the wind that shakes the undergrowth

by ladyptarmigan

Summary

Deep in Eversong Forest, a powerful Drust druid lives in seclusion. Her days are spent tending the cycle which honors both life and death, and after hundreds of years she has nothing but scorn for war and the grasping conflicts of Azeroth. Even discussing her existence is discouraged, and not a single living person knows her name.

Not a single person except for one: Sylvanas Windrunner.

Notes

Credit for this cool au concept goes to roman, and doubly so since its their fault for reminding me of childhood fav videogame Warcraft III. Check out this awesome art to get the picture of the ballin Drust!Jaina aesthetic. And don't worry, my catadora stuff is still very much in progress! I just all of a sudden was able to write in past tense, and could tell I really needed to practice it before I went back to present tense in a long work. Part three is still making good progress :)

The poem is also very lovely and not mine. Landscape by Mary Oliver is threaded through this piece, and it was the combination of Sylvaina thoughts, Drust!Jaina aesthetic, and this poem that brought this fic into existence.
Isn’t it plain the sheets of moss, except that they have no tongues, could lecture all day if they wanted about spiritual patience?

Lireesa Windrunner made one fundamental mistake. It was not, as one might suspect, specifically telling her daughter to stay put—she knew better. Her instructions, worded with care, were for Sylvanas to ‘guard the camp by keeping an eye out for wolves or other predators’.

It was their first hunting excursion together; she had kept her daughter in sight at all times, with meticulous care, for almost the entire trip. Despite this, her waist high hellion had attempted escape twice already, irresistibly drawn to the wide boughs of ancient trees and the blackberry thickets laden with birds.

Her mistake was that, when she did leave Sylvanas alone, she failed to double back and spy on her before continuing down to the river. She had good reason; by all earthly standards the girl should have been exhausted after a day spent hiking for miles, tracking deer and fowl and learning the ways of the forest.

Nonetheless, scant moments after her Mother disappeared down a deer trail, Sylvanas took off into the deep woods.

Sylvanas was too young for doubt or fear.

With her small practice bow slung over her shoulder, she stalked the forest as if she was the master of an ancient kingdom. Her Mother was an elite tracker, she knew she’d be caught soon after her absence was discovered. So she opted for haste rather than care, not worrying about the crunch of leaves beneath her feet or the way sapling branches caught, whiplike, on her jerkin.

She raced through the undergrowth of the trees, barreling through shrubs and stumbling over enormous tangles of roots, heart soaring with the freedom of the forest.

Her greatest mistake was in underestimating how late in the day it was. She hadn’t been gone an hour when the sun edged beneath the treeline, casting the woods in shadows. As adventurous as she was, even she didn’t want to be stuck alone overnight; her Mother couldn’t track in the pitch dark.

But before she turned to go back, something caught her eye in the distance.
The piercing blue glow of the arcane, faint but unmistakable, was coming in and out of focus as it wove through the trees.

Curiosity sang through her veins: she needed to know what was out there. Stalking as silently as a half untrained child could, she moved through the forest towards the source of light. And as she got closer she started to see the hint of shapes in the shadows. At once, a hint of antlers, then a curve of shoulder.

Was another person out there? Or was it some mystical animal, hiding in the ancient parts of the wood? Maybe she had come across Malorne the Waywatcher, the ancient guardian who takes the form of a stag. She’d heard the legends; that he could mark the path to safety by the light of the moon, that he would bestow wisdom on any who tracked him for a night and a day. Was that it? She couldn’t remember exactly what she’d read. Alleria had said something similar once too, though. That he would answer any question for a ranger skilled enough to shoot an arrow through the crown tines of his majestic antlers.

And wouldn’t Alleria be impressed if she did it?

She resolved at once to succeed, to track the being and prove herself a worthy huntress. Sylvanas has been practicing with the bow since she was strong enough to draw one. If she could get close enough, she knew she could make the shot.

Quieting her steps, she padded closer to the source of that blue glow. Sliding the bow off her shoulder and down her arm, she readied it for the draw and pulled out a slim practice arrow. She darted from tree to tree, working her way into range, keeping cover between her and whatever mystical being roamed the Eversong Forest.

Some tingling instinct raced up and down her spine as she felt the right moment approach.

Tall antlers were just visible behind a scattering of branches, and they would soon move from behind the coverage of a tree and give her a glimmer of a chance. Ahead of it was a small clearing where a great oak had once stood; the trunk lay rotting and covered in mushrooms along the forest floor, spikes of the great stump jutting up with savage beauty.

Sylvanas counted second by second as her target moved. Seeing some imperceptible sign, she knocked an arrow.

A moment later the majestic, towering set of antlers moved into sight above the trunk of the fallen tree. She counted the points off the beam, up through the fork all the way to the final division at the tips of the antlers.

There. That was her mark.

The draw comes as instinctively as breathing to a Windrunner. In a motion smooth as silk she pulled the string back to the anchor, peering down the slim body of the arrow while equalizing the push. Hold hand and draw hand force settled into balance, and her back contracted as she used a final second to aim.

The moment was suspended in complete stillness. Sylvanas’ exhale was a faint prayer, her brow furrowed with focus, and a moment later she let the arrow fly.

It’s path was true, and the bolt whistled past trees and threaded through the obstacles between it and its goal.

And she watched, heart in her throat, as it soared neatly through the crown tine.
The arrow completed its journey by glancing off a tree and clattering to the ground, the noise seeming to jar the whole clearing into awareness.

Sylvanas couldn’t help herself, she jumped up and whooped with delight.

“Got you!” she said, laughing, grinning and flushed with success.

She was too young to recognize the rising tension, or the strangeness of the chill wind whistling around her ankles and filling the air with a peaty, earthen smell.

But she did notice when the antlers swung to face her, and a skull of bone gazed back.

A skull of bone with two glowing blue eyes.

She swallowed roughly. That did not look like a stag guardian.

When the figure rounded the trunk and came into full view, they appeared fully humanoid. Sylvanas could have sworn she had seen bits of hoof and stocky flank, something unmistakably deer-like, but what had emerged was no animal.

A part of her knew she should be scared.

But she found something else overcame any more logical response. Despite everything, she felt that this was the most wonderful, mystical thing to ever happen to her. That somehow she had stepped into a large, powerful destiny she had never known existed until this very moment.

She took a step closer.

Across the little clearing, the other figure froze.

“You aren’t Malorne, are you?” she asked, sounding equal parts intrigued and let down.

Now spared a peaceful moment to look, she could see the skull was not even that of a deer. She had spent enough time forced to admire hunting trophies to recognize the skull of a bear. It was unadorned, except where deer antlers anachronistically emerged from it. The antlers themselves were covered with twisting swirls of blue and other obscure markings that burned in the dim light of the evening.

The figure did not respond, but seemed to peer down at her with an uncertain cant.

“Well, I made the shot. So you’re supposed to answer my question.” Sylvanas crossed her arms sullenly.

“Am I?”

A shiver went down her spine at the sound of the words.

It was a female voice. And not, as she had expected, an ancient, raspy one: it echoed with power, seemed to come from all directions, but sounded almost young.

She took so long to reply that the entity took another step forward.

“What’s your question, then?” the figure said, a hint of a laugh threaded through the echoes it cast.

Sylvanas froze.
What was her question, anyhow?

She hadn’t made it that far. She tried to think about some wisdom she wanted to receive and came up short. How could she become the best ever ranger and rub it in Alleria’s face? How to learn the ultimate silent hunter skills that would make her famous and remembered for all elven history?

It all sounded too dumb to even say, stupid kid stuff. Why hadn’t she planned this better?

She needed to ask something cool, something about nature. And she needed to say it fast, before she lost her chance.

“What’s so great about bees, anyway?” she blurted out, before she could stop herself.

And then she almost died of embarrassment. The question only came to mind because Vereesa had been basically obsessed lately, and she really didn’t get what was so wonderful about them, but it wasn’t like she could explain all that to the mystic forest person! She almost groaned.

A bright, tinkling laugh filled the clearing a moment later and erased all hints of self-recrimination.

It was beautiful, the most beautiful thing she had ever heard.

Her question was stupid, but at least the deer lady thought she was funny.

She looked up, smiling and rubbing the back of her head.

The peaceful moment was interrupted by a harsh shout, not too far in the distance, by a person she knew quite well. A shout filled with a substantial amount of rage.

“SYLVANAS!”

Her Mother was going to kill her. She was never going to get to go outside again.

She turned, to try and gauge how far away certain doom was. But when she turned back, the mysterious woman was gone.

Her Mother didn’t kill her, but Sylvanas sort of wished she had.

She was stuck in endless lessons, forbidden from playing outside, and followed around relentlessly by Vereesa. At least her brother would leave her alone.

And, worst of all, she knew she couldn’t tell Alleria what she had seen. She’d think it was all made up, to try and save face for getting punished. So she couldn’t even show off about what a good shot she made.

Despite considerable reluctance, she decided to tell Vereesa instead. At least she would get to be the cool big sister for a while.

