ariel concerning military drills, and if I figured that if I was going to bore myself to a second death - I’d rather do it in a warm spot.”

“I’m flattered.”

“Oh, and Windrunner’s looking for you,” Voss’ gaze lifted up to study Jaina’s reaction. “Something about confirming leyline placements?”

That would be the other major project Jaina juggled now: determining the breadth of the leylines throughout the troll ruins to better defend them - or to draw on them without interfering with the slumbering being they were ensnared about. “Oh, good. Thank you, Voss.”

Voss chuckled while she pushed herself back up to standing. “Should I intercept and make excuses for you?”

“What?” Jaina glanced up again, momentarily distracted from the reports out of Stormwind. “No, of course not. Why?”

“Because that’s sort of been your m.o since we arrived here.”
“It has not.” Jaina had just been busy with an agenda that would make the Council of Nobles riot. Add in all of her personal projects and … “All right, maybe I have been a little out of reach.”

Voss snorted. “Well, you can make it up to her now. She’s on her way up.” With a salute of her hand, Voss vaulted back over the balcony ledge. The tapestry barely fluttered with her passage.

Jaina watched the spot she’d been for a little bit longer, then turned back to the reports. She’d asked Voss for a backlog of ship logs and manifests, mostly curious to see if there’d been other sightings of the Naga before their brush in the Sound. At first, she’d kept the encounter with the Naga separate from her encounter with N’zoth, but it wouldn’t hurt to have further data to support the theory that they were somehow connected - or to rule it out. Azshara and her ilk were too connected to the oceanic Old God for Jaina to just dismiss them as a coincidence.

The sanctum’s doorway darkened. Out of the corner of her eye, a familiar silhouette stepped before the gentle light that streamed in from the circular staircase. A gentle knock followed.

“Next time you see Voss, can you refresh her education on using that?” She asked, not looking up from a descriptive log concerning a trip along the southern edge of Northrend.

“Use what? The door?” Sylvanas peered at the doorway.

“Mmhm.” Jaina underlined a passage concerned with a Naga scouting party that oddly kept at a distance and maintained contact long after they’d been spotted - and warned with a few deterring cannon-shots.

“Of course not. She’s just now addressing me directly, I would like to keep that progress, thank you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Indeed. I think Kalira would appreciate no longer needing to be an interpreter either.”

“Shame,” Jaina’s eyes ached as she lifted them from the report. They burned, even after she blinked a couple of times.

Sylvanas sighed, the sound soft despite the room’s acoustics. “You will eventually need to rest, Jaina.”

“I do rest,” Jaina protested. She reached over to the far side of her desk where various jars of swirling energies awaited her. The verdant liquid shimmered as she brought it into the candlelight.

“Burning through your mana reserves and abusing potions is not resting,” Sylvanas pointed out as she stepped inside Jaina’s makeshift sanctuary. She assessed it, and Jaina followed her gaze as it took in the various acquisitions she’d obtained over the past few weeks. Sylvanas remained near the door and as if habit, her hands tucked formally behind her back while she finished her evaluation and returned to looking Jaina’s way. “Nightmares?” She gestured with a lift of her chin towards the stamina potion Jaina held.

“I think I’d prefer those, honestly. Instead, I’m dealing with N’zoth’s version of a personalized utopia and I’m a little concerned.” Jaina slumped back in her chair to better try to work out a kink in her neck. Tides, when had she become so old that a day of study left her stiff?

Sylvanas frowned with sympathy, “I am certain I would also want to avoid being the center of attention when it comes to Old Gods.”
Jaina felt the beginnings of a headache threatening to come on. She set the stamina potion back among its fellow. After a brief hesitation, she then also set the reports aside - they could wait for tomorrow. If there’d been anything urgent, she’d have known about it already. Her paperwork out of the way, Jaina then extended out a hand towards Sylvanas.

Sylvanas didn’t quite mask the look of surprise in time, but she quickly adjusted and her expression smoothed into a pleasant neutrality as she approached for the invitation. A beat of hesitation passed between them before she lifted her hand to be drawn in the rest of the way.

“You know, just because you’ve got this aura of undeath and you might not physically need sleep anymore doesn’t mean that you wouldn’t benefit from a night’s rest yourself,” Jaina smiled as Sylvanas idly brushed her thumb over the inside of Jaina’s wrist.

“Blackmail is unbecoming of you, Lady Proudmoore,” Sylvanas drawled.

Jaina’s smile turned sweeter, and she fluttered her lashes with the parry; “I believe this is what they call ‘compromising’.”

“Hmph.” Sylvanas gave Jaina an imperious look that a few months ago would have sparked the need to strike against it but now prompted Jaina’s smile to turn from sweet to impish. She didn’t resist as Sylvanas tugged her from her chair and guided her towards the makeshift pile of various furs that padded out her bed. “Just for that, I don’t believe I will be sharing with you any of the latest topographical discoveries until after I’ve run it by every single tidesage and dark ranger first.”

“Holding my curiosity hostage is a war crime,” Jaina muttered as she took the prompt to settle down. She removed the outer pieces of her armor - sleeping was uncomfortable enough without being prodded in the elbow by an errant gauntlet edge. Sylvanas did not do the same, but she folded herself into a comfortable recline and opened her arms for Jaina to slot herself against Sylvanas’ side. Jaina did so, aware of - but not minding the chill that permeated Sylvanas from head to toe.

Once tucked in, Sylvanas seemed hesitant with settling her arm about Jaina’s shoulders, and carefully set her head back to rest against the wall.

Jaina found a comfortable spot between the leather of Sylvanas’ pauldron and the stiff binding of her cuirass to tuck her cheek against. She couldn’t close her eyes though. Logically, she was well aware that she should rest - but without the numbness of a dreamless potion the very thought kept her mind jumbled and her senses hyperalert.

It took a minute or so before Sylvanas realized Jaina’s dilemma, because she shifted minutely. “You know, if you ultimately decide to get yourself lost in the daydreams that N’zoth promises in exchange for allowing them the freedom to enact their Black Empire - you’ll never have the delight of telling my sisters that I make a terrible club for a half-blind cave-ettin.”

Jaina snorted despite herself. Tides, that detour felt like it was years ago. She darted a look up to meet Sylvanas’ wry sidelong glance. “You’re right. I’m still saving it; it’s my ace up the sleeve for when you misbehave.”

“Misbehave?” Sylvanas’ ears canted backward just a fraction though her mouth hid the shadow of a smile. “One declaration of companionship and I’m being compared to a disobedient lynx cub?” She adjusted their position again, her arm looser around Jaina as she relaxed. “Four years ago, you would have been challenged to a duel for such a slight.”
Jaina chuckled. She didn’t really feel mirthful but even the mimicry of happiness felt better than dealing with the tension coiled behind the idea of closing her eyes for longer than a minute.

Sylvanas chuffed out a laugh as well.

Silence folded like a blanket around the two of them. Still, Jaina’s thoughts continued to race, and the subtle buzz of power Jaina felt underneath Sylvanas’ skin suggested that the banshee was just as alert. Jaina took in a long breath and forced herself to let it out slowly. She decided to stop trying to sleep, and just watched the subtle dance of light along the wall - and lost herself in the dancing illusion of the canopy.

Jaina didn’t know how much time had passed - a minute or an hour before Sylvanas spoke again. She felt Sylvanas’ words more than heard them, like the rush of a brook against her chest.

“Have you heard from Silvermoon yet?”

Jaina shifted, then sighed. “No. I’ve been stuck on an appropriate approach for the better part of the last three days.”

“Vereesa has offered --”

Jaina scowled. She hated the thought of being so inept at broaching the subject that it would fall onto Vereesa, who - though incredibly talented as a commander of troops; tended to have a temperament that made dragonhawks appear calm when it came to political maneuvering.

So she diverted; “Vereesa’s mentioned that there’s the threat of another divide in ideology. Something about the elves wanting to rename themselves in honor of the Sunwell?”

Sylvanas’s glance slid down to meet Jaina’s own, and Jaina knew she wasn’t fooling the banshee with the shift in focus - but Sylvanas played along regardless; “The Sunwell is not connected to the Lightforged -”

“- But it is a product of a Naaru - “

“There has been no evidence suggesting the influx of holy magic is a catalyst for the transformation of the Lightforged.”

“What about the reaction that was noted when Alleria neared it - or that the Ren’dorei cannot call upon its’ magics now?”

“High Priestess Swiftarrow called on the Sunwell’s strength often during her campaigns, and she favors the shadow over any other aspect of the priestly arts,” Sylvanas countered. Her voice kept the same steady cadence throughout the back-and-forth. “I think the Ren’dorei - and my sister’s - complications come from their own drastic transformations.”

Jaina frowned.

“Not to mention, Lady Liadrin has never once wavered from her loyalty to the Horde - even when that placed her or any of the knights under her command in direct conflict with the Lightforged and the Naaru that advised them.” Sylvanas paused a beat, then added: “And for all of the years prior to the disaster in the Arathi Highlands - the Sin’dorei were tolerant of the Forsaken - even accepting of our nature at times. No matter what political intrigue is going on in Silvermoon currently, I do not think that the Sunwell will be the catalyst.”

Jaina’s shoulders slumped, and she squished her face against Sylvanas’ armor. The banshee
smelled of armor oil, wood smoke, and a subtle musk that reminded Jaina of petrichor.

“The Sin’dorei have protected their lands with warding magic since the first elves learned what arcane was - and if the theories of descendancy from trolls is ... anywhere remotely near-true - then it goes back even farther. If N’zoth is actually threatening exposure, then the best defense we have beyond one powerful archmagess is even more archmages.”

Jaina scowled. Sylvanas was right. She knew Sylvanas was right. Sylvanas wasn’t saying anything that Jaina didn’t already know. The ideal defense would have not only the tidesages, but the magisters of Silvermoon to lend their power to any spell.

However, there was a problem - Silvermoon had taken in the refugees from Suramar - and last Jaina was aware, Thalyssra sat upon the Council of Hours, the nascent union of the two strains of highborne elves to unite their cultures and experiences in the shared aftermath of genocide and trauma.

Thalyssra, who vowed to see her people’s suffering repaid upon Jaina tenfold after the decimation of Suramar.

Jaina didn’t see Silvermoon taking kindly to any request from her, and was fairly certain that if she did approach them, Calia would find herself without an archmage to recruit. A living, intact one, at least.

Sylvanas must have taken her silence as criticism because she reached out to brush a hand along Jaina’s arm where she could. “It isn’t as if I doubt your capabilities...”

“It’s not that.” Jaina assured her, and pulled back again. “There’s ... a lot of history between Silvermoon, Suramar, and myself that I don’t think the elves would be willing to overlook; even if you and Vereesa lended your voices to the request.”

“There are still debts that I can call upon.”

Jaina highly doubted that anything Sylvanas had on either Thalyssra or Lor’themar would be enough to deter them from enacting out their retribution. She didn’t say anything aloud but Sylvanas noticed it regardless.

“An elf’s word is their bond. They’ll answer if I demand it. That doesn’t mean they’ll come with gentle hearts. You might have to answer to a duel or two,” Sylvanas waved her hand off to the side, as if the prospect of duels was irrelevant in the grand scheme, “But that can be dealt with afterwards.”

“Not helping.”

Sylvanas peered down her nose at Jaina, “You could always request one of the Dark Rangers to be your Champion. I suggest Kalira or Cynara. They enjoy a decent fight and they’re skilled against magi.”

“Are you taking this seriously?”

“Why should I? They are no saints to your sinner. The streets of Suramar ran crimson upon the Dusk Lilly’s ascension. She was quite thorough in her desire to stamp out even the barest whisper of dissent. As for the Regent Lord - he exiled his own people in order to curry peace and compliance from the nobles who absolutely loathe a commoner sitting upon the Phoenix Throne.” Sylvanas shifted so they were eye to eye, and the ethereal whisper danced along the edge of her voice, “We all have despicable acts in our collective pasts and there’s not a one of them who can
pass judgement without hypocrisy.”

“I don’t care if they judge me - I care that I might have to prepare for an Arcane Duel in the middle of losing sleep over the thought of which antagonistic faction is going to murder me first.”

“I will be sure to stress the importance of scheduling the honor duels for after whatever hell is coming our way. That way, if we all end up dead, assimilated, or enslaved, they’ll have other things on their minds.”

“How thoughtful.”

Sylvanas ignored her sarcasm with all the dignity of the queen she had once been. “I can be on occasion.” She rewarded Jaina with a half-smile before her focus moved inward. The smile faded as she listened to something beyond Jaina’s hearing. Sylvanas turned her face towards the courtyard, her eyes unfocused.

Jaina wavered a few seconds on the ethics of privacy before she shifted her awareness to the arcane link between them. The cold command that swirled about Sylvanas strummed like a harp string after a chord and as Jaina followed that resonating energy, she felt --

“Anya,” Sylvanas’ consciousness returned to their current position. Jaina picked up on the strain of worry in Sylvanas’ voice as the banshee gently untucked herself from Jaina’s side. “She’s -- something’s wrong.”

Jaina was already donning her armor; adjusting her gauntlet while Sylvanas secured the pauldron back on her shoulder. She flexed her magical muscle and her staff appeared in the air next to her, ready to be picked up.

“I should have brought Thori’dal with me,” Sylvanas muttered as they met up at the doorway.

Jaina shook her head, “You came here to seduce me into a cuddle-pile; what use could that have been?”

Sylvanas chuckled. She still looked as tense as a bow-string, but she managed a smile nonetheless. The canopy rippled around them as they descended the stairs. “Why, if all else failed, I could have used your insatiable curiosity to coax you away of course. Unrestricted access to one of the most powerful artifacts of the elven people - all for the simple price of taking a damned break for once? The perfect siren song for you.”

Jaina laughed. How couldn’t she? “Ok, fair.”

The cold greeted them as they broke into the courtyard. Jaina tugged the wolf-fur cloak tighter about her shoulders as they fought against the wind. “Where are we going?”

Sylvanas had her head bent, ears pinned to her skull as she stopped mid-step to listen to whatever bond connected her to her Dark Rangers. Her expression darkened - shadows drifted over her face. “The cistern.”

“What?!” Jaina took two steps for every stride Sylvanas made.

Sylvanas didn’t answer. Her pace quickened, and the edges of her form faded into mist as she kept just shy of truly running. Jaina managed to keep up, relying on a Blink once over open ground.

The temple grounds were dusted in a fresh snowfall. There was no movement, no noise beyond the crunch of their boots over the snow. The currents of magic drifted as Jaina expected them to, and
just along the edge of audible the haunting song of the deep river called to her. They headed to the
reinforced entrance - wide enough now to allow unimpeded passage. Jaina noted that the stairs had
been worked on, they were now smooth-cut and staggered for easier movement.

Sylvanas pointed out footprints, at least four differing sets according to her judgement.

Jaina didn’t understand what would have brought one Dark Ranger - let alone four of them down to
the temple. “Could they have been chasing someone?” There could have been a breach - or Jaina’s
fears about the living being so close to the void were about to become validated.

Sylvanas’ ears swiveled with her thoughts. She slowed her pace and marched out the steps, gauging
distance and pressure with the efficiency of a peerless hunter. “No,” she shook her head, “There’s
no urgency here, and I would have been warned of trouble. Especially concerning Anya.”

The soft gleam of torchlight reflected up along the shaft cut deep past the veneer of elven worship.
Evidence of the ongoing research was everywhere as they descended; from piles of excavated stone
moved under the muscle and magic of the Thorspeakers to the worn grooves cut from constant
foot traffic - evidence of the site being the central point of activity in Falor’Thalas.

Sylvanas slowly scanned the site. She carried only a short blade, and held it loose at her side.

“What did Anya say?”

“She didn’t,” Sylvanas stared into the dark between the torches, “I felt her become incorporeal.” At
Jaina’s confusion, she continued; “My Dark Rangers were raised by a lesser version of the ritual
that I went through. After the Blood War - for those that were left - I commanded the Val’kyr to
empower them as I had been. It would take something concerning to force any of my rangers to
lose control like that.”

Jaina wanted to pry further. The questions were on the tip of her tongue, dying to spill out even
while she reigned in the desire to poke at new information.

Her decision was made for her when a piercing wail emanated from the excavation. The shriek
echoed from somewhere in the twisting dark. This far away, it managed to raise the hairs on the
back of Jaina’s neck, but nothing more.

Sylvanas went first as Jaina conjured up a sphere of magelight as to not destroy her nightsight.
They cleared the halls methodically, visually and magically ensuring they weren’t missing
anything vital; space after space - hall after hall provided no answers. Nothing rushed their
positions. They didn’t stumble over the remains of a battle. The only signs of life were expected -
no untoward struggles or miscast scorch-marks.

Dread closed a fist around Jaina’s gut.

She realized they were nearing the cistern - the dried central chamber where she’d fell into a fugue.
She’d not returned since that night, afraid of what would happen a second time. She was about to
find out.

They were also closer to the underground current. The river’s mournful cry escalated to a mind-
numbing roar loud enough that it drowned out Jaina’s superficial thoughts, it’s demands for her
response grating along Jaina’s consciousness to the point that Sylvanas noticed - glancing
frequently behind her every time the melody swelled to deafening volume.

If it hadn’t been for the few lessons with Brothers Pike and Zelling - Jaina would have willingly
gone mad just to block out the noise.
"I'm all right," Jaina assured Sylvanas after the sixth glance in as many minutes.

Sylvanas nodded but waited for Jaina to catch her breath. They both noticed the strange blemish on the wall next to her. It looked like water damage - algae growing between the erosion. Though her ears twitched, Sylvanas didn't notice the disturbance that began to unspool right above her.

Jaina did, though. She shouted a warning.

Sylvanas spun, her blade coming up fast - but Jaina’s spell was faster.

Frostfire sizzled along a spine made up of too many pieces, and the frost crackled over a deformed jaw stuffed with too many rows of sharp, white teeth. As the spell snaked along the creature’s form, its flesh undulated and dripped down from where it had lurked on the ceiling. It fell into a puddle, churning and bubbling like a potion brewed wrong. Sylvanas adjusted the angle of her blade’s swing against the coalescing creature. The blade sliced through the thing’s body easily - too easily, for as the blade barely avoided being dulled against the cramped corridor’s walls, the wound was already closing - sucking in on itself.

Sylvanas hissed a challenge, her ears sliding back in agitation. The lack of a magical weapon was readily apparent.

A gurgling groan warned of further creatures outside the magelight. Jaina sent the sphere high, and it blazed as bright as a miniature mid-day sun - revealing the cluster of unspeakable things pulling themselves from the very walls.

The air shimmered around Jaina as she wove offensive spells into existence - arcane and frost bleeding together as she easily dipped into both reservoirs. Sylvanas became a blur of darkness, dropping her physicality entirely as she became the banshee. She didn’t wail, but she launched herself with a viciousness into the largest section of the encroaching creatures.

Tentacles, teeth, and talons tore into her ethereal substance, stripping it away in long gashes of shadow. On the other side of the mass, Sylvanas reformed - eyes wide and burning hot.

“Sylvanas! Blade!” Jaina’s fingertips glowed with frost. A tendril that gleamed wet and dark in the magelight lashed out - missing her by bare inches as she blinked forward, manipulating her momentum to cross the divide and reach Sylvanas.

Sylvanas handed her the blade, and turned to face the swarm. “How much time do you need?” She asked over her shoulder, already guessing what Jaina planned. Jaina was already feverishly inscribing frost-fueled sigils into the metal.

“Only a minute - not even that!”

“Done.” Sylvanas turned and snatched the closest fiend. With a blood-chilling snarl, she tore it in two, throwing the two halves into the scrambling mess. Jaina looked up to see that the halves were already twitching, developing new tendrils that snaked out into the formation of limbs.

Sylvanas stood her ground against the horde. As the beasts attacked, she returned their ferocity - breaking through the tide. She didn’t flinch as teeth sank into the little exposed flesh she had - or broke through the leather.

Jaina sealed the final enchantment. She shouted Sylvanas’ name, then tossed the blade.

The second time Sylvanas’ sword cut through one of the beasts, the creature gave an unholy shriek as a tentacle sloughed off, frost cracking on the wound’s edge. As the severed limb landed, it
twitched, but she didn’t see regrowth.

Sylvanas’ fangs glinted as she assessed the damage - and then they pushed back as one against the beasts. Between magic and enchanted steel, the creatures were overwhelmed. Little by little, the pair chipped away at the swarm until they stood victorious surrounded by the cooling corpses. Some of the beasts still twitched, desperately trying to reattach themselves, but that was easily resolved with a dedicated spell, or the jab of the blade.

Jaina leaned over one of the more intact beasts, drawing the magelight closer to her again to better shine on the corpse. “I have never seen anything like this before, have you?”

Sylvanas peered from over Jaina’s shoulder, shaking her head. “No. Though, it looks a little like a lynx.”

Jaina tilted her head to the side. “I’m not seeing it.”

“I haven’t seen a lynx in the southern Greenwood for centuries, though.” Sylvanas nudged the creature’s body with the point of her blade, turning its head up to get a better look.

The creature did appear feline underneath the horrors of void-corruption, but it wasn’t a species Jaina was remotely familiar with. Jutting out below the creature’s shoulder blades, another pair of appendages stretched out, reminding Jaina of a dragon’s wing-joint. There was the impression of feathers. “Is it an owlcat?”

Sylvanas straightened up, frowning. “Possibly? My main concern is that it can be killed - which we’ve proven.”

“They also managed to do some nasty damage to you,” Jaina turned to her, and gently ran her fingers along one of the shallow lacerations.

“Yes,” Sylvanas muttered, with a glance to the wound herself. “So it seems they did.” She lifted the short sword so that the enchantments gleamed bright in the mage light, “However, we repaid them quite fairly, wouldn’t you agree?”

Jaina nodded.

They turned to assess the dark cavern with a newfound wariness. They pressed on, Jaina’s hands tingling with spells primed to unleash at the snap of her fingers. Sylvanas carried the blade at the ready, her ears constantly twitching.

The further they went, the quieter their steps became - and it wasn’t because they’d mutually agreed on the stealthy approach. Instead, it was as if the air grew denser at every point in the descent. Jaina felt her ears pop, and worked her jaw to try and ease the pressure against them.