So the next time Vereesa was making fun of her for being punished, she fired right back.

“It was worth it,” she said with a mysterious grin.
“How could a few hours away from Mother be worth weeks of punishment?” her sister replied, kicking at the side of an end table.

“You’ll never guess what I saw.”

Isn’t it clear
the black oaks along the path are standing
as though they were the most fragile of flowers?

For many years, she did not think much on what she saw that day. It remained at the back of her mind, cropping up in odd moments, but mostly drifted unnoticed. Some days she herself doubted what she had seen.

But as she was promoted up the ranks of the rangers, whispers reached her ears that struck a familiar chord. Women in a village bordering the forest would speak, when they thought no one else was listening, of appealing to a witch in the woods for love troubles, or for help conceiving. A novice ranger who fell into a raging river woke bone dry and healed, remembering nothing except a flash of blue. A woman chased into the wood by a vengeful ex escaped to a nearby village, and the next day, they searched and found the man trapped in thicket of thorns twice as dense as should be natural, and which had certainly not existed prior to the incident.

There was no common thread, and no one had seen anything useful, mentioning neither deer nor eerie magical figure.

When she asked her own commanding officers, they silenced her with an anxious glare. That was a tell in and of itself, and it could only come from higher up the chain of command.

At last she resolved to ask her Mother directly, avoiding any hint of the real reason she wished to know, and she got her chance the next time they managed to share a meal.

Clearing her throat, Sylvanas looked up the woman who was both her Mother and her Commander.

“I’ve heard some interesting whispers about a mysterious being who lives in the deepest parts of Eversong Forest. But no one will tell me anything that isn’t pure speculation.”

Her Mother knew her entirely to well. She responded to this inquiry with a raised eyebrow and a glare.

“That would be because they are all strictly forbidden to speculate about any mysterious being who may or may not live in the wood,” she said, voice clipped.

“Ah. A politician’s answer. That isn’t what I expected from the Ranger-General of Silvermoon.” She responded with a scowl. “Don’t think you’ll bait me so easily.”
“Don’t you think it's far more conspicuous if I keep blundering around asking random people? Because I can continue doing that, instead.”

“Have I ever told you that you are an infuriating piece of work, daughter?” she said, scowl softening to an amused quirk of the lips.

“Many times. And we both know where I inherited such a trait. So you may as well not bother trying to change the subject.” Sylvanas had played this game more than enough times to be prepared for such a weak counter.

Lireesa Windrunner’s fingers drum rhythmically against the table. Deep in thought, she seemed to look past her daughter into the distance.

“Several hundred years after I took up this position, we started hearing rumors that someone had begun to live in the forest. Someone… not one of us. The farstriders were tasked with the investigation. For years we found traces of almost nothing and had sightings of almost nothing. Eventually I was forced to call in assistance from a team of magisters.”

Sylvanas knew what she heard would not be repeated a second time. Her full focus was commanded, and she tried to memorize every word.

“They lasted only a few days in the deep wood. All of them reported strange dreams, spells that seemed to work but failed to do exactly as they should, various odd occurrences. They were all unharmed, but could not corner whoever was behind it. They confirmed that a powerful spellcaster was living out there. At least a strong druid, most likely an archdruid, but possibly something more obscure, like a wild god,” her ears twitched with annoyance. “I went so far as to send a message to the Night Elves. I asked if they were missing any of their order strong enough to do the things we had seen.”

“And?” Sylvanas nearly gasped. Their relations with the Night Elves were chilly at best.

“They were not. None of the Cenarion Circle operate in this area. The answers that were left are almost all distasteful. Imagine if we were allowing a troll druid free range of one of our forests? A drust? A tauren?”

Sylvanas could not tell her Mother that the woman was most certainly not a tauren.

“Whoever it is, no reports have reached us of them causing serious harm. So it was decided that the panic their presence would cause, if it were known, was worse than simply leaving them to live in peace. And so it has been, for hundreds of years. And I will have your oath not to upset that balance over your own curiosity, Sylvanas.”

She raised an arm with an overly sweet grin. “I so swear, Mother. I will keep my curiosity in check on this topic henceforth.”

She chose not to reveal it wasn't merely curiosity that had driven her, that drove her still.

The outbreak of the Second War put all her inquiries on the back burner.

Sylvanas found herself sunk in the endless tedium and despair of war. The rangers had more need of
her as a strategist than a warrior, so she found herself with increasing responsibilities. While Alleria zipped off to the front, winning battles with dramatic acts of heroism, she was stuck in a tent plotting how to move this supply or that battalion. But all that changed, more suddenly than she could have ever imagined, on the day a shaking messenger handed her word that her Mother had been killed.

An ambush in the borderlands had gone badly. The entire company under her command had been almost wiped out.

She had stalked away from the poor man and barely made it to her own tent before collapsing.

Somehow, she had never imagined this day would come.

It had really felt like Mother would be able to guide her forever. Even the weight of this terrible war, outnumbered and disadvantaged, had seemed manageable with her confidence at the helm.

And now what? What will the rangers do? What will she do?

Four days before her ascension ceremony, she had gone to find Vereesa in a panic. All of a sudden, it had become too much to bear.

Mother’s death was one thing. She had not really dealt with it, and she would not, not for many years. But they were busy, the war beat steadily onward, there was little time for grief. That was manageable.

Alleria refusing to take up their Mother’s position was what had shaken her. She should have suspected it, but somehow the thought barely occurred to her. In retrospect, she could remember even Mother trying to drop hints about her potential role. But it had seemed part of a future that would never come.

Alleria was the shining star, the hero. Her name was already sung in tales of grand heroism. Sylvanas had left Thas'dorah, their family's legendary bow, with her gladly; her sister would wield it better, and much more often, given that she would be stuck behind the lines of battle. And in Alleria's hands, the bow would carry out their ancestor’s oath: that as long as the weapon protected them, Silvermoon would never fall.

And yet, that was precisely why Alleria Windrunner made sense as the leader of Quel’Thalas’ military. Her story felt like that of a walking legend. It was true she was never one for the bureaucratic aspects of war, but to refuse the position of Ranger-General?

So now it would fall to her.

She would have to do it. The mantle of Ranger-General would rest on her, and she would have to find a way to carry the burden. Her Mother had always made it look—not easy, but a matter of soldiering on and doing one’s best.

Sylvanas had kept it together until she was told there would be an ascension ceremony. A small one, as the war was still raging, but a ceremony nonetheless, where her position would be made official. Something about the thought of it had destroyed her last reserves of calm.

Her head pounded, her hands shook. She couldn’t do it.
By the time she found Vereesa, it was obvious something was wrong. Her sister took one look at her, grabbed her by the elbow, and dragged her back into her tent.

"By the light, Sylvanas, what’s wrong?" She winced and sighed. "Well, which terrible thing that’s wrong is bothering you is the better question, I suppose."

"The ceremony," she managed to choke out. "I just can’t imagine how I will do it. I can’t be her, I can’t do what she did."

Vereesa laid a hand on her arm. "The rangers have looked to you as a leader for years. I know you will do well. They trust you, and so do I."

"That just makes it worse!" she fidgeted, trying to explain. "What if something happens to you? It will be… it will be my fault. From now on, all the loss, it will all…"

"You aren’t responsible for war, Sylvanas," Vereesa answered slowly. "But I can see that knowledge will not comfort you. Just know that, what risk there is in following you… we have accepted it. I have accepted it. I’d follow you gladly, to whatever end you chose. And just as I don’t want you to blame yourself for whatever happens, they wouldn’t either."

Sylvanas closed her eyes. The truth in her sister’s words was nothing but a temporary reprieve from the doubts that hounded her.

But it was enough space for a certain kind of clarity.

"Before the ceremony, there is something I have to do. I’ll be gone, just for a day or two. If I leave orders and instructions for you and some other commanders, will you deliver the messages and do the necessary organisation?"

Vereesa’s response was a shocked glare.

"I’m not running away, I swear. I’ll be back in plenty of time to prepare for my ascension. But I need… I need to do this."

Her sister’s sighed. "Alright, Sylvanas. I will do whatever you need. But you had better come back, safely, you hear?"

She nodded, already planning.

The second time she went into the wood she was much better prepared. A pack of food and a field tent were slung over her shoulder along with the bow of an accomplished ranger. Somehow all of it failed to make her feel older or more secure than the last time she had gone to this part of the forest. She had always avoided it. Despite her inquiries, she hadn’t truly tried to go back.

Perhaps she had wanted to leave some sense of mystery? Or, more likely, she hadn’t wanted to come and find nothing, as she suspected would be the case now.

But even that would be an answer, wouldn’t it?

She didn’t even know why she was searching, or what she would do if she found that mysterious woman. It had been so many years ago it felt like another lifetime, and she suspected the response
from the forest dweller would be much less obliging now that she was no longer a child.

She ran the fingers of memory over their first encounter as she navigated through the ancient forest. So much had blurred with the years, though the burning blue of those two eyes was clear to this day, the white of the skull, the towering antlers.

And that voice.

Her feet found even ground between ancient gnarled roots, her travel quick and sure. Years of practice had made her a near-soundless force of efficiency and grace. But without a military purpose, the smooth flow of her travels brought a kind of peace. Birds trilled overhead, ignorant of war and death. She saw traces of the life of the wood, the tread of a wolf, a pile of deer droppings. Navigating past a stream she saw the gnawed remains of trees, little spikes along the banks marking the territory of a nearby beaver. The further she went, the more she saw, the pattern of nature slipping into her bones like a whisper.

She breathed in the smell of the forest, pine and leaves and dew.

Even if she found nothing, she could say her time was not wasted.

The wood did not care who ruled in Silvermoon City. It did not know who the Ranger-General was. It would soak up the blood from their wars and grow shrubs and flowers and bury their bones in the soil.

She sighed, and a very particular sorrow rushed out of her.

And in that moment, something familiar tickled at the edges of her perception. Nothing that she could see, or hear.

The wind around her ankles went chill, carrying a fractionally different scent: the dank sweetness of decay, the slightest tang of the sea.

Her ears twitched. She closed her eyes, focused, and let instinct lead her. She raced through the woods, trying to make up ground, pointed in the direction of some ineffable instinct, the slightest scent and sensation. But she realized quickly she was not gaining enough distance. The scent would grow stronger, then fade again. She could not keep up this pace forever.

She would have to resort to more unconventional methods.

Her mind raced; knowledge of tactics, ways to cut off an opponent, to trap them. But that same sense of strategy informed her that she could not trick this being in these woods. She could not outsmart this opponent, especially not on home ground. Fighting the battle that way was a sure loss.

This would require a different sort of approach.

Her eyes scanned for a sliver of high ground. She broke out into a run, a minute later spotting a large moss covered rock jutting upwards. That would be her chance.

She scaled it in three quick bounds, pulling herself up by a crack in the rock, foot catching on a small ledge, then leveraging herself the rest of the way up. Standing on the highest point, she cupped her hands around her mouth.

“HEY!” she shouted, flinching inwardly at the way her voice echoed back at her. “I just want to talk!”
Several groups of birds flew from nearby trees in alarm.

“You never answered my question,” she hollered, grinning.

That may give her a chance, if anything could. She resumed pursuit, scarcely daring to hope, even when she felt that sense of latent power grow stronger and closer. But she soon realized the presence was not letting her catch up, not exactly. It seemed to be circling her position, preemptively backtracking around her in a loop. Staying always just out of sight, and out of reach.

A stalemate.

She thought carefully, then pulled the ornate ranger bow off her back. It would be as it was before.

She would hunt her prey, and do so with much better aim.

It was still light, making it paradoxically more difficult to pick out the figure through the trees. Perhaps tracking her by day was what caused the farstriders to fail so many times. But she could see hints of movement at the farthest edges of her vision; the trees blocked too much, there was no way to keep something in sight as it moved.

Perhaps now was the time for a trap. She knew she was being circled, maybe using a gap in the tree line would work a second time.

If she could lure her quarry through the path of one, anyway.

She made her way carefully north, placing herself between the wood dweller and a small clearing made by a patch of boulders. The shot would be long, even for her. And she highly doubted she could make it between a branch of her antlers as she had done as a child, the range was too far, though she would try.

Eventually, her moment came. She knocked an arrow, doubling back a little till she had a good view of the clearing. The faint rustle of leaves masked the light click of hooves in the distance, something brown moving between the trees.

She drew, needing to fire at a moment's notice.

Then at last she saw a shaggy shoulder emerge, followed by a towering rack of antlers, glowing faint blue.

Her aim was more instinct than calculation; gauging the travel of the deer against the distance, sighting high to account for drop, then releasing with an exhale. The arrow sprung forward with a snap, whizzing decisively through the forest, through the antlers of the deer, and burying itself deep in the tree behind it.

Her heart pounded.

The stag froze, standing stock still next to the tree.

Sylvanas stood smoothly, replacing her bow over her shoulder. She strode with more confidence than she felt towards what she could now see was most certainly not a normal animal: the shag at its shoulders and flank were a dark green, more like moss than fur, it was much, much larger than a natural deer should have been, and its head was an eerie skull, the eye sockets burning with blue light.

It was her. She had not doubted, somehow, but the confirmation hit her like a bolt of lightning.
As she drew closer, the deer flicked its ears, whether in recognition or annoyance she could not tell. It watched her warily, one hoof digging at the ground.

At last she was within a comfortable speaking range, but she found she wanted a closer look. The legs of the beast looked made of living wood so close up, bark so dark it was almost black, and its whole body was covered in gentle whirls and scatterings of symbols of varying sizes, those on the flank glowing with arcane power.

“We can’t talk with you like this,” Sylvanas drawled, a smile on her lips.

The deer just looked at her, ears pinned back.

“I’ll close my eyes, if that will help?” she said, burying her face in the crook of her elbow.

She counted to three, then lowered her arm. Her eyes stayed closed for a long moment, breath stuttering in her chest.

When she opened them, a woman stood before her.

The bear skull was the same, pulled down to cover her face, with a dramatic sprawl of antlers attached. But now she was close enough to see other details: wooden, rune inscribed pauldrons, a layered cloak decorated with intricate patterns, a belt and pouch hung busily with odds and ends like a small, iridescent feather, a bit of bone, the skull of a bird, and a sheath containing the ornate hilt of a dagger.

The effect on her was almost more frightening as an adult. Now she knew how odd this picture was, and the extent of the powers this woman must command. And knowing something else, as well—that the ears of an elf were absent. She did not have the stature of a troll or tauren or any of the Horde races, and was actually a bit shorter than Sylvanas herself.

This woman could only be one of the Drust, whether human or not. She had suspected it; what few books existed spoke of sacrificial rituals involving blood and bone, un plumbed depths of mysterious runes, mastery over life and death and reverence for the horned beasts of the wood. Her skull clad apparition matched in several categories.

“Thank-you,” she said cautiously. A polite beginning couldn’t hurt.

“Why have you sought me out?” the voice echoed from beneath the mask.

“Maybe I was curious,” Sylvanas said, grinning.

The woman’s arms cross over her chest. “Those who seek me out for curiosity's sake find nothing.”

“So there is a system? I had heard that people who go into the wood and make a request sometimes find what they need amongst their things when they leave, perhaps a healing poultice, or a tea for fertility.”

“I may not be inclined to generosity with the one who comes to use me as target practice,” the skull tilted to the side, but a glimmer of humor warmed her tone.

Sylvanas laughed, eyes sparkling. “I was a poor student as a child, who mixed up legends with nonsense my sister told me. I’m just grateful you didn’t spear me to a tree for my Mother to find!”

“And yet, I do not think your purpose here is to ask me more questions.”
“Well, certainly not about bees,” she drawled. “Pardon me, I’m working up to it. It sounds very stupid now that I’m standing here.”

The skull tilted up with a patient air.

“My family, the Windrunners,” she looked any sign of recognition, and got a slight nod. “They’ve been heroes and leaders since the founding of Quel’Thalas’ military. Ever since I could walk I’ve been famous, looked at like I was some preternaturally skilled future leader. And it always…” she sighed. “It always felt like everyone was confusing me for someone else. Like they had made a mistake, and were going to realize it as soon as I messed something up.”

Her self doubts sounded foolish in the calm of the forest, but the mysterious druid watched her intently anyhow. The weight of her regard was nearly physical.

“Two weeks ago, my Mother was killed in an Amani ambush. My older sister chose to remain with the Farstriders, and so my Mother’s position falls to me. I will be the next Ranger-General of Silvermoon,” she took a deep breath, fighting down the shock of the words. Her throat was unexpectedly tight.

“We are at war. I cannot afford to show doubt. I cannot afford to be afraid,” Sylvanas had to close her eyes against the burn of tears. “But I am.”

She took a step backwards, not sure if she needed space or was preparing to sprint away in shame. Her breath came heavy, but in a moment control returned to her.

“And I know it’s foolish. But the only time I ever felt worthy of my family name, or blessed by some special destiny, was that day when I saw you in the wood. I suppose I hoped, if I could find you again, I would know that this was something I could do,” she finished in a rush.

The eyes of the skull seem to burn through her. After watching quietly, the woman started walking forward.

She came to rest an arms breadth from Sylvanas. One hand reached down to the pouch at her waist, fishing for a moment, then her closed fist emerged and was held out between them.

Sylvanas reached out, palm open, heart leaping in her chest.

The druid dropped her hand into Sylvanas' palm, weather roughened fingers brushing against her skin as she deposited a small, heavy object. She hesitated a moment before she withdrew, seeming jolted by the contact.

A pendant sat in her hand. Or, as near as she could tell it was a pendant; an eerie black stone with a dramatic whirl in the center, pockmarked by little fossils, set in a crescent of bone. The whole thing was polished until it was smooth and sheer. She could not guess its function, if it had one, but the gift made her feel impossibly warm regardless.