Then came the wailing. Even muffled, the scream of a banshee so close felt like nails being scraped along Jaina’s spine. Jaina pulled the chill around her in a cloak of elemental armor - the icy shield glinting as she moved. The idle concern of being able to properly cast a portal this far underground and surrounded by a convergence of binding ley-line energies ran through her mind before she dismissed it.

“Marrah.”

“Of course you can tell them apart by the wail,” Jaina muttered as they reached the stone stairwell that would take them into the well.
“I know my Rangers,” is all Sylvanas said. She stared into the pit, shoulders squared and spine rigid. She acknowledged Jaina’s hand against her arm with a quick glance and the barest wisp of a forced smile - then took the first step down into the abyss.

After a breath, Jaina followed her.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

I had a goal to try and hit 20 before the end of the year, and by goodness I succeeded! I have to give a major thank you to all of my readers because I don't think I could have hit this without your cheerleading.

We have 4 chapters to go - can you believe that? I certainly can't.

Dread, cold and damp, coiled around Jaina’s gut as soon as she crossed the threshold. With every step, pressure built against her eardrums. With every meter descended, breathing became more of a struggle. Every exhale, the following inhale required more conscious effort, and the more Jaina became aware of her own respirations, the more aggressive the battle to take in a proper breath.

A vice closed in around her, and with every breath, it cinched tighter and tighter about her ribcage.

The magelight snuffed out. The crystal upon her war-staff wavered and flickered out. The icy shield that coated her armor dripped away to nothingness. All of her spells withered on the vine as Jaina’s entire being centered around the sudden inability to breathe.

A freezing hand seized her by the elbow, and the breath that ghosted along the shell of her ear was ice. “It’s not real, Jaina.”

Jaina sent a vicious look sidelong. Easy for Sylvanas to say, she wasn’t the one scrambling for one decent lungful of air.

Sylvanas sighed, “Spare me the dramatics of the living. You are a mage - there are at least two banshees here. It is their aura.”

Jaina’s glare only intensified. It wasn’t her logical mind that needed convincing, but the ache in her ribs.

Sylvanas glanced into the darkness, then back to Jaina. Jaina already knew her concern; they barely were past the halfway mark, and every delay threatened the Dark Rangers.

Jaina gripped her staff tight enough that the smooth grain of the wood impressed itself into her palm. She took another step down, and ground her teeth as her lungs started to burn - demanding oxygen. Another step, and anxiety reared up - scrabbling along her thoughts.

Jaina gestured for Sylvanas to continue on without her. Her pride burned as terribly as her lungs.

“Like hell - there could be more of those creatures and the last thing you get to do, Lady Proudmoore, is die on me.” Sylvanas shifted, and ducked down enough so they were face to face. “Let me ease the burden of fear.”

Jaina smelled ozone. Up above her head, the impression of the raging storm. Around her, the illusion of a churning ocean. Salt stung on the breeze. The pressure was still there, still throbbing and insistent against Jaina’s eardrums. However, this time, she could pick at the edges of the illusion, and see the frayed weave that somehow threaded itself between her mind and her body.
Thank you, she whispered. Her heart rate slowed, and she eagerly embraced the shield Sylvanas offered her mind. She stood up again, shaking off the vestiges of fear, and smiled even though she knew the banshee couldn’t see it.

But she could feel it. Sylvanas was ready with an explanation for the sudden possession - an apology balanced at the tip of her tongue - and faltered when Jaina reacted with relief and gratitude, not anger.

This -- you’re not? … The storm that Jaina knew to be Sylvanas’ internal compass rumbled disquietly. You’re welcome.

Jaina took in a massive breath. Her lungs filled with the damp, stale air of the cistern, but she didn’t care. Not when she greedily inhaled and her lungs welcomed the return of oxygenation.

They moved forward.

Fear is such a potent tool - so under-utilized. Sylvanas mused, her thoughts slinking just beneath Jaina’s own. Jaina’s fingers tapped against the underside of the sword’s grip, and not under her own accord. No matter how comfortable they might be - the fear of one’s inevitable demise is inscribed into the very essence of every living thing.

“Is that what the wail is?” Jaina asked, her voice loud against her own ears without another body to muffle the sound against the bare stone around them. “Fear?”

Death. In particular - our own. No banshee is born from a peaceful slip into eternal slumber. A warrior’s death on the battlefield isn’t enough. Terror from sickness, or age? Forget it. Sylvanas’ explanation drifted through Jaina’s mind. No. We’re crafted from a perfect storm of terror right at the moment of death.

Jaina winced in sympathy. She knew, if she sent her thoughts after the streaks of lightning that left after-images against her mind’s eye, she could experience that catalyst for herself. It wasn’t a hard choice to keep that curiosity in check.

Jaina restored her spells. Sylvanas gently pushed the sword through light training drills, trying to adjust to the muscle memory of a woman who preferred slinging icicles over steel. They went even further down, until they hit the bottom and their boots scuffed along the dry floor. Dust and debris from restoration work scattered in their wake as they quickened under the open arches into the central vault.

They were prepared for anything.

So when Jaina cast the magelight high against the vaulted ceiling, the carnage revealed sent them both reeling to catch themselves.

The abyss oozed from the pattern of stars about the snarling figure, the black tar dripping down the stone edifice.

Jaina noticed two banshees in the center of the chamber, encircled by a staggering number of the strange feline shadows. The ethereal huntresses hovered back-to-back, resorted to a feral clash of talons against talons as shadow creatures swarmed on them like sharks drawn to a feeding frenzy.

A Dark Ranger sprawled over the ground, her body bent at an unnatural angle, and her sightless eyes a dull, flat crimson. Sylvanas tensed, grief needling just underneath the bloom of anger - so easy to unleash.
The fourth Dark Ranger was locked in a struggle.

*Little Moon?*

“Vereesa?!”

The fourth ranger glanced over her shoulder at the shout, “Lady Proudmoore?” She looked to the banshees, then back to Jaina. “No, you shouldn’t be here - “

“It’s all right Lenara,” Jaina’s voice reverberated with a ghostly echo,

Lenara’s eyes widened with understanding just before she took a strike to the chest. She grunted, the force sending her back a pace, while Vereesa strode forward.

Vereesa, covered in the same tar that bubbled out from the walls, stood as tall and proud as Jaina had ever seen her. Her elven features, sharp and delicate, were darkened and feral - casting her expression into a predatory snarl. About her shoulders, her cloak fanned out, the abyssal ooze streaking over the fabric, and smeared along her shoulders and neck. Her gaze snapped up and her eyes were black as well.

“*Your place lies among the Circle of Stars,*” Vereesa spoke, and underneath her Thalassian was a layering of an older language, one that was once widespread among a powerful empire.

_Jaina?_

“I heard it too,” Jaina confirmed. “It’s what drew me in last time, too.”

_Suggestions?

“How’d you get through this last time?”_

*This didn’t happen last time. You sort of - seized - and then collapsed.* Sylvanas turned to address Lenara. “Join Marrah and Anya - we’ll manage Vereesa.”

Lenara nodded, and disengaged before Vereesa could snag her again.

_How exactly are we going to handle Vereesa?*_ Sylvanas inquired as they traded places with Lenara, rushing up and underneath Vereesa’s hand.

“What’s going on,” Jaina muttered under her breath as she sent out low pulses of arcane missiles, striking them against Vereesa’s shoulder, or her hip - places far away from vital organs, and to keep the elven ranger off-balance. At the same time, Sylvanas parried away the blows, using the flat of her blade with every strike.

Vereesa arched a brow, “Iron with the strength of the stars behind it? Impossible.”

_I’ve got her for now, help the rangers._

“Right.” Jaina turned, sending a wave of frost along the stone that snared the frontlines of the shadow beasts. Lenara used the breathing room to reach the side of the fallen ranger, and carefully picked her up.

The two banshees, Anya and Marrah, exploited the frozen diversion. They let loose screams and rushed into the mass of frozen shadows, rending apart the beasts. They swirled like a contained cyclone, keeping between the retreat of their corporeal sisters and the fiends that kept pouring forth.
Jaina was no stranger to spellcasting in melee, but having her body move without her conscious (or subconscious) sayso was disorientating at first. They adjusted quickly, with a stronger reliance on Jaina’s warstaff.

“Marrah, Anya, go with Lenara. There’s more up above.”

It said something of the Dark Rangers’ trust in their commander that they didn’t even hesitate. They fell in around Lenara, and the four retreated, pulling back onto the stairs. Half of the creatures fell over themselves chasing the banshees while the rest turned to face Jaina.

As soon as they’re at an acceptable range, I’ll leave. It’ll --

Jaina shook her head, watching as Vereesa’s gaze turned towards them as if she could hear them. Honestly, at this point, Jaina wouldn’t have been surprised if she could. “No, stay.”

Lightning rumbled in the back of Jaina’s mind. Are you certain?

“Yes,” They turned to meet Vereesa head on, mindful of the circling shadows all around them. “I don’t trust separating yet.”

As you wish. Mind the beasts, I’ll keep Little Moon in hand.

Jaina nodded. Her spells were suited for the rapidly closing creatures; the glacial spikes that erupted from the air about her piercing through and pinning three of the beasts against the ground as they leapt at them. She whirled, her sword arm coming up to block Vereesa’s rush, and grunted as it forced another three against the ice of her shield - the magic wavering against the hits. Their claws raked along her armor, and found the exposed parts of her flesh, but took away only scrapings of frost. She scowled - their claws glittered with ice, but they moved without hindrance. The cold prevented their regeneration, but didn’t seem to slow them. That suited Jaina fine. Behind her, and to her right, two mirror images appeared - each of them bearing a sword and staff, and each joining the fray without needing guidance. Arcane twirled and sizzled in the air as the mirrors conjured up their own spells.

Jaina twisted at the subtlest urge from the banshee within, ducking away and half-turning into a grapple that snagged Vereesa’s dominant hand between their bodies. She grunted as she bore the full weight of the ranger, stumbling back a step or two. Vereesa came with - a terrible shriek ripping from her throat.

“No!” Vereesa howled, “The Ascension is not complete! You will not deny us our Avatar, Ironborn!”

“Well, that doesn’t sound good.” Jaina knew well that time and advantage were rapidly slipping away from them. Killing Vereesa was a last resort - and one that Jaina wasn’t certain would even stop whatever was occurring. “You said you stopped this by removing me last time?”

Considering this is nothing like that - yes. They grunted as heavy blows landed against the frost. The barest sensation of sharpness skittered against Jaina’s unarmored bicep - the shield wouldn’t hold much longer.

If Vereesa’s caught in the middle of a transformation - I think I can stop it.

What do you require?

Time, and arcane crystals. As many as your rangers can manage. She’ll need them.
Sylvanas’ consciousness dimmed momentarily, and Jaina felt the unexpected weight of the sword in her left hand. She adapted for the sudden shift in her balance, and used her momentum to etch the beginning of an arcane rune, the sigils flaring to life beneath her feet. She spun, avoiding the brunt of Vereesa’s attacks, slivers of ice dripping away as her armor chipped.

They’ll meet us at the entrance.

Good. When I say to - return to your corporeal state and prevent any of the voidlings from touching the rune.

Sylvanas seemed wary to isolate themselves, but nodded. In matters of magic - she trusted the mage. Very well.