“Thank you,” she breathed.

The druid nodded, then half turned back to the forest.

“Wait,” Sylvanas said before she could disappear.

The figure looked back, quirking their head.

“I think I earned a second question with my fine archery abilities.”
“Do you?” the woman asked.

Sylvanas knew if she could see beneath the mask there would be a smile there.

“What is your name?” she asked, before she lost her nerve.

A little flinch ran through the druid at that. She turned again towards the wood. But she hesitated, looking back over her shoulder before disappearing.

And a moment later, Sylvanas heard it; a single word, echoing like the trees themselves had spoken.

“Jaina.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Every morning I walk like this around
the pond, thinking: if the doors of my heart
ever close, I am as good as dead.

The years passed, and Sylvanas more than earned her title.

She trudged, indomitable, through the loss of her mother, of her innocent smiling brother, of the elder sister she had so admired, and of so much else besides, yet still stands. Silvermoon City was full of rumors about the pragmatic general who could not be stopped by any foe, or turned from a purpose once her mind was set.

Sylvanas Windrunner became a legend in her own right. One who was never without a mysterious pendant, whose origins she always refused to explain.

Not that she ever discovered what it did.

She found her dreams a bit odd, when wearing the strange artifact. Sometimes the night brought insight, or clarity to an issue she had overlooked, and she discovered in herself an uncanny instinct for danger, even before any outward signs betrayed a problem. She would feel an itch, or a weight against her chest. Nothing that couldn’t be explained by other means.

But it hadn’t failed her yet.

That was why she took the news of Lordaeron’s fall so hard. As soon as whispers reached her about the murder of King Terenas and the sacking of the capital city, she had felt that same dread weighing against her chest. She appealed to Prince Kael’thas for all the money and resources Silvermoon could spare, but the wheels of politics turned slowly, too slow to calm her sense of impending doom.

Lordaeron was their neighbor to the Southwest. If the undead she’d heard about marched north it would take them straight through Quel’thalas.

She had no evidence, nothing concrete enough to use for an emergency appeal, but that hair trigger sense for danger left her pacing back and forth, restless, comforted by nothing. She knew she wouldn’t sleep until she heard back from the team of dragonhawk scouts she had sent to survey the southern border.

Despite that, she does not need official confirmation. The knowledge already burned inside her.

She knows, somehow, that the rumors are worse than true, that the scourge army would march through Eastweald, and enter her people’s lands, and do it soon.

And she knows that Quel’Thalas’ defense rested on her shoulders.
She swore with vicious competence at the starry night sky, kicked the side of an armor chest, went back to her tent, and sat down at her desk to write. Damn it all, she cursed again, at the circumstances that would leave her in charge of a second war so soon after her first.

Since she knew the truth, there was no point in hesitation.

There was only one point defensible enough to stop an army that size before the elfgates and Silvermoon City itself. She must prevent the Scourge from taking the Thalassian Pass.

She would muster every soldier, scrounge up every commander, call down anyone who could make it in time, and hope to hold.

Her failure was all the more bitter for the dread it cast; she could no longer plan.

Fear swept over her, sure and cold as the sea. Make no mistake, she would summon every single soldier in the land to Silvermoon City and organize its defense. She would make the Scourge pay for every inch with her life’s blood, if need be.

But she had seen that terrible army. The undead had stretched as far as the eye could see, howling and beating their shields, absorbing her losses into their own number. Skeletal warriors had stood almost on top of each other, so dense were their numbers, ancient armor dangling off gaunt frames and clattering against their neighbors. Their howling and screeching was burned into her ears.

Sitting at her desk, Sylvanas rested her head in her hands.

This was not a foe conventional tactics could defeat. She wished the thought of the elfgates gave her hope, but they did not. That army could sweep every inch of Quel’Thalas looking for them without taking any net loss in manpower. Silvermoon City’s defenses were considered unbreakable, and had never been subverted in the whole history of the city. And yet, none of that seemed to matter to her.

Every part of her feared this defense would be in vain.

In the morning their tents would be pulled up, and the forward camp would move all the way back to the outer gates of the city. Everything in the central part of the continent would be abandoned, on her orders.

She knew now she would be remember for failure, no matter what scant portion she managed to save of her people. Her army would evacuate every village they could on the way north, but it would never feel like enough.

She could afford to stop and defend nothing.

Her only chance was to beat the scourge to Silvermoon City in time to dig in and become entrenched behind the outer gates, though even that was a play for time rather than victory.

Despite knowing she had done all she could, Sylvanas was unable to rest. The moon was high and bright in the sky, and she’d need to march in the morning. Their trek would be hard and taken without breaks, she would be a hindrance if she went another night without rest.

Yet still, it felt like she had left one task unfinished.
She looked up at the stars, at the forests of her home. The Ranger-General had done all she could that day.

But Sylvanas Windrunner had one last debt to pay.

As exhausted as she was, travel was slow. The dark made it even worse.

Her mission already felt like a bad idea; she needed to be back at camp before first light.

Sylvanas cursed into the trees, one hand clasped tight around the pendant hanging from her neck. She had taken a horse, hoping it would speed her journey at least partway, but instead it just made her painfully sore back and shoulders ache even worse. The path was dim by the light of the moon, clear enough to follow, but she held the horse to a trot regardless. The last thing she needed was to get injured in a fall.

She shouldn’t have needed to travel for long, the Thalassian Pass was quite deep in the forest to start with. The oldest parts of the wood edged up against the western mountains, nourished by the source of the Elrendar River, which wasn’t too far north. It was just the darkness making it hard to tell whether she was going the right way, and she didn’t have many hours of moonlight left. But she couldn’t be too far from her druid’s territory.

Eventually the terrain grew too rough and the brush too dense for horseback, and she was forced back on foot.

Sylvanas narrowed her eyes in the darkness. Perhaps by tracing the river up, she would find where the druid made camp? She could not live too far from it, a source of freshwater was too convenient. But as she debated inwardly, even that approach felt too slow. She could ill afford to lose another entire night of sleep, it would be best if she had time for at least an hour of rest.

She picked up her pace.

Branches sliced at her face and shoulders as she tumbled through brush and bramble. She could feel blood trickling down her forehead, which she wiped away with a grimace.

She was looking at this the wrong way, she realized with a start. Wherever the druid lived, she must have defenses. She might do better to try and trigger them and summon her, rather than search for her in the middle of the night.

Pulling out her bow, she fired a shot aimlessly into the forest. Then, swearing, she leapt up and into a sprint. Clasping the pendant, she took a deep breath, ready for some serious hollering.

“Jaina!” Her feet pounded against the dirt, tripping on roots too subtle for her to make out in the dark. “This is serious, damn it. The undead…” she stopped to try and catch her breath, leaning against her knees. “The Scourge are coming. Coming here. So let me warn you and then I’ll leave you alone!”

“Is that what I sense at the edges of the wood?” a chill voice asked from behind her.

Whirling, she almost fell again. She was so tired she was nearly delirious; still, the druid was unmistakable for anyone else.
She was frozen, staring at that familiar figure. Years had passed, and the woman was unchanged. The same mask of bone, the same arcane aura.

“You look terrible,” the druid said with a huff. Her eyes seemed to gleam inside sockets of bone.

Sylvanas almost laughed. She sounded like a disapproving relative. “I have not slept but four hours in the last two days. And I will not sleep again until tomorrow.”

At that, the woman’s arm came up. Slow and hesitant, it crept up to rest on Sylvanas’ shoulder awash in a green glow.

As soon as she made contact, Sylvanas felt some of her exhaustion melt away. She stretched, flexing her back and shoulders, and could tell most of her cuts and bruises were healed as well.

“Thank you,” she mumbled, voice thick with gratitude. “I’m sorry. I don’t have much time. I must make it back to camp before the morning.”

“Something is wrong.”

“I hoped you had felt it. The Scourge Army will march north through these woods, cutting clear across to Silvermoon City. You must hide yourself away, or leave. I’d suggest the latter.”

“To leave the forest?” she said, a soft murmur.

“They will focus on areas of strategic or symbolic importance. I suspect you will be able to return if you wait for…”

“If I wait for what?” Jaina asked, voice hard.

Sylvanas could not bring herself to answer directly. “I fought their army. The pass was packed full of undead and still stretched clear back to Andorhal, there must have been more than 25,000.” Panic crept into her voice as she spoke, and her nails dug into her palms. “Every single soldier I lose will be risen as one of them. It is unlikely a military victory is possible.”

The truth of it echoed in her skull, striking like a blow. The drum of it felt like a concussion, the words hounding her with terror.

The same sentiment haunted this conversation as the last time they had met: I can’t do this.

But this time, she had not come to find confidence in her magical destiny. There would be no deliverance from the fate that awaited her, and she did not seek one.

Jaina seemed to feel it too, and she jerked backwards in a choppy, graceless movement that looked wholly out of character. Sylvanas wished, not for the first time, that she could see the face under that mask, to get some hint at the keen mind that raced beneath it. She knew she would not get the chance.

“Hide and live, Jaina. By the light of the sun.”

She wanted to reach out between them. She had a hundred questions to ask, a hundred things she hadn’t done, but she knew her time was running out.

And the figure across from her stood silent and still. Not that she could blame her, there wasn’t much you could say in response to the news that a massive army antithetical to life would march through your home.
This time, it was her that turned to go.

“You will not reach camp in time on foot, if you are east of the Thondroril River.”

Sylvanas turned back. “Is there a faster way?”

“I do know one, yes,” Jaina said, sounding amused.

Then she changed.

Her form seemed to stretch for one timeless moment, branches stretching down her limbs, moss engulfing her shoulders. She doubled in bulk, the earth itself wrapping around her. In the time it took her to take a breath, she had transformed into a great stag.

Sylvanas gaped, shocked at both the feat and the implication of it. She could not possibly mean…?

The stag shook its head, ears flopping. It was a full head and a half taller than her, impossibly huge for a natural animal. The skull Jaina wore elongated into a form more natural to a deer, while keeping the fierce fangs of a predator. The head turned, gleaming blue eyes seeming to glare at her. One root-like hoof tamped the ground.

She could not ride a druid. The thought was absurd. And yet, Jaina was staring quite impatiently at her.

She took a step, placing a hand on the stag’s back, and it whuffed encouragingly. Sylvanas crouched, coiling her legs while keeping a firm grasp on the stag’s mane, then leapt. She managed to fling one leg over its back, far enough to save herself from falling off, but she still needed to pull herself upright with her arms. When she settled herself, having preserved at least some of her dignity, she realized she would have to duck a little to avoid the expanse of the beasts antlers.

But she found that was for the best anyhow when Jaina started to move.

The instant the stag sprung forward, they were airborne. Her pace was so quick the forest blurred into nondescript shapes.

Sylvanas wound her arms tightly around the deer’s neck. She needed the extra anchor, they were so swift she half-feared she was going fly off. The thick torso beneath her was both bulkier and more agile than a normal steed, creating more strain, but eventually they both settled into a rhythm.

Jaina continued to charge through the forest, hooves clipping lightly over the terrain. The druid was so familiar with the wood she did not need light to place her feet surely, and Sylvanas began to enjoy it without noticing.

Chill night wind blew through her hair as the wood whipped past them. She buried her face in the side of the stag’s neck, grinning with delight as adrenaline coursed through her. It truly felt like flying. When they took a particularly dramatic leap, using the height from a boulder to clear a fallen tree, she couldn’t help but whoop in delight. Spurred on by her audience, Jaina soared impressively over a ravine as well.

Sylvanas laughed, a girlish trill she would normally be embarrassed by. But the joy of the moment, amidst such darkness, was too pure. The beauty of the place, of her home, struck her clear to the heart.

She could see why Jaina did not wish to leave.
She knew she would remember all of it until her dying day: the moon bright overhead and the sky full of stars, the trees rustling in the breeze, and the strong pulse of the stag’s strength beneath her.

All too soon, their ride was over.

Jaina came to rest in a little clearing Sylvanas knew was less than a mile to the camp. She slid off the deer’s back with regret, legs quivering with fatigue. She needed to catch herself against a sturdy foreleg, and could not resist leaning in for another stolen moment of peace.

She stepped back, looking up intently.

“Turn back,” she whispered. “I want to thank you in person.”

The deer flicked her ears, but obliged; a moment later her form collapsed in and a woman stood before her.

“For days I have seen nothing but corpses,” she said, swallowing. “Thank you, for reminding me of beauty. Of what it is that I defend.”

It’s an odd thing to have said to a woman wearing a skull. It seemed like Sylvanas Windrunner should be hero of the tale, and this eerie spectre some villain falling prey to their own scheme in the final act. But it was Sylvanas who had been up to her elbows in death, bloodied by the struggle life wages to remake the world in its own image, to create something hospitable for itself, to strain against the flow of the river.

The druid in front of her had slipped into the long dreams of trees, of the way of the wilds, and accepted death as the opposite but equal consequence of life; had lived in the cycle without struggling against it. There was a beauty to that, even in the parts of it that were decay and bones and whispers in the night of things better left forgotten.

“Youre warning was more than repayment enough,” the druid replied, sounding hoarse.

“Is that so?” Sylvanas grinned, silver edged and sharp. “Then, it occurs to me that you never answered my very first question. I think I would like to exchange it for a different one.”

“What?” the druid asked, confounded.

If Sylvanas was not mistaken, there was a little quaver in her voice; she would press any advantage.

“May I kiss you?”

The words struck the druid like a blow. She did not move, did not even breathe.

But she did not say no.

Sylvanas reached out slowly, watching for any hint of protest. She laid a hand on the druid’s shoulder, rubbing lightly with a thumb. Then, with the other hand, she traced down the edge of the skull she had never seen Jaina without.

If she touched it, would she be cursed? Knocked over dead in an instant? Turned into a bear herself, or some other forest beast?

The risk was worth it, she thought, and wrapped her fingers around a long, curved canine. An incisor dug into the back of her hand and she adjusted her grip, feeling her wrist tremble; feeling the woman in front of her tremble.
Gradual and hesitant, she tilted the mask up to reveal a sharp curved jaw and rounded chin, lifted further past pretty feminine lips and an angular nose. A braid trailed down one side of her neck, the color impossible to pinpoint in the dark. What Sylvanas could see of her was much younger than she had imagined, much younger than Jaina could physically be by any possible calculation.

She could not imagine the strength of this woman. To touch her was like laying hands on the center of a thunderstorm. And yet, on this day, she had nothing more to lose.

She bent down, ducking beneath the gaping maw of the skull. The angle would be awkward, with her taller to start with, and scrunched over. But she would make do.

Sylvanas pressed their lips together, chaste but lingering. Their noses brushed; they were so close she felt Jaina’s shaky gasp.

Then she pulled away and stepped back, heart pounding.

She had no choice: if she kept kissing that woman she would never stop, duty be damned.

She wanted to apologize. She wanted to say thank you. She wanted to say a thousand things, a thousand other words, one word in particular, but she had time for none of them. Light was already inching up over the horizon.

Her hand withdrew to clasp her throat, aching and tight with sorrow.

“Don’t forget me,” she said, voice weak.

Then she turned and ran.

As if I could.

Jaina did not answer her, could not have.

She stood in the clearing longer than she would care to admit, a maelstrom of sorrow and regret. Her words had never come easy, not even when she lived a normal life. It was worse now, with only one person to know her. That thought struck her deep.

There was only one alive who could speak her name, and she would go to die.

For Jaina knew a farewell when she heard it, had known even in the deep wood: that Sylvanas had not come to warn her, but to make her peace.

And she, who had spent ten times a normal mortal span sunk in the natural cycle of life and death, regrets to let this particular life go; cannot bear the thought of it dashed to dust. A dozen kingdoms had risen and fallen in her time, and their affairs were not hers. Her empire was the slow growth of a stand of ancient oaks, the sick doe dragged to the den of a wolf, the high call of the eagle.

But somehow her mind does not consider that sufficient counterargument to the simple refrain beating inside her, like a heart all its own: that the stubborn child she had met, the uncertain woman grown to a capable general, was scared.

And Jaina had felt her fear like a knife.
Does it matter, since all life will eventually pass away? Does it matter whether death is calm or cruel, fair or unfair? She knows it does not.

She chose this path hundreds of years ago. It’s not her place to fight, not her role to participate in the everyday struggle of survival. It is her role to observe it.

She cannot go back, not now.

Not even if it means she must say goodbye.

Chapter End Notes

Oh no I feel bad leaving the chapter like this when all the other recent Sylvaina fics are in such a depressing place too??? OK don't worry this is a happy story people! One part left, and it's a fun one. It's also longer again, I don't know how the middle chapter ended up the shortest but what can ya do. Come visit me on tumblr for nerdy bits of poetry and fandom fun!
Every morning, so far, I'm alive. And now
the crows break off from the rest of the darkness
and burst up into the sky

Sylvanas was so covered in gore that her clothes creaked. Her cloak was long gone. It was amazing what had become important to her, at the very end. Most prominently, she wished to die in clean boots. A fantasy, she knew. No one else’s boots were in any better shape than hers.

Not that anyone’s boots would matter soon.

The outer gate had fallen not two hours ago, and the inner gate was the city’s last line of defense. Ban'dinoriel, the shield that represented her last hope, had fallen. The location of the elfgates was known to their enemies. Her city had been betrayed, and she had no time left to pursue it.

The inner gate would be their last stand. And her death would buy time for her people’s escape.

Sylvanas sighed deeply, body wracked with pain. Hundreds of years of military expertise, and she would trade her life for time. But what else could she do? The undead needed neither food nor rest, had no supply lines, and could lay siege indefinitely. There was no military defense for that. Not one that she had ever learned, anyhow. She wondered if this would be different if her Mother still lived, or Alleria was by her side wielding Thas'dorah. But then, she was glad they had both been spared this.