Jaina’s focus turned to finalizing the rune. The last sigil scrawled to life along the stone and brought with it a flood of arcane power that crackled as if lightning itself ran white-hot along the synapses of her nervous system. Every reaction and response came faster, her thoughts racing quicksilver from one spell to another, from one suggestion to the next. Now.

The banshee materialized at Jaina’s back, her sword gleaming with imbued magic, and her body glinting as if formed of mercurial stone. She rushed at the swarm, quickly felling them, pushing the creatures to the defensive as they adjusted to the sudden arrival of a second opponent - and one that could strike them without losing pieces of herself in exchange.

Her body free, Jaina reached deep into the depths of power within her and brought it up, channeling not just the arcane, but the winter that resided inside her as well. She didn’t release the blizzard around her, though, no, but into the arcane rune beneath her feet - and beneath Vereesa’s.

She had to trust Sylvanas’ battle prowess, because as soon as winter’s chill hit the rune, it grew - devouring the arcane rune, and as they stood in the very center of the ley line nexus, it channeled the transmutation writ into the very foundations of Falor’Thalas itself.

The blizzard hungered for more power, quickly draining the arcane in a radius around it, and - with a simple coaxing from Jaina, turned toward the void that slithered through the cistern.

“What? No. NO!” Vereesa surged back, trying to distance herself, but Jaina lunged after her and tapped into the reserves of power within her staff to strengthen her grip. The elf struggled against her as the blizzard roared out from the rune itself, into the nearest conduit of magic: the elven body that stood upon it.

The blizzard claimed every inch that the spell could grab, and as the arcane rune continued to channel the law of transmutation - the void began to collapse upon it, being drawn into the vortex of whirling ice.

“Go!” Jaina yelled to Sylvanas, not risking a glance to the banshee behind her.

“What about you? What about --”

“We’ll be fine, I promise - go!”

Sylvanas cursed. Still, Jaina heard the sound of her retreat.

As frost consumed void, Vereesa’s body twisted and writhed in the rune-trap, struggling to pull away and unable to. As ice began to overtake her, frost cracked along her skin, opening up fractal patterns as her body struggled to contain the welling power.
Her eyes faded from black to a blazing, brilliant ice, and the defiant sneer of whatever once claimed her was now replaced by a struggling panic.

“You have to let go, Veri!” Jaina said, her hands numb against her friend’s skin. Frost crawled up along her fingers. “All of it - let it go!”

Vereesa’s eyes were wide with panic. Magic was an intricate part of an elf’s being, and to ask her to let go of all of it --

Vereesa screamed, and though she was no banshee, the sound was a shadow of the pain that her sister wielded. The blizzard that Jaina had funneled within her essence exploded outward as shards of razor-ice, slicing everything in their path.

Jaina’s ice-block prevented the worst of it from reaching her, but not all of it. Warmth, sticky and wet bloomed against her abdomen. Her face burned from a dozen grazes, each of them stripping skin away.

Vereesa slumped to the ground, the arcane rune fading beneath her. Jaina dropped the ice immediately, and reached down to pick up the weakened elf. The world tilted with her, and darkness threatened to swallow Jaina. She stopped, steadied herself, and waited for the vertigo to pass. Every confrontation, it was easier to reach into her reserves of power - and drawing on Raiden’s strength was becoming less and less a conscious action. Now, it felt like taking a deep breath.

When the world righted, Jaina leaned down and carefully helped Vereesa up to her feet. They picked their way through the frozen cistern and left. Behind them, Jaina felt a sluggish anger in the air, but had the feeling that she’d bought them time before the entity’s retribution would be unleashed.

*****

Vereesa trembled against her hold - and the violent spasms continued to wrack her body even as they left the dark, claustrophobic tunnels for the relative peace above-ground. Jaina kept her arm secured around Vereesa’s shoulders as they took the rough-hewn steps out of the archeological site.

Sylvanas met them at the top of the stairs, her long brows furrowed with worry that she didn’t quite banish from her features by the time they crossed the threshold. She quickly came to Vereesa’s other side and helped Jaina guide the youngest Windrunner towards a large bonfire that blazed in the center of the open excavation site - strong enough to banish away the cold in a decent radius about it.

Several Dark Rangers stood guard on the perimeter, while Jaina spied two Forsaken hunched over three deathly-still bodies just on the other side of the fire. The Dark Rangers’ crimson gazes were subtle embers in the dark as they tracked Vereesa’s escort to a hasty-made canvas spread.

The youngest Windrunner sister didn’t react when Jaina coaxed her to sit, and continued to stare ahead blankly while Jaina stood up and stepped away just enough to pull Sylvanas aside. She wiped her bangs away from her beaded brow, the sweat clammy and cold in the frigid air. Sylvanas, for her part, took in Jaina’s wounded appearance with a concerned frown, but said nothing as she offered up a healing potion.

Jaina took it without complaint. The magic warmed and numbed all at once as she drank it in one swing. “Will they be all right?” She gestured with her good hand towards the Dark Rangers.

Sylvanas nodded, “Yes, with time. Whatever we encountered down there did not have enough time
to complete whatever it intended with them.” They watched as the Forsaken healers carefully went about examining the bodies. Then, they both looked towards Vereesa.

“She has the same trauma to her fingertips,” Jaina spoke first, and reflexively rubbed her fingers together, feeling the subtle ridges of scar tissue catch over themselves. “You said I had been trying to trace out a sigil, right?”

“You repeated a gesture against the figure over and over again, but what you were attempting to replicate?” Sylvanas shrugged. “I couldn’t tell you.”

“I still don’t fully understand the symbology. Vereesa’s been working on her notes - sending them to the Farseer.”

“Mm,” Sylvanas brushed against Jaina’s shoulder as she stepped away to collect a small clay bowl half-dangled into the fire. The scent wafting from it was medicinal, and Jaina leaned over to take a peek while Sylvanas gently stirred the mixture within. “I should just seal off that space entirely.”

“I get the feeling that wouldn’t help at all.”

“It would keep curious archeologists and adventurous mages from attempting to whittle their fingers down to the bone at the very least,” Sylvanas retorted. Jaina met that comment with a flat stare and arched brow.

They both returned to Vereesa’s side, and as the elf slowly came out from her fugue state, Sylvanas took the opportunity to carefully soak and wrap Vereesa’s hands in the healing tincture. They were bloody and raw, just as Jaina’s had been.

By the time the second soak had completed, Vereesa’s color had returned and her gaze was one tinted by shame and frustration, her eyes lowered to just watch Sylvanas work. Jaina had an inkling of what she was going through, so she said nothing - merely offered silent support. She sat down, and gently guided Vereesa to lean against her and offered some of her body warmth.

It took a little while longer before Vereesa spoke. Her voice was hoarse, even after she was offered arcane-infused tea. “I think it’s a Loa.”

“What, the entity?”

Vereesa nodded as she wrapped her hands around the mug to steal its warmth. She leaned against Jaina’s side, her ears drooping low and delicately folded against her head while she adjusted it against Jaina’s shoulder.

Sylvanas’ attention seemed focused on Vereesa’s injuries until Jaina went to stand and refill the mug. Sylvanas stopped her with a touch to Jaina’s knee, and a shake of her head. “Stay.” She summoned one of the Dark Rangers to refill both the mug and collect more of the healing tincture while Sylvanas herself settled into a seated lotus position just opposite them; close enough that if Vereesa wanted to reach out to her sister, she could.

“Can Loa be corrupted by the Void?” Sylvanas asked.

Vereesa nodded. “Alleria would know better than I do, but … yes. Theoretically. I mean, if the Titan Keepers of Ulduar were able to be influenced by Yogg Saron over thousands of years, what’s to say that a Loa couldn’t be susceptible as well?”

Jaina tried to recall the scraps of information that had come out of Zandalar during the Blood War concerning the various loa that had fought alongside the troll empire, but found her mental archives
Sylvanas inclined her head. “So, then, if it is a Void-touched Loa … I don’t understand why N’zoth would rather you drive it back to slumber instead of simply killing it outright.”

Jaina wracked her brain but found no reason that made sense.

Vereesa, on the other hand, brought her refilled mug up for a long drink as she considered. Between the body warmth, the arcane, and time away from the cistern, she was recovering quickly. “Well, the Loa are Wild Gods, right?” Vereesa looked between them and gave their respective shrugs an exasperated sigh. “They’re another form of the Ancients the Kal’dorei worship. Supposedly when a Wild God is felled, their spirit --”

“-- returns to the Emerald Dream to be restored,” Jaina finished, remembering something Malfurion had said years ago, after the first assault upon Hyjal.

Vereesa nodded again, “Something like that, yes.”

“Then why not just subdue it?” Sylvanas wondered, “if it is corrupted - can be corrupted - why not convince it to join his side? Slaying the creature would mean the potential resurrection of an enemy - I understand that - but leaving an enemy sealed? Something doesn’t add up.”

Jaina agreed, but this wasn’t the place to debate the complexities of an Old God’s madness. A glance towards Sylvanas and she knew the banshee picked up on her train of thought.

Sylvanas’ lips were as thin as a razor as she tucked the strategic talk away for another time and place.

“I have a sleeping draught for you. When you’re back in your rooms, take it. You need the rest.”

Vereesa glanced up. While most of the color was returned to her, there were dark circles under her eyes that gave away her exhaustion. “What? No, I’ll be all right. Just --”

“The Entity will be there tomorrow, and we will all have fresh eyes and clearer mindsets,” Sylvanas was gentle despite the admonishment. She offered a hand to help Vereesa stand. Between her and Jaina’s shoulder as a brace, Vereesa groaned but managed to stand upright without too much sway to her stance. Sylvanas turned to the Dark Rangers; “Clea? Help Vereesa back to her quarters.”

“Yes, Dark Lady.” The Dark Ranger named Clea stepped forward without a second’s thought and came to Vereesa’s other side. After a moment’s pause, she slipped a hand about Vereesa’s waist to secure her hold, then nodded to Jaina.

Jaina looked from Vereesa to Sylvanas. Sylvanas looked pensive, but there was a shadow of a smile as she caught Jaina’s glance. Briefly, she brushed her fingers along Jaina’s sleeve as she said; “I’ll find you tomorrow. We have a letter to write.”

Vereesa gave Jaina a curious sidelong glance. “Letter?”

“Mmhmm. Out of curiosity, how much do you know about Arcane Duels?”

****

Jaina spent all of the next day writing out her request to Silvermoon, finding that the encounter with the entity - the Loa, as Vereesa saw it - had left her shaken enough to overcome her resistance
against calling on the elves. She’d sent it out that night, through an arcane missive, after addendums from Sylvanas.

She woke up the morning after that to find a letter sitting innocently on her desk.

For a moment, Jaina wondered if she’d dreamt of sending the letter out. It had been late, after all. However, where Jaina’s letter had been plain and sealed with simple wax, the new letter was quite different.

The letter bore a very official looking seal of a phoenix rising up against the dark impression of a flower - a dusk lilly, to be precise. The fact that it had seemingly materialized from nothing and not hand-delivered by one of the Dark Rangers patrolling the borders suggested powerful magic behind its arrival.

Thalyssra’s magical signature blazed around the object.

So, instead of addressing it head-on, Jaina decided to distract herself with checking in on Vereesa.