She still had one last sister who might be saved, though.

In a bound, she leapt from the ramparts down a ladder, navigating quickly to where her sister and a company of rangers prepared for the coming assault. She knew Vereesa would be angry. Lucky then, that she was the one giving the orders.

The moment Vereesa saw her, she guessed her purpose and stalked forward her before Sylvanas even had a chance to open her mouth.

“Do not even think it, Sylvanas,” she spat.

“I am your commanding officer.” She waited, glaring at her sister. “Restoring Ban'dinoriel is Silvermoon’s only hope. It will be your mission to enter the city and discover why it has not been re-empowered. A message should have reached Kael’thas by now. Rendezvous with him, and attempt to bring the Gate Keeper back up. If that proves impossible, you and your company will be in charge of concluding our evacuation efforts.”

“Stop it,” she frowned, clenching her fists. “I won’t be sent away.”
“Vereesa, it must be done. And I am ordering it done by you. Regardless of our relation, you are the best choice.”

“Please, sister,” she fought to keep her voice from breaking, and failed.

Sylvanas swept her baby sister into her arms, squeezing tightly. Their arms came around one another like strangler vines.

“You have another important job too, you know?” Sylvanas muttered from above her. “You have to make sure the history books only say cool things about me.”

Vereesa slapped her shoulder, crying into a single barked laugh. “You idiot. I will tell them every embarrassing thing you’ve ever done.”

She released her sister stepping back with a watery grin. “Well, I can’t say I won’t deserve it.”

Her sister closed her eyes, fighting for composure. “Fight well, Lady Moon.”

“I will buy you every minute I can.”

She stood high on the ramparts, bow clasped between nerveless fingers. Below her, the final gate buckled and cracked under the staggering force of the Scourge attack.

Their only advantage was the undead army’s general lack of siege towers. In order to scale the walls they were forced to push up crude ladders, or climb the bodies of the dead. They had tried both, make no mistake, but thus far her forces on the wall had managed to repel them. On the ground, every able ranger and guard stood braced for the forces who would soon break through the door. Their final action was at hand, and there was nothing more for a general to do.

Sylvanas fired one more shot into an abomination before she heard the door buckle inward, and the Scourge began to pour through. Her marksmen on the walls were ordered to stay put, and reinforce those on the ground however they could. They’d be shooting into the backs of the enemy, for what little good it would do them. For as long as they had, before they were overrun.

She turned, ready to adjust her position to best support the ground army, when she noticed something odd: not a presence, but an absence.

The smell of rotting flesh, of guts and death, had faded. She’d smelled it for days and had almost stopped noticing it, but its decrease in intensity struck her. It was weak enough now that she could almost smell the sea.

When she stopped to breath in deeply, she felt it. A chill wind stung her ears and tossed the feathers of her pauldrons, carrying hints of pine and salt and moss.

She knew this wind.

Her chest felt crushed, mind screaming no but heart pounding yes please yes. She hadn’t dared dream of salvation, had settled for hoping the only sacrifice would be her own, and that of her troops.

She scanned the field, searching for any hint of a blue aura, not realizing she was looking in the wrong direction. It wasn’t until she heard a screech high above, the wild warcall of a storm crow,
that she spotted it.

Above her, an unnaturally large bird glided past the outskirts of Silvermoon City. The wingspan alone marked it as a magical creature, too broad by far to be light enough to fly, and as the bird got closer she could see that leaves the vibrant orange and yellow of autumn grew in place of feathers.

Sylvanas did not know what to think. As strong as she was, no single druid could affect the turn of a battle like this. What could her intentions be, here? What could she think to do?

The crow circled and dove.

The inner gate was built into the battlements, made from carved marble reinforced by delicate metal seams and fortified by magic. In deference to beauty, the structure was capped by an elegant arch suspended between two columns that culminated in dramatic spires. As the bird descended it honed in on the tip of a spire, swirling down next to it before landing at the base.

The crow flapped its leafy, coarse wings once before shifting, and a moment later a woman stood precarious on the ledge. But this time she did not look exactly as she always had.

This time, Jaina carried a staff a full head taller than she was. The top third was dotted with short branches, circling the body in an alternating pattern. And hanging on the branches were a series of bells.

At least, they looked like bells. Sylvanas wasn’t too far below her on the battlements, but the arch hampered her line of sight. And as Jaina tapped the staff against the stone once, twice, three times, the bells did not sound. She was close enough to see them jar with the force of each strike. But she could not figure what the woman had done.

Then, she felt the wind.

It was not subtle, as it had always been before. This was a gust.

Her hair whipped into her face, her clothes rustled, and something else was different about it. The adrenaline of battle left her, and she felt tired, more so than she had; a sort of peace came over her. The effect was so powerful she didn’t notice the first chime had already started until a second joined it. The bells were, in fact, ringing: two high, consistent peals of staggered pitch.

She scurried to the parapet, looking down at the armies below.

It wasn’t just her feeling sluggish. Abominations and crypt fiends still roared and gnashed their teeth, but the skeletons were teetering. Ghouls ran into their neighbors and slashed at the air. She even saw a wyrm topple from the sky.

And Jaina wasn’t done yet. The wind picked up again, so severely she had to shield her face with an arm, and a third bell rung, one lower pitched then its brethren.

Then the fourth sounded. Its deep rumble made her bones ache: her jaw, her knees. She leaned against the crenellation of the wall, letting the stone dig into her hip. The sensation was grounding, as the low echo of the bell seemed to bounce around her skull. Sylvanas felt barely coherent, as if she had been knocked out of her body by the strength of that gale, by those otherworldly tones.

Below her, skeletons toppled and scattered to pieces.

The wind was a howl in her ears, and it was only getting louder. She felt like she was in the middle of a typhoon. What trees that had not been killed by the scourge blew at harsh angles, their branches
whipped wildly in unnatural directions. But the chaos around her seemed to grow further and further away.

Her vision felt foggy, her thoughts more and more lethargic.

Sylvanas’ awareness was distant when the fifth and final bell rang true.

She did not even hear it, as such. She felt it.

Her heart stopped, for a single moment. The tone was so deep it rattled her chest like a drum. The force of it made her grit her teeth; she clenched the stone in front of her, bit her lip, and began to count.

She made it to five before the bells released them. The wind calmed at the same moment, whatever the spell was drawing itself to a close.

Sylvanas gasped for air, shocked and afraid despite herself. It she had any doubts before, they were gone: the Archdruid Jaina was the strongest and most terrifying person she had ever met.

Fighting for coherency, she looked down at the battle again.

Close to the gate, more than two thirds of the Scourge Army was motionless on the ground. The larger crypt fiends seemed less affected, some already starting to stir. But all the lesser dead, the weaker shambling corpses, the ghouls and gargoyles, seem destroyed. The risen skeletons that made up the tremendous bulk of the undead forces were decimated, and the battlefield was covered with heaps of bone. Some abominations seemed to have disintegrated too, their limbs detached and torsos swollen.

Further back, the army was more intact; proximity must have impacted the force of the spell. There, they seem to have lost mostly the weaker dead, skeletons and ghouls with scattering of larger beasts. Several enraged necromancers were trying to re-raise fallen troops, in vain as far as Sylvanas could tell.

Her spirit scarcely dared to hope. So much of the scourge’s troop composition was converted enemy ground forces, and so much of their strategy depended on swarming defenders. With the chance to focus down difficult targets? She might have a chance.

They might truly hold.

She looked up, already moving to the base of the column. Above her, Jaina was swaying unsteadily on her ledge near the spire.

Sylvanas picked up her pace with a sharp curse. She whirled, searching frantically for the closest battlemage.

“Shelean!” she hollered. “Slow fall, up top! Help get her down.”

The battlemage looked shocked, but she gave a sharp nod.

Jaina seemed to understand what she had asked for, crouching to jump from her place on the ledge. As soon as she lit up with the force of the spell, she slid off and floated down at a far safer speed than gravity would normally allow for. Sylvanas extended her arms, heart lighter than it had been in days. She snagged Jaina’s elbows as she came down, drawing her into an embrace as she lowered the woman gently in front of her. Her forehead dipped down, resting against the top of the skull.
“There is nothing I can say to describe what you’ve done for us.”

She could feel Jaina’s chest heave with exertion, slim fingers clinging to the front of her armor.

But even exhausted, there was iron in her voice. “The battle isn’t won yet.”

“I can scarcely ask more of you when you’ve just obliterated half an army,” she said, light with affection.

“You aren’t asking.” Jaina’s voice was grave.

Sylvanas wondered what had brought her here. Perhaps she had seen the evil of the Scourge for herself in the forest, and known she could not remain uninvolved; they were an enemy of all life. She wasn’t brave enough to hope it had anything to do with her.

“Very well,” she nodded with respect. “We must seal the gate off, to prevent them from overrunning us.”

Jaina stepped out from the circle of her arms to peer at the battlefield below. She took in the ruin of the old doors, strewn amidst gruesome undead remains and the glint of ranger trim and armor. There was not much to work with. The fact of it did not dissuade her, she turned to a ledge and was nearly off before Sylvanas stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

“Hold up, tiger. You aren’t going anywhere without backup. What’s your plan, and what do you need?”

“Stopping up the gate should not provide much difficulty. I need my boots on bare ground, and a minute’s distraction,” she said, leaning over the low walls of the battlements. The undead grew more aware by the minute.

Further back, the scourge army was recovering. Scattered troops were making their way to shouting figures, recondensing into a solid wall of battle.

Sylvanas turned to shout. “I need twelve rangers below to help me and our friend here close up the gate and rout the Scourge. Form up behind me, then redistribute yourselves along the wall.”

Several shell-shocked rangers came to attention, then more filled in behind them. They shot curious glances at the out of place druid, decked in tall antlers and hidden behind an eerie skull.

One crass ranger, an older woman, elbowed Sylvanas in the ribs as she walked by. “Way to call in the cavalry, General,” she smirked.

“I didn’t call her, Falis,” Sylvanas crossed her arms.

Another woman grinned over the top of her friend’s shoulder. “Does your girlfriend have a name?” Sylvanas choked.

“Jaina,” she replied, bear skull tilting to the side.

How was she supposed to interpret that? Was the druid just being polite? Was she uncertain how to respond? Had Jaina been teasing her?

Sylvanas wanted very much to survive, all of a sudden.

“We’ve got an army to fight, unless anyone else has a cheeky question.”
“So, is that what your taste is like General?” a different ranger hollered, from further down the wall.

Sylvanas scowled. “Be ready to cover us. Battlemages, prepare to unbar the lower stairs. We’ll fight our way along the wall to the gate.”

They barreled down the stairs, bows already drawn. Upon reaching the field, several undead whirled to attack, and the rangers cut a path through the scattering of crypt fiends and monsters. The enemy had recovered enough to start surging through the gate again after several minutes of more scattered movement. The rangers knew their business, though, forming a tight circle and advancing slow but clean through the enemy troops. Sylvanas was a force of nature in and of herself, planting arrows in the eyes and throats of thrashing beasts and abominations.

The distance wasn’t terrible, and the party reached just outside the arch before they were overrun. Several rangers had begun to show the strain, but they did not fall.

Jaina stepped forward, looking intently at the ground. But before she cast, something caught her attention in the distance.

Beyond the gate, at the heart of the Scourge army, a man was riding.

His burning gaze seemed to cut across the battlefield. The sight brought more fear than any other thing she had seen this day, and she recognized the man, and the man’s blade, from the woods and knew him for the true danger.

Sylvanas shook her shoulder, looking worried.

The druid flinched back, refocusing her attention on the archway. She didn’t have the time or ability to deal with an enemy like that. The door was a problem she could solve.

For this work, she did not require an incantation or a staff or a movement. Not even her wrist twitched. She took one step forward, heel planted firmly in the ground, and a green shoot twitched into being before her.

Briar and vine thick with thorns sprung from the ground, weaving themselves up the sides of the arch and sprawling across the entrance. At first slim threads merely dangled, and an abomination tore through without effort, barreling towards the group only to be stopped by a barrage of arrows. But soon enough the thorns thickened, curling around deposited corpses and weaving into a decisive wall. Undead slashed futilely against an incredible mass of plant life, screaming into the wind, unable to make headway against an ever expanding thorny jungle.

When the arch and grounds below it were complete engulfed, Jaina took a step back.

She put a hand on Sylvanas’ shoulder, the ranger mid draw, to get her attention.

“You’re done?” she asked, angling her head as she fired into the eye of a ghoul.

Jaina nodded.

“We’ll have to fight our way back through. Are you well enough?”

“We still have to clear the scourge forces from behind the wall, do we not?” she asked primly.

“Jaina, you must be exhausted. Let me retreat you from the battlefield.”

“Retreat? My mana is exhausted, that is far from my only resource.” Jaina said, eyes flashing.
Her transformation this time was not into a bird or stag.

Wood sprung from the earth, thick as an ancient trunk, to engulf her arms and legs. Her form grew and shifted, runic markings at her flank and shoulders burning so bright it was a miniature sun. The skull expanded, antlers flattening and thickening against the tremendous body of the beast. It towered above them, almost twice Sylvanas’ own not inconsiderable height. The thing must have weighed a thousand pounds.

It was the most terrifying bear she had ever seen, all twisting bark and enormous teeth.

Raring up, it let loose a tremendous roar and launched itself into the closest group of undead.

Sylvanas looked over at the rangers standing next to her. They all wore identical looks of frightened awe.

“Good god,” one whispered.

Good god, indeed.

The inner gate held.

They did not know it then, but from that day forward and for the rest of Quel’thalas’ history the city’s southernmost entrance would be called the Gate of Thorns.

For no matter how the undead tried to hack at it or charge through, thick vines and twining bramble would not be deterred. Even drained of life by the scourge, stubborn vines clung to the stone arch and their entwined neighbors. They resorted to burning, but the rangers were ready with battlemages of their own to stop them with spears of ice and summoned gushes of water.

Eventually, Arthas realized he was losing too much time. No matter how powerful his advantages, a commander who loses the initiative often loses the battle and only a small percent of his army could assault the gate at one time.

He decided to split his forces, and use only half to pressure the walls.

Arthas turned the other half towards the sea to attempt a crossing, and Sylvanas was still debating their course of action when they felt it.

Her hand was on the small of Jaina’s back, their heads bent close, as they debated the merits of this magical defense or that, of a purely military reinforcement of the Sunwell Guard versus an attempt against Arthas directly. Sylvanas was wondering how a druid from the forest came by such a degree of military expertise, in fact, when a surge of warm power settled over them like a blanket.

The character of the Sunwell’s power was unmistakable, and so was the nature of the spell it powered.

Vereeesa had succeeded at last. Ban’dinoriel was restored, and Silvermoon City was saved. The sacred shield of their people stood once again between them and their enemies.

Sylvanas collapsed against Jaina, pulling them both to the ground.
She tore at Jaina’s mask, yanking it over her head and setting it aside. Then she reached across to clasp Jaina’s face in her hands, leaning in to kiss her forehead, the elegant arch of her eyebrow, her nose, not wanting to stop, never wanting to stop.

Sobbing against her lips, “It’s over. It’s over.”

“It’s just, it isn’t really done.”

“What? Secretive druids of staggering power don’t regularly attend meetings?” Sylvanas quipped.

Jaina only glared at her.

“The Convocation is Silvermoon’s highest ruling body, I could scarcely turn them down. Don’t worry, all you have to do is pretend to answer some questions, just make up some cryptic nonsense. They don’t have any power over you, even less so after you’ve saved their entire fucking city. Light preserve us, perhaps they intend to thank you.”

She crossed her arms. “Even I remember politicians too well to believe that.”

They were interrupted by the clatter of footsteps.

“If it isn’t the women of the hour,” Vereesa said, grinning as she came around the corner.

“As if you aren’t to be included in that,” Sylvanas replied with a smile. She could scarcely believe they had both made it through alive.

Vereesa looked between them, then did a double take.

“Are you really going to wear that to meet with a bunch of high elven lords?” Vereesa asked, aghast, looking at Jaina.

“I’m assuming you are referring to the eerie, glowing skull?” Sylvanas laughed. “Because I consider that a bonus. I estimate that meetings in which someone is wearing a skull will be on average fifty percent shorter.”

“I see why the two of you get along.” Vereesa shook her head.

Jaina sighed, “Sylvanas.”

“What? You don’t want to scare the daylights out of the high council?”

Sylvanas could almost feel Jaina roll her eyes. The druid reached up for the edges of the mask but then paused, seeming to look around.

“Where to put it, that’s a good point,” Sylvanas murmured. “I will carry your skull, how about that? The best of both worlds.”

Vereesa stared at them, astonished. That ease of communication, on a topic of such absurdity? She had known something was going on, but this was an altogether different beast.

Jaina pulled it up and passed the mask over, which Sylvanas slung firmly over one decorative,
ceremonial pauldron.

The mask’s removal revealed a young looking human woman, with dirty blond hair and a sharp, incisive face. Vereesa tried to hide her shock, but couldn’t resist staring given the incongruity between the appearance of the woman and her age, not to mention her deeds.

Sylvanas looked struck dumb, like a foolish adolescent.

Which also did not escape Vereesa’s notice.

“I can’t believe you were telling the truth, all those years ago.” Vereesa still remembered the outrageous story her sister had told her of the mysterious woman she had met in the woods.

Sylvanas laughed, deep and joyful. “I wouldn’t have believed me either, don’t worry. I just wish Mother were still here to be equal parts scandalized and impressed.”

“And what is it that she would be scandalized by, exactly?” Vereesa asked, eyebrow raised, having been waiting for just such an opening.