The youngest Windrunner claimed a smaller spire within the inner circles of Falor’Thalas for herself. Deja vu trickled down Jaina’s spine as she approached. Sylvanas and Vereesa’s voices carried easily through the otherwise silent cityscape, the Thalassian ebb and flow between the sisters so similar to the river currents deep below ground.

Jaina paused right before the doorway. They didn’t sound agitated.

She rounded the corner to find the pair hunched over a sprawled out collection of maps, glyphs, and sketches of bas reliefs. Since their return from Kul Tiras, Jaina had not spent as much time in the hollow cisterns, but she recognized the various carvings that had captured her attention on her first explorations. The dozens of notes that were attached to each sketch drew her in.

The sisters’ conversation paused mid-word as she entered. Sylvanas looked up first and acknowledged her with the barest tilt of her head before she returned to meddling with a pile of fur on her lap. Jaina caught the flash of a needle somewhere in the midst of the action.

Vereesa, on the other hand, set down a chewed-on quill to offer Jaina a wane smile and a gesture to sit wherever she could find space. Jaina diverted to offer the younger Windrunner sister a one-armed hug.

“How are you feeling?”

“Exhausted, mostly. Don’t worry, I’ve been taking it easy since the other night.”

Jaina arched a brow pointedly at the scattered paperwork. “Are you?”

Vereesa followed her glance with a dismissive bat of her hand, “this is my compromise for ‘light duties’.”

Sylvanas steadily ignored the look tossed her way.

Reminded of her own workspaces, Jaina only chuckled and poured herself a mug of warm tea before she found herself a spot to settle in. She brushed her fingers along the back of Sylvanas’ chair as she passed, and tried to sneak a peek at whatever was in Sylvanas’ lap.

“Is that my cloak?”
“Oh, so it’s your cloak now?”

Jaina scowled at the side of Sylvanas’ head, “You gave it to me.”

“You gave her a cloak?” Vereesa leaned towards them, her ears canting forward, “When did you give Jaina a cloak?”

“Right before she dumped a blizzard on me,” Sylvanas slid a glance towards Jaina, “You have a terrible temperament for gifts, by the way.”

“You brought that blizzard on yourself,” Jaina retorted, and found herself a spot directly next to Sylvanas. She reached out for one of the stacks of research notes closest to her. “Astronomy?”

“The early Zandalari Empire was invested in celestial patterns - why did you give Jaina a cloak?” Vereesa split her responses between the two of them but her focus was almost entirely directed on her older sister.

“She stopped reacting to the explosion of her arcane messengers.”

“You could just pull pigtails like a normal schoolgirl,” Jaina idly commented while she shuffled through the notes. The movements of the two moons featured heavily throughout the papers.

“I have a reputation to uphold,” Sylvanas must have caught the expression that threatened to dance over Jaina’s features because her voice climbed half an octave as she twisted to lay the full force of her glower upon the mage. “If you even think to compare me to a lynx cub again…”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Jaina quipped, flipping one of the sketches on it’s side to get a better view of one of the icons depressed into the stonework.

The scrape of a chair against the floor drew their attention to Vereesa as she made for the open arch that led out to the attached veranda. As she disappeared behind the corner, Jaina felt guilt settle in her stomach like lead.

“When I asked you why you didn’t want to court my sister,” Sylvanas’ voice carried just above a whisper, “I assumed Little Moon was also aware of your reasons.”

Jaina sighed, “We never really talked about it. It … I’ll go talk to her. She deserves that much.”

Sylvanas made a non-commital noise, “We don’t have the time to spare her the luxury of working through her feelings.” However, as Jaina walked past, Sylvanas’ hand shot out to encircle Jaina’s wrist, stalling her; “Still, be gentle with her - whatever you decide to talk about?”

Jaina covered Sylvanas’ hand with her free one, “I will.”

Vereesa hadn’t gone far beyond the room. Perched on the railing, she braced against one of the colonnades with her face tilted up into the gentle snowfall. Her ears twitched back with Jaina’s footsteps, and she sent a quick glance over her shoulder as the mage came up alongside her. “It took me two decades to get used to the snow.”

Jaina rested her elbows on the railing next to Vereesa’s perch, “Minus the risk for frostbite, this must have been a lovely city in its prime.”

Vereesa nodded, “It was. According to records, we took many of the architectural advancements here and applied them to Silvermoon.” Her ears twitched back a bit a second time as she looked sidelong to Jaina, “So, you and Sylvanas?”
Jaina’s breath came out as a long, low whoosh. She knew she had to eventually have this conversation but she’d been happy not having it either. She laughed, weakly, and shrugged a shoulder, “It took me by surprise too.”

Vereesa’s ears kept low, “When? If I can even ask that.”

“What?” Jaina blinked, looking over to her friend, “Of course you can. It ... “ she turned around so she could prop her elbows on the railing and stared back into the building. Had it only been a few months? That was ... was that too short a time to dive into that sort of choice? “Kul Tiras, after we escaped.”

“So after you came here looking for me.”

“Yes.” Jaina risked another look towards Vereesa; thought back to Sylvanas’ queries on why nothing had blossomed between them; then could only offer another shrug to elaborate on her answer. Vereesa watched her as intently as a cat did a wounded bird before she ducked her head down. They stayed there in the silence of the afternoon chill for a while. Jaina took to idly observing the masonry around her while Vereesa picked at frozen pieces of moss.

“Are you happy?”

Jaina chewed on her lower lip, “Considering the circumstances? Yes. She’s … not exactly what I expected.”

Vereesa quirked a brow but said nothing.

As silence stole back into the space between them, Jaina struggled to find some way to break the awkwardness.

Vereesa turned to mirror Jaina’s pose, settling back against the railing, head tilted up to look somewhere besides the woman next to her. “I know that ultimately what I think about this doesn’t matter, and we never, ever talked about anything and … “

“The timing was always off,” Jaina picked up where Vereesa trailed off.

“I know,” Vereesa sighed, “But that doesn’t change how I feel.”

Jaina paused, not quite sure how to respond to that. She’d suspected, long had suspected, honestly, but she’d never broached it, and Vereesa had kept her silence as well on the matter. Jaina settled on a simple, faux-casual ‘Oh?’ that came out far too stilted.

Vereesa gave her a pointed look, but immediately dropped it, “To be quite blunt, I don’t see how Sylvanas managed to get the right timing - between Calia Menethil practically stalking you and the fact that my sister is an exiled war criminal - when is it appropriate to strike up an affair?”

Jaina winced.

Vereesa kept up the glare for a minute longer, then sighed and dropped her gaze to her fingers. “I think I’m more angry at myself than anything. It takes two to start a company, as my Minn’da put it. I could have done something - said something. I think … I relied on the possibility as a crutch. I mean, I could have reached out when you were in Kul Tiras and I didn’t.”

“You had your boys to raise, and two sisters to wrangle.”
“I appreciate your defense of my lack of action,” Vereesa cut her off with a dry drawl that her Thalassian accent only enhanced, “But it’s not needed. My pride is a little bruised and I might nurse some nostalgic what-ifs, but I’ll be all right.”

Jaina blinked, and studied her friend closely, looking for the catch. “Vereesa—”

“You’re my dearest friend, Jaina, and if that’s the only path we’ll ever walk together, then so be it. My life is fuller with you in it, romantically or not.”

Jaina smiled, and tentatively reached out to clasp Vereesa’s hand, squeezing tight as a silent ‘thank you’ before letting go. “We’ll be ok?”

Vereesa’s smile might have been a little wane, and the cant of her ears pressed against her skull suggested that she was reeling - and not entirely pleased; but it was the wounded honesty in her eyes as she returned the gentle squeeze before letting go. “We’ll be ok.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

When I have a longer moment, I will sit down and edit this with a finer comb than what I've currently got, but here is chapter 21! 3 more to go

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To the Lord Admiral Jaina Proudmoore, the letter began; the Trade Tongue beautifully written with an eye especially towards aesthetic calligraphy. Jaina had opened the letter not too long after her conversation with Vereesa, and had yet to progress beyond the overly polite acknowledgement of her titles, the banal courtesies that accompanied any diplomatic overtures, and the pleasantries that came with dealing with elves. Especially amongst the Quel’dorei - as there was no cultural idea for blunt, curt communications; something that Vereesa had struggled with during the early part of her decade arranging the blend of elven and human rangers to protect Theramore.

So, the letter sat for a good portion of the day and the following night; its presence gnawing holes in Jaina’s fortitude as she warred against reading it alone, with Sylvanas, or --

“There you are,” Katherine’s voice greeted her from the doorway. The scent of mulled cider followed her arrival like a banner, and as Jaina investigated further, she swore that the crisp salt of bacon or something similar stung the air and caused her mouth to water.

“Mom,” Jaina rose, respectful, and gestured for Katherine to enter. The elder Proudmoore carried a covered wicker basket and sure enough, as Jaina peeked in, she spied a delectable array of breakfast just waiting to be devoured.

“A rather small, incorrigibly cheerful bat pup delivered a message to me this morning suggesting that you had forgotten what it meant to eat something besides sweets.” Katherine set down the corked jug, and as she drew Jaina in to a warm, one-armed hug, her eyes drifted over the open letter sitting innocently on the desk. “You’ve reached out to the elves?”

Jaina nodded. “I haven’t read it yet.”

Katherine made a soft, sympathetic noise. “If they refuse, we do have the Tidesages available.”

“I know,” Jaina took her time in making a plate for herself, and for her mother. Since her return to Kul Tiras five years prior, she had devoted much of her free time to make up for the lost years between them, and that had led to Katherine becoming Jaina’s closest confidant in the final months of the Blood War. The night terrors and guilt after the Devastation of Suramar had devoured Jaina for the first year - and the sensation of channeling and directing the Vindicaar’s weapon had felt so much like the surge of arcane from Theramore that Jaina had locked her war-staff away and thrown herself into the mundane aspects of her new life in Kul Tiras.

Jaina witnessed victory for the Alliance through filtered daily reports and communications with a world-weary Anduin. Afterwards, Jaina observed the dismantling of the Horde; adding in her opinion only rarely and mostly around the removal of Horde forces that had occupied the Isles.

Throughout it all, Katherine had stood beside her.
The scent of mulled cider drifted under her nose and roused her from her thoughts. She looked up to Katherine’s arched brow and met her mother’s laughter with her own. “Do you want to -”

“Absolutely not,” Katherine said with an easy grin sapping the refusal’s sting. “You’re the one who tangled herself in this fishing net.”

“You’re my mother, you’re supposed to untangle me.”

Katherine snorted before taking a drink. “I’ll keep that in mind for the next dilemma.”

Jaina made a face, scrunching her nose and deliberately chewing an overly-large mouthful obnoxiously. When she finished, she leaned forward and stared morosely at the letter as if it would not only read itself, but solve whatever complications laid within its pages; and there were at least four, all penned in the same small, precise script.

Katherine took a steadying breath. “Have you asked our esteemed hostess for her input? Or, even better, the Lady Windrunner would have insight on how to proceed.”

“I’ve already off-loaded an entire archeological catastrophe on Vereesa - I don’t need to add political drama to her plate.” Not to mention that Jaina was trying to be sensitive to the time and space Vereesa needed; even if she said she was fine. “As for Sylvanas,” Jaina stressed the name that her mother danced around; “I want to form my own opinions before I bring this up with her.”

“Oh?” Katherine’s brow arched in an eerily familiar manner. “You two have been so chummy recently. Did something happen?”

“No.” Jaina jumped in before her mother’s hopes could rise up. “Nothing happened. I just want to show up with something to contribute - that’s all.” Jaina glanced over to a pile of cloth she’d set aside before falling asleep the night before. Katherine followed her gaze.

“Jaina…”

Jaina snapped her attention back to her mother and tried her best to not cringe at the look she encountered.

“Don’t you think that’s a bit too soon?” Which came out far nicer than Jaina had been expecting that conversation to develop.

“No.” Jaina’s tone was flat, and brooked no discussion.

Unfortunately, the usual tricks of the Lord Admiral persona didn’t quite work as effectively on the woman who had perfected them. So, all Katherine did was arch that brow even higher and wait.

It took Jaina five minutes before she gave in with an exhausted, frustrated sigh. “With everything else going on, I’m going to snatch up something good. That’s not a crime.”

“No,” Katherine agreed, “But the woman you’re thinking about has done nothing but commit crimes - war crimes at that.”

Jaina didn’t disagree. “It’s not like my hands are entirely clean. I have just as many cities conquered by my hand as she does.”

“And your brother? Is there a conveniently parallel for that horror?” Katherine folded her arms, and her gaze turned to steel.
Jaina slumped back into her chair, and looked anywhere but the gaze focused on her. “I killed Father.”

“Jaina.”

“What? You asked. I’m not excusing her actions, Mother - but you can’t hang her crimes out without wringing mine out right there with them.”

“You do not need to martyr yourself by --”

“I’m not!” Jaina rose to her feet, frustration warm on her cheeks. “Every single leader that walks Azeroth has war crimes on their hands, and right now - when we’re facing assimilation by both the Light and the Void - I’m not about to hash out a past that’s threatening to disappear by the hour. If I walked back who’s really to blame, we’d be reaching into your generation’s faults.” Jaina pinched the bridge of her nose. Arcane licked at the edge of her fingertips as she allowed some to bleed into the air around them - dispel the energy that burned bright in her veins. “What she can do - what we all can do - is strive to do better; to actually rely on diplomacy, sanctions, and trust that Azeroth as a whole is finally sick and tired of moving from one war into the next. You don’t have to like her - I would never ask that of you - but you do have to work alongside her.”

Katherine’s steel-eyed gaze didn’t waver as she listened to Jaina’s monologue. “You had reason --”

“Of course I did. Every battle was justified a hundred times over, but that doesn’t change what happened. The innocents caught in the middle aren’t going to care about strategy and the ethics around the greater good - they’re just going to understand suffering.” Jaina chuffed and slumped back into the chair. “You know this.”

Katherine nodded, slowly. She also set herself into a chair, her guard lowering as Jaina’s did. “I do. I just wanted to hear your explanations.”

Jaina scowled and said nothing. The last of the arcane fizzled in the air around her as she poured herself another mugful of cider.

“You sound clear-headed.”

“Thanks for the support.” Jaina’s tone was incredibly dry, but she restrained herself from rolling her eyes. That was a point in her favor, right?

“Don’t snap at me, young lady. You should have expected this, and you should understand why I’m concerned about …” Katherine trailed off and gestured to the pile of cloth with an aggressive jab of her finger. “Beyond this crisis, do you actually know anything about this woman?”

More than you’ll ever be able to understand, Jaina thought wryly. Part of her current stretch of solitude had revolved around coming to terms with a second, vague set of memories and impressions that danced around her thoughts as easily as her own did. She could close her eyes, touch a hand to her chest, and swear she felt the rough ridge of Frostmourne’s scar ragged and raw upon her sternum. And then there were the happier moments, the gentle touch of a lullaby, the warmth of her sisters’ laughter, the simple joy of solitude in the forest she pledged herself to. The thrill of romance.

And, now, nestled right against her own consciousness, the powerful promise of a stormfront waiting just beyond the horizon, daring her to venture out beneath it.

When Jaina didn’t answer right away, Katherine blew out a heavy breath and clasped a hand over Jaina’s shoulder. She squeezed, trying to convey maternal support even if she couldn’t understand
Jaina’s choices. “All right, I won’t trouble you further on that matter. Shall we move onto lighter subjects? Say, like what the elves wrote to you.”

“That’s your idea of light?” Jaina gave her mother a dubious look, but shrugged. It was better than arguing the ethical quandary of courting one of the more aggressively dangerous Warchiefs the Horde had ever had. Jaina tugged the letter over, and unfurled the first page. She cleared her throat, and began to read.

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Her mother had left sometime in the early afternoon, having spent much of the morning working with Jaina on various counterpoints and concessions to present not only to Sylvanas, but to Silvermoon. The letter had been harsh, but surprisingly fair in judgement and consideration of what Jaina had asked of the elves.

Then, with her outlines written and ready for Sylvanas to read, Jaina collected her gift in her other arm and headed out towards the Western Spire.

It took a bit of searching to locate Sylvanas within. Jaina took the stairs two at a time, the thought of her gift propelling her quicker than her anxiety could keep up. When she reached the top, she rapped her knuckles loudly against the marble and waited a few seconds. When no answer came, Jaina risked a step inside the threshold. “Sylvanas?”

Again, she waited. Again, no answer.

Was she out?

Was she avoiding Jaina? The thought continuously crossed Jaina’s mind since their last conversation. She wanted to dismiss it as simple paranoia, but it persisted to the point of honest worry.

Jaina’s fingers curled against her gift as she debated her options. Eventually she settled on leaving the present for Sylvanas to find. After all, it could easily be interpreted as innocent as Sylvanas wanted it and what was the harm in gifts between battle-worn allies?

Mindful of the privacy of the inner chamber, Jaina decided to leave the gift closer to the balcony, near to the desk that had fresh topographical maps carefully inked and left weighted open to dry upon the surface.

As Jaina started to set the gift down, she caught a flurry of motion out of the corner of her eye. She could barely summon up the basics of an arcane shield before a small, furry boulder bumped not-unkindly against her shoulder and immediately began to bombard her with a frenzy of high-pitched chirps and chuffing.

Moth was rarely apart from his mistress.

Sure enough, Jaina looked to see where Moth dive-bombed her from and caught the slight sway of a leg dangled out beyond the balcony’s overhang. She approached the edge and leaned out.

Sylvanas perched on the overhang with an oversized parchment unfurled over her lap, and various instruments of measurement and navigation carefully braced against her side to prevent them from rolling off the side. She leaned over her work, her face close enough to the paper that smudges had got on her cheek, streaks of charcoal and ink in various stages of drying. She was intent on whatever had her focus and the sound of her quill was the only indication that she wasn’t a gargoyle perched on the spire.
“Hey,” Jaina said during a longer pause between quill-strokes.

Sylvanas’ hand stilled before she looked up. She looked genuinely surprised to see Jaina standing beneath her spot. “Jaina?” Concern furrowed her brow, “How long have you been there?”

Jaina smiled, “Not that long. I called your name, but you didn’t answer.”

Sylvanas frowned. She set the quill aside before she twisted to face Jaina more appropriately. “I apologize. I tend to drift inside my own head when I’m working.”

“I understand completely,” Jaina squashed the bubble of relief that bumped against her throat. Just because Sylvanas admitted to not hearing her enter didn’t rule out the idea that she didn’t want company. “You can thank Moth, actually. Two inches higher and he’d have given me a concussion.” She ran a finger down the offending bat’s back. He simply triled happily in response, apparently unaware of the near-injury he almost caused.

Sylvanas shifted her attention to the bat momentarily, “Thank you, Moth.” Her gaze dropped to the parchment in her lap; before she carefully set it aside. She rolled it in a way that wouldn’t smear the work she’d just done. Then she gathered up her tools and tucked them away into a small pouch after capping the inkwell. It was all rather methodical.

Jaina stepped back as Sylvanas swung down off her perch and back onto the balcony. Sylvanas reached out to retrieve her latest map in progress and as she ducked back within, she caught Jaina watching her.

“What?”

“What.”

Sylvanas’ ears pricked backward in dubious suspicion, but she didn’t press for elaboration. Instead, she handed Jaina the pouch as she led them back into the shelter of the living quarters. As she made space for her latest work on her desk, she glanced over to Jaina every so often.

“How’s Little Moon faring?” The question was lightly worded, and to the untrained ear (and eye), Sylvanas looked completely disinterested in whatever answer she might have received. However, Vereesa’s conversation fresh in her mind, Jaina saw the tension carried in the cant of Sylvanas’ ears, how they ever-so-slightly shifted forward and back to neutral bearing - anticipatory. Nervous energy.

“Vereesa’s hurt, but she’ll be ok. I spent some time today with her discussing that astronomical pattern. We’ll get past it. She’s also taken to mothering the entire herd of children. She’s teaching them letters by having them help her in tracing and transcribing her notes,” Jaina chuckled. “I think she misses her boys. Voss thinks it’s ingenious - free labor in exchange for the kids feeling like they’re contributing members of society.”

“It’s hard enough to adjust to undeath as an adult. I could not imagine facing the prospect as a child. I told you, yes, that there were many long and painful debates about whether or not the Forsaken should bring children into our fold?” Sylvanas finished her tidying and now stood with one hip braced against her desk while she spoke.

“You did.”

“Part of it was practicality. After all, when one’s entire existence is around simply existing to the next day, sparing time and effort on a child’s comfort and peace of mind seems rather frivolous. After we chased Arthas out of Lordaeron, the children were some of our best lines of defense
against the Scarlet Crusade and the rare Alliance that ventured north. The living tended to hesitate in presence of a child on the battlefield. It was devastatingly effective.”

Jaina could imagine.

“All after Varimathris’ influence was purged from my people, and the Lich King defeated there was this … shift. We stopped utilizing the children in battle and once again the debate of what to do with them returned.” Sylvanas frowned, glancing toward her hands. She turned her nails up as if noticing the ink and charcoal caught beneath them for the first time that day. “It all seems rather cruel irony, doesn’t it? There we were, arguing for our right to stand as equals in terms of Azeroth’s citizens, hounding the ethics of choice and free will to choose one’s right to exist. All while we waged a philosophical battle on the mercy of allowing the children their true Final Death because to force on them an eternal existence without change for no crime other than their bodies rose up again like everyone else’s.”

“You couldn’t bring yourself to kill them.”

“Indeed.” Sylvanas turned her gaze out over the balcony as if she could peek in on the mentioned children from where she stood. She wasn’t just referring to the year after Northrend - it must have been costly to secure seclusion for even the small group of children that she’d managed to hide. “I still can’t. They would be far safer facing whatever troubles the Shadowlands would bring them, and yet …”

Sylvanas turned back to Jaina, “You wished to speak to me about something else than my ruminations on the state of undead children, I assume.”

Jaina knew that there were many topics that should be broached between them before anything truly happened, but she found that she’d stopped caring about what she should or shouldn’t do anymore. They would speak about the differences and commonalities between them, but later. Perhaps after the threat of assimilation had passed over them.

She looked down to the bundle of fabric in her hands, then back up to Sylvanas. She tried her best to hide the nervous tremble of her hands as she approached the banshee, but the flick of Sylvanas’ ears towards the motion even as she kept Jaina’s gaze gave her away. “My mother is absolutely furious about you.” Jaina stopped just shy of their bodies touching. “She was half-concerned you’d cast a spell over me.”

Sylvanas lifted a brow. “Oh? What makes you think I haven’t?”

Jaina matched that brow, even as she grinned. “I think I rank pretty high up there on the ladder of magic-users.”

“And that’s enough to assuage you?”

“Enough to take my chances.” Jaina bounced idly on her heels. She enjoyed this. She’d always been the one chased and courted, and the few examples she had to go off of weren’t exactly the sort of advances an undead ex-royal and military leader would be impressed by, so to have Sylvanas engaged in the banter was, well, thrilling.

“You know, you brought up a good point. You’re the archmage between us, I should be the one concerned about an enchantment.”

Jaina’s grin grew. “You caught me. I conjured it right about the time you compared me to a stowed away rat. I was so besotted, I just had to risk it.”
Sylvanas snorted. “You were as annoying present as a stowed away rat.”

“Is that why you pranced around before me nude?”

“I did not prance.”

“You did.”

“Flensing is a messy business! I might appear as a corpse - that doesn’t mean I want to smell of one.”

“So, instead of covering your armor, you … stripped it off?”

Sylvanas’ ears pinned playfully back while she tossed her head with an imperious scoff. As she did, Jaina presented her gift. It was her cloak of rich navy blue and gold trim. She’d taken the time to spell enchantments of accuracy and keen senses along the hood, the Thalassian lettering a soft, shimmering shift of silver whenever it caught the light.

“You’re a city mage. You couldn’t possibly understand the … intricate rules…” Sylvanas’ gaze landed on the cloak, “…that … is… Oh.” She shifted her hip and nearly fell into the chair. Sylvanas blinked, caught Jaina’s gaze, then returned to staring quietly at the presented cloak. “Oh.”

Oh, indeed. That wasn’t a refusal, but it wasn’t as enthusiastic as Jaina hoped for. So, faced with a choice about as dangerous as a cliff’s face - Jaina took the bold leap and leaned forward to carefully and purposefully set the cloak around Sylvanas shoulders. She smoothed the fabric against her, and adjusted the hood so that it would easily slip up and over the elf’s ears without too much friction.

Sylvanas didn’t move throughout the entire process. Jaina could feel the banshee’s eyes on her while she adjusted the cloak; that gaze burned against her skin, and when Jaina pulled away, Sylvanas’ eyes had become hypnotizing embers in the shadow of the room.

Jaina took a deep breath. Time for her to be a bit vulnerable. “Vereesa mentioned that elves have a tradition about gifts being presented to their prospective partners. I … in Kul Tiras, the cloak is a promise of protection. The noble houses - we present our colors as a show of support for those we bestow them upon. It is our promise that the recipient and their kin will always be able to call on us whenever we’re needed.”

Jaina’s voice pitched just a bit. “I, uh, I know a little about what it’s like to be so consumed by grief and vengeance and hatred; and how much difference it makes between knowing that there’s support you can reach versus knowing that you’re very much alone. I don’t know if you wrote missives to Theramore back then - probably not, we were barely established with Orgrimmar, but I wish you had, and I wish I had responded. Not because of this,” she gestured between them, “but because what could have been different if the people of Lordaeron hadn’t been forgotten - so, this is my pledge to support you and your people until whatever happens.”

By the end, Jaina knew she was rambling and her finish felt more like a stumble than any honest declaration. Her cheeks flamed, but she kept to her diplomatic training to keep her expression from crumbling. Tides, facing down a tribunal to discuss war terms was so much easier than this!

Sylvanas blinked, slow and careful as Jaina pulled her hands away.

“The cloak, it’s a symbol for my people as well,” Sylvanas said just at the point that the silence was about to destroy the last of Jaina’s composure.
“I know,” Jaina said, her voice softening into a whisper. “I’ve been thinking - about what you said to me in the Blighted Lands; and what I chose there: You. These past few weeks have made it a luxury to follow up on what we spoke about but this is Midwinter; we’re allowed a few luxuries, no?” She ghosted her fingers up along the sharp angle of Sylvanas’ jaw, then without pause, gently danced her touch against the shell of Sylvanas’ ear - prompting a sudden, sharp inhale of breath from Sylvanas.

Jaina chased that noise with her mouth, bending slightly to brush her lips feather-light over the path that her fingertips had already blazed. The chair creaked, catching Jaina’s attention. Sylvanas’ hands were white-knuckled against the armrests even as she subtly lifted her jaw to encourage Jaina’s attention. The banshee didn’t need to breathe, but her chest rose and fell in a deep, steadying rhythm just as if she’d been alive.

Jaina paused. Seconds slipped by, slow and sure, and each heartbeat only increased the duality of anticipation and anxiety that warred within her. Just when she started to pull away did Sylvanas’ hand drop from the armrest to gently, but determinedly encircle fingers around Jaina’s wrist, effectively trapping the mage where she was. Not that Jaina minded, really. Then, carefully, Sylvanas’ hand left Jaina’s wrist to travel up and mirror the touch along her jaw, cupping against her cheek - thumb brushing along the corner of Jaina’s bottom lip. She tugged, ever-so-slight, and turned Jaina’s face towards her own.

Jaina’s mouth went dry at the heat she encountered. Half-lidded, the crimson glow of Sylvanas’ eyes shimmered bright against the pallor of her skin - even as they narrowed into two halos around the intense dark of her pupils. The fire in Sylvanas’ gaze juxtaposed the absolute chill of her touch as her fingers carefully slid down the length of Jaina’s neck to dance along the line of her clavicle, the pads of her fingers dipping just slightly behind the raised curvature of the bone.

“So,” Jaina’s tongue darted along her lower lip, “what exactly was your intent behind the wolf-cloak?”

Sylvanas watched her expression with rapt attention, “Intimidation,” she said. Her voice was a low rasp. “You were supposed to realize that it showed how little I respected your ability to manage your affairs out here, get furious, do something rash, and break the accord - freeing me from your absolute meddling in my isolation.”

“I’m not.”

Sylvanas' thumb slowed to a stop. "Not what?"

Swallowing past the sudden dryness in her throat, Jaina said, "I'm not intimidated."

The corners of Sylvanas' eyes creased in amusement. "Are you sure? Your heartbeat suggests otherwise."

"Well, I think that's a matter of perspective."

Sylvanas hummed as the point of her nail just barely bit into the fullness of Jaina’s lower lip. “And now?”

Jaina didn’t move as Sylvanas went to her feet. The motion put them flush, hips slotting easily together. Jaina’s hand splayed out against the spanse of Sylvanas’s shoulders for balance. The flimsy linen of the banshee’s shirt bunched up underneath her palm. “Do I look scared?”

“Quite the opposite. If I may be so bold: Lady Proudmoore, you look absolutely stunning wearing
the trophy of my hunt.” Sylvanas stood a few inches taller, even despite the heeled boots Jaina wore and the lack of any footwear for the elf. She wielded the height well, requiring Jaina to crane her neck to keep their gazes together, and the banshee took advantage - her thumb now tracing a maddeningly slow, soft circle just above Jaina’s pulse point.

The witty retort died somewhere on the back of Jaina’s tongue. That was fine - they were past words now. Jaina tilted her head and met Sylvanas’ kiss with an eagerness that trembled along her spine like a harp’s cord. Sylvanas made a soft noise against Jaina’s mouth, and lifted Jaina before balancing her against the darkened support of the nearest archway.

Jaina could hardly feel the cold marble through the heavy fur of the wolf-cloak as Sylvanas pressed her into the support, swooping in to press chilled kisses down the strong edge of Jaina’s jaw before nudging gently with her nose. Jaina obliged, tilting her neck up, and keened softly as Sylvanas’ lips drifted lower, brushing over her bounding pulse. The threat of fangs against her skin followed by soothing kisses sent aftershocks through Jaina’s body - each burst of energy building off the one before it until a pleasant buzzing anticipation curled right at the base of her spine, just behind her navel.

Jaina wasn’t passive either. She curled her legs about the narrow span of Sylvanas’ hips, locking the archer in the cradle of her hips as her hands drifted up and under Sylvanas’ shirt. She met skin and marveled at the steel she felt beneath her fingertips. There was nothing soft to the ranger’s body - instead it was hard, corded muscles defined easily as Jaina traced along Sylvanas’ stomach up underneath her ribs. She knew that if she brought her hands just a little higher, she’d brush along Frostmourn’s scar.

Instead, she ran her hands up along the curve of Sylvanas’ back, along the side of her chest, just barely grazing against the swell of her breasts. Sylvanas was still tending to a rather indulgent kiss against her pulse, so Jaina went after what was in range: elven ears.

After all, she was in the perfect position to do so.

Jaina didn’t start soft. Instead, she teased Sylvanas with exploratory nips and languid, soothing kisses.

It drew a noise from the back of the banshee’s throat that Jaina had never heard before - but instinctively knew she wanted to hear again. It reverberated between them, rumbling against her chest.

Sylvanas pulled back, her eyes were luminous in the dark of the Spire. “Anar’alah, you need to warn a woman before you do that.”

“Oh, you didn’t like it?” Jaina fluttered her lashes coyly and grinned widely when Sylvanas playfully bared fang in return. “I could avoid your ears entirely --mm!”

The kiss might have cut off her verbal sass, but Jaina couldn’t help but dance one hand up along the length of Sylvanas’ ear before curling her hand into Sylvanas’ pale hair, gently tugging down the hood of her gifted cloak to do so.

Jaina marveled at how easy it was to fall underneath desire’s heady spell. Doubt flickered like lightning on the horizon but was chased away by the sureness of the kisses exchanged. She felt greedy and indulgent as she languidly learned the shape of Sylvanas’ lips underneath her own.

When they parted, Sylvanas returned to mapping Jaina’s throat with her mouth, her teeth a dangerous thrill that Jaina arched up into. Sylvanas’ hand kneaded at Jaina’s hips, just barely
slipping her fingers beneath the hem of Jaina’s leggings.

It was wonderful; a slow, spiraling climb.

Sylvanas’ other hand worked at Jaina’s corset, unbuckling each clasp as reverently as if she were performing a ritual. When the last fell away, Sylvanas glanced up and waited for permission. Jaina gave it with a breathy sort of sigh that melted into a low-pitched moan as Sylvanas slipped a hand underneath her camisole and cupped her breast. *Tides.*

A shadow fluttered in view. Moth landed against the high point of the pillar and let out a high-pitched squeak. He sounded almost apologetic.

Sylvanas looked up at the squeak, brow arched. “Who’s coming?”

Jaina laughed, and shook her head. “You speak bat?”

“I speak Moth.”

“Oh. That clears it up.” Jaina was already redressing, straightening out her bodice and smoothing down the fabric wrinkled by roving hands. She paused, then snapped her head up with an ‘aha’. “You’re a ranger!”

Sylvanas had been in the midst of presenting her with a sorrowful gaze, with drooped ears and a hangdog frown when Jaina’s gasp caught her off guard. “Yes, why?” Her ears immediately swiveled back, startled, and her gaze narrowed. Jaina grinned inwardly - it seemed Sylvanas was a quick learner to Jaina’s moments of incorrigible humor and must have caught something in Jaina’s expression. “Whatever you’re thinking: no.”

“Moth is your Companion! That’s why you can speak with him.”

“What? No. I raised him. I haven’t had a Companion for decades.”

Jaina had already latched onto her theory, though, and wouldn’t hear otherwise. “He reminds me of the Huntsmaster’s beasts you know - her Companions are spooky intelligent. That massive wolf she had?” Jaina shuddered at the memories; “I hated facing it in battle.”

“Irralu?” Sylvanas offered, offhandedly. “She still has her?”

Jaina nodded. “She does. Retired from active service it looks like, but she follows Mistwalker to every meeting of the Order Champions. I swear that wolf knew how to feint better than a rogue. Irralu’s her name?”

“ ‘ Ghost ‘ in the Common tongue.” Sylvanas gave Jaina a concerned look, and her hands fell behind her back as she stood at attention. It was awkward posturing, what with Jaina still pressed so close against her and the way Sylvanas’ hair was tousled as if someone had just spent the last half-hour with their fingers running through it. “I apologize if I was too forward just now. I --

Jaina leaned up on tip-toe, and it was her turn to quiet Sylvanas’ rambling thoughts with a deep kiss. One that had them back against the wall again, Sylvanas’ hands roaming over her hips, reaching to cup at her rear and pull her closer. Jaina was no better - her hands wound back around Sylvanas’ neck, tugging her down as Jaina wantonly stole kiss after kiss.

Moth’s impatient chittering wasn’t enough to interrupt them, but when he landed squarely on Jaina’s head and sang in a high enough pitch that both of their ears hurt afterwards, they pulled apart like guilty apprentices.
Jaina recovered first, smoothing the back of her knuckles against Sylvanas’ cheek before resting her palm flat against the thrum of necrotic energy at Sylvanas’ heart. “When we have the time, you will bring me back here, spread me over that decadent pile of furs, and allow me to have my way with you.”

Sylvanas blinked, thrown off just a bit. “Have your way with me? I - Lady Proudmoore, you were the one pinned just now.”

“As I said earlier - a matter of perspective.”

The corner of Sylvanas’ lips curled into the barest hint of a smile, but the remainder of her expression kept neutral. “We’ll see about that.” She cleared her throat, and pressed on; “Moth says Gawain is coming to collect us. Apparently, our Rangers have found something on the boundary line that requires the two of us.”

Jaina’s heart thumped painfully sweet at the phrasing. She nodded, then cursed. “My staff is back in my sanctum.”

“I have mana crystals for you to draw off. Do you need the staff?”

No, Jaina thought, and squashed the worry about drawing on the Titan residue within her. It’s not as if she’d hadn’t been doing just that.

Sylvanas watched her, but whatever the banshee wanted to say was lost in a gust of wind that announced the arrival of the massive flying bat. Gawain settled against the ancient stone with two wing-claws double the size of Jaina’s own hands curled about the bulstrode. Sylvanas took that as her cue to don her battle-leather. It wasn’t quite as impressive as the armor she had worn as Warchief but it was something far more intimidating than the plain black leather she’d worn to Kul Tiras. She shouldered Thor’dorial and met Jaina outside. She pressed a small bag into Jaina’s hands, the arcane crystals buzzing within.

Jaina discovered that transitioning onto the back of the giant battle-bat had been difficult enough when the creature had been balancing on solid ground; but Jaina mounting the beast while it clung to the side of a crumbling railing, wings half unfurled to maintain its position? A little fear-inducing.

Jaina needed to distract herself from the dizzying adjustment, and to keep her mind off the fact that one false move and she’d slide backward and off the creature as Gawain unfurled his massive wingspan and took to flight. It was a heavy swoop that left her stomach lurching and her hands white-knuckled on the saddle. “Have the rangers reported in?”

Sylvanas kept one hand loose about Jaina, her fingers curled in just slightly to leave a soft pressure against the swell of her hip. Her other hand kept a firm command of the reins as Gawain gained enough altitude that even Jaina’s tolerance for the cold was pushed to the limit. “There’s seven roaming the boundary. All of them have reported in - there’s no evidence of an army just on our doorstep, but we have a … unexpected visitor to the west. Kalira has detained them.”

Jaina’s lips pressed into a thin line. It could be another smaller scouting party pushing harder against the original trail they’d picked up. Even with the reinforcement along the wardings, and the additional secrecy of Tidesage guile, it would only take a determined mage a short while to really push through. She berated herself internally - she should have gone through with the Seal as soon as they’d returned. “A mage?”

“No. Lightforged.”
The flight took them to the boundary soon enough, and as Gawain dipped down for a scouting run, they passed through the weakened warding line. The sensation rippled through Jaina like a pebble dropped into a still pond.

She looked for magic while Sylvanas craned to peer over the edge of the wings. Between them, it didn’t take long.

“Movement, just along the upper ridge.” Sylvanas pointed out. Jaina squinted, and with her eyes adjusted to the night, she could faintly make out the gleaming silhouette of a person. They were doing absolutely nothing to disguise themselves - either magically or visually. Around them, the darker shadows of Kalira and her compatriots, backlit against the Lightforge’s radiance.

The pair exchanged a look, then as Gawain continued to descend, Jaina readied her staff while Sylvanas shifted to nock an arrow. She kept the string loose as the bat came around for a landing.

The lone figure paused in their movement and turned to see their arrival. Even though the night was poorly lit, the figure was illuminated enough that Jaina hesitated.

“Turaylon?” Spellwork crackled just underneath Jaina’s fingertips. “What are you doing here?”

“Lady Proudmoore - thank the Light.” Turalyon took a step towards them. Sylvanas’ readied arrow gave him pause. The Dark Rangers shifted as well, moving to circle wide, flanking the paladin. He would find it a challenge if the situation came to blows. “Lady Windrunner.” His greeting towards her was a little cooler.

“Lord Turalyon,” Jaina didn’t dampen her magic. “This is unexpected. How --”

“-- Did I find you?” Turalyon interrupted. “Alleria told me.”


“She didn’t give your position willingly.”

Sylvanas threats died on her tongue. “What?”

Up close, and underneath his inner radiance, Turalyon looked like he’d spent the last few weeks running on the dregs of his energy reserves. His eyes were bloodshot and sunken beneath dark bruising. His cheeks were gaunt, and the look that he carried reminded Jaina of the nights where she supplemented actual sleep with stimulating herbs and potions. Frankly, he looked like hell.

Still, Jaina kept her spell just at her fingertips. “I don’t follow.”

“Alleria wasn’t subtle with her sabotage of the Vindicaar, and the fact that half of the Tidesages and Thornspeakers loyal to your mother disappeared at the same time thanks to a dizzying roulette of portals - the High Inquistor isn’t blind.”

“Nonsense. My sister is many things, but she wouldn’t be so foolish as to get herself caught after such a stunt.”

Turalyon agreed with a tilt of his head. “No, but you agree that she would turn herself in if she felt it was the only way to keep her son from bearing the brunt of the Inquisition.”

Sylvanas’ lips pressed into a thin line, and Jaina watched the cant of her ears sink back ever-so-slightly. “How much time do we have?”
Turalyon shook his head. “Truthfully, I don’t know, but I expect you don’t have much. Without the Vindicaar, it will take a few days to organize the various Wings into a cohesive march but the Army of the Light has been eager for a new frontline and it will not take long to convince them to rally.”

“And all they’ll need is a few solid mages with any grasp of arcane theory to break through.” Jaina added on. This was bad. Falor’Thalas would not be able to withstand a siege of mundane means, let alone one led by the Lightforged.

Sylvanas shouldered her bow. Her brow was creased by a deep furrow as she listened. “Where is Alleria now?”

Turalyon paused.

Sylvanas growled, the sound rippling through the night. “My patience is stretched thin as it is with your presence here, High Exarch - I suggest not stretching it further.”

“At my family’s estate. It’s a day’s flight from here.”

Sylvanas quirked a brow. “A curious place for interrogations.”

Turalyon scowled at the implication. “I still have standing with the Army of the Light. There are those of us who fought alongside Alleria for hundreds of years and will answer when she needs aid.”

“So the Light has fractures within it - how illuminating.”

“Sylvanas,” Jaina reached out a hand to rest upon the banshee’s upper arm.

Sylvanas flicked an ear towards the touch but it did its job. Slowly, the bristling eased out of her stance until she watched Turalyon with the passive gleam of a reclining lynx studying the local deer.

Night fell heavy around the three of them. The soft, lonely call of an owl drifted through the branches, and further down the ridge, Jaina could pick out the faint bubbling of the creek - the air was that still.

It didn’t last long. Turalyon shifted, then fixed Sylvanas with a look that bordered on desperate. “She saved your life.”

“I never asked that of her.”

“You didn’t need to, she’s your sister.”

“A fact that’s only relevant to her when it suits --”

“ -- it didn’t suit anyone to save you from your deserved trial, Banshee.” Turalyon’s voice dipped into a lower octave as a harsh light unfurled about his shoulders, “Yet Alleria risked her life, her allegiances, and her values to ensure you avoided the headsman’s axe.”

“And what do you want me to reward such selfless devotion with, hmm?”

“Bring her behind the wards - watch over her as she recovers.”

“Why? You just said that the Lightforged were told of us - and that we had days if that to prepare. If you want me to show concern for Alleria’s welfare, then she is far safer in your family’s ruin is
she not?”

Turalyon didn’t seem to have a rebuttal for that. The light faded as his shoulders slumped in defeat. “I suppose you’re right. I just … I can’t tend to her there.”

“You were a priest before you were a paladin, were you not?”

“Alleria cannot bear the touch of the Light even when she’s well. I have nothing to offer her but broth and companionship.”

Jaina figured now was as good as any time to step in. “We do have Tidesages here, Sylvanas.”

Sylvanas tossed her a look even as she acknowledged the point. “Very well, I’ll send a Dark Ranger with you upon Gawain.”

“No need, I can bring her here.”

Sylvanas’ eyes narrowed, “I’m already displeased with allowing my estranged sister asylum. That doesn’t extend to the commanding officer of the Light.”

“What about to your brother-in-law and fellow exile?” Turalyon countered. “Take me in as well and I will lend your people all the knowledge I have concerning the Army of the Light. It might buy you -- buy us more time.”

Time for what, though, was the unspoken question between the three of them.

Sylvanas sneered, her voice as cold as ice. “And why should I trust you?”

Turalyon took a moment, and when he replied, Jaina realized that he was carefully measuring the steadiness of his words against the weight of the emotion behind them. “I failed Alleria once because I believed in what the Light - what Xe’ra told me was the truth. I can’t atone for all of her suffering that I caused, but that will not stop me from trying. If Alleria believed that you were worth saving, then that will be my command as well.” He approached, then, and knelt before Sylvanas. As he did so, he unsheathed the broken sword that he wielded and offered it up to her, hilt first. “Do what you can for Alleria, and you will have my sword for your battles to come. I swear it.”

Sylvanas eyed the offered weapon like it was a snake rearing to bite her, and the longer she kept quiet, the more Jaina was absolutely sure that she was going to refuse - until Sylvanas reached out to rest her hands upon the blade, directly over where Turalyon’s own were beneath it. “Rise, then, Turalyon, and serve the people of Lordaeron once more.”

Chapter End Notes

I do hope that moment makes up for the 100k slowburn. :)

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