Her sister smirked, then sobered all at once. “We didn’t have time to sort through Mother’s more numerous possessions, with the war raging. Her weapons, her jewelry, I can’t recall if we left them at the Spire, or moved them to storage in the city,” she said slowly, laying her hand on Vereesa’s forearm. “I’ll be stuck here all evening, more than likely. Will you find out for me?”

Vereesa understood her sister’s intentions immediately. She wished she didn’t, couldn’t help but be a little scandalized herself, but more than that, was overcome by the love she felt for her precious older sister, who would have died for her. She knew what Sylvanas was asking her for: their Mother’s own engagement band, Al’ar’s bond, a bracelet woven of gold and silver and threaded with a storm of sapphires.

She nodded, once.

Jaina looked between them, eyes narrowed with suspicion.

Vereesa wondered if she would say yes. Clearly something was going on there, though she could not imagine how such a thing would work. She wondered if Sylvanas had any idea what she was getting herself into.

Probably not, though that had never stopped her before.

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Two weeks later, they both joined a procession of rangers tasked with evaluating the trail of the Scourge’s destruction, already known as the Scar, and in estimating how many undead remained throughout Quel’thalas. The Scourge’s army had retreated, but not without leaving as much damage behind as possible.

The Scar carved a swathe of death and destruction through the heart of the country, and many villages were still filled with rotting undead.

Despite their serious circumstances, Jaina and Sylvanas chatted idly. Their horses plodded along, stopping occasionally to smite undead, as they marked areas that would need particular assistance.
Sylvanas had insisted on leading the expedition partially to escape the bureaucratic aspect of the recovery, but also due to something else; she had seen Jaina grow increasingly uncomfortable in the city, though she refused to admit it. She hoped back in the forests of Quel’Thalas, they would both feel a little more centered.

And that they might talk, at last, about the past, and perhaps even the future.

“Will you be able to heal the damage, do you think? From what I understood, the Scourge is both infection and decimation. No one has managed to sprout so much as a blade of grass in the destruction of Lordaeron,” Sylvanas asked, looking down at the unseemly greyish earth below them.

“I will have to experiment more to be certain. But I doubt there is anything they could do that I could not undo, given enough time.”

Sylvanas laughed. “They made the wrong enemy when they marched through your woods, that’s for certain. I can’t say—”

“Do not thank me again,” Jaina said, cross.

“Yes, yes, I remember. Quel’thalas protects and maintains the Eversong Woods as a buffer zone. That doesn’t change the importance of your intervention.”

Jaina still glared, but there was fondness writ at the corners of her eyes, in the curve of her mouth.

“What was that spell you did, that dispelled so many undead? I’ve never even heard of such a thing being possible,” Sylvanas asked, tentative but wildly curious.

“I called them home,” Jaina said, but when she turned, she saw that this had not satisfied her riding companion. “The lich are not the only spellcasters with a mastery of death. The Drust druids also claim dominion over the dead, and from them I learned many methods to bind a soul to a gem, or to a body, or to utilize a spirit as fuel for great works. Unbinding is not so different. In many cases, it’s easier. So many of the Scourge were made against their will, a moment of freedom was all they needed to be swept down the river.”

“You unbound their spirits, and pulled them into the final rest? Is that why we had a handful of casualties as well, among the elderly and the grievously wounded?”

“Yes. I channel the spell, but cannot control it. It was not uncommon for a Drust who overestimated their power to drag themselves into death by accident.”

Sylvanas peered at the woman riding beside her. “So you trained with the Drust? I mean, I had guessed, given your… appearance. But I thought they mostly disappeared. How did you come to these lands? If you don’t mind telling me, that is. I don’t…”

“No, no, it’s…” Jaina stopped. Openness was still new to both of them. “My family were among the first Gilnean settlers of Kul Tiras. But the island was not uninhabited, and small scale raids from both sides escalated into full-scale war. I insisted that peace was possible, and we managed to obtain a brief ceasefire. But my eldest brother had been killed, and something in my Father was lost with him. The moment the fighting stopped he began planning a surprise attack, which I could not…” Jaina paused, chewing her lip. “I was young. And my Father was wrong to do it, though of course the Drust were planning the same. But our people were the invaders, and I couldn’t bear it any longer. I left my family, and went to warn them. Luckily for me, I wound up with the Thornspeakers. They housed and taught me their ways, and I stayed with them until they were destroyed by the conflict as well.”
Sylvanas could tell there was more to that story, but stayed silent. There would be time. The pain of the subject was obvious, for all that it happened hundreds and hundreds of years ago. To lose all the people around her, again and again, it was no wonder she left for the woods and remained separate from society for so long.

“I’m sorry,” she said instead, simple and quiet.

“I thought,” Jaina trailed off. “The endless conflicts… this world is filled with power hungry fools. I didn’t want any part of it. I didn’t want…”

Sylvanas reached over and laid a gentle hand on Jaina’s thigh.

She resisted asking the question that pounded most desperately at her breast. Why then had she stood against the undead? Despite Jaina’s excuses, it was obvious the Scourge would have had little interest in holding all of Eversong Forest, and her spell would have worked just as well in the woods as it would have on the ramparts of Silvermoon City. She had defended Quel’thalas, specifically. But what had changed her mind?

And had she come back to stay?

Eventually, the two of them broke off from the main group. Her lieutenant protested, but he could hardly cite safety concerns when Jaina was to accompany her.

Jaina was the one who had asked that they take a detour, in fact. The tract of the Scar had veered a few degrees, and had been trending that way for several miles.

When Sylvanas asked about it, the druid confessed her role.

“Of course the Scourge intended to march through the heart of the forest,” Jaina said, smirking. “I planted some totems, skewed their perception, laid down the subtlest and most delicate illusion. They thought nothing of it, and quite enjoyed burning down a very well transformed replicate of the mother tree. But I still would like to check on the original, to make sure.”

Sylvanas had agreed to that idea with what she had hoped was measured consideration. From the way her rangers snickered though, she somehow doubted it.

They had left the horses with the rangers, and walked companionably into the heart of the forest. The trees grew old, ancient oak and elm interspersed with beautiful stands of silver birch. Her heart felt light, and she could tell how much happier Jaina was. The woman’s eyes sparkled, face animated as they talked.

She very much appreciated getting to see Jaina’s face, these days.

Soon they reached Thas’alah, the Light of the Forest, the most ancient tree in the wood. It was the strongest as well, the Sunwell’s power filling every inch of leaf and branch and root. The tree was named aptly, as the drooping branches allowed streams of light to filter gently to the forest floor, casting elegant patterns on the knotted root system that dominated the clearing.

Jaina walked straight to the tree, setting a palm against it. She crouched down with a sigh of relief.
Sylvanas went to stand behind her, heart pounding. Her mother’s engagement band burned in her pocket, and she knew she would have no better place or time to ask than here, no matter how small her chances of success were.

Then, Jaina’s hand started to glow green against the bark. Around her feet, roots twisted and curled like snakes.

Sylvanas took a startled step back, watching the tree dance at Jaina’s call.

She would never get used to that.

After several minutes Jaina turned around, holding out her hand. A thick cord of root twisted up, settling into her palm and looping back to the ground again, the ends dissolving into dust and leaving an elegantly curved branch in her hand. Her fingers closed around it, and she stood with a proprietary grin.

“And what is that for?” Sylvanas asked, eyebrows raised.

“Well, I seem to recall hearing that your family’s legendary bow was lost with your elder sister. The one made from the boughs of this very tree.”

“That’s correct,” she responded, heart in her throat.

“Then you’ll need another weapon for the protection of your people, will you not?”

Sylvanas stood, stunned, for a long moment. Then she strode forward, pressing Jaina against the great tree, and kissed her; head tilted down, fingers stroking her jawline, full of passion and feeling. She nipped at Jaina’s lower lip, trailed her mouth down the fine line of her throat, pulled at the neckline of her tunic and nibbled at her clavicle till the woman was gasping and mewling beneath her.

Then, she pulled away and went to her knees. Her chest heaved, she rubbed at her face with an arm and fought for control.

“I have one more question to ask you,” she choked out.

Jaina tilted her head, voice curious and warm and breathless. “Just one more? I hope you’ll pardon my skepticism.”

“I know I have very little to offer you. My family’s riches and lands, my own standing, none of it holds value by the currency you measure. And I have nothing else to bargain with, except the fact of my own heart, which will be yours until the day I die, and after. Would you consent to wed me, and share a life built together?” Sylvanas’ hand shook as she reached into her pocket to pull out the narrow bracelet her Mother had worn to the last day of her life.

Jaina’s eyes went wide. She said nothing for a long time, thinking beneath that keen blue gaze. “But where would we live? What would we…” her voice trailed off.

Sylvanas’ heart leapt. That was not a no.

“I do not know. But, any path I might share with you? I would walk it gladly.”

Jaina turned back to the heart tree, and placed her palm on it once again.

“Do you know, this is the very spot where I decided I must fight?”
“Is it?” Sylvanas murmured, not wanting to interrupt.

“I knew I had to protect this place. And yet, was this tree worth more than an elven child because it is older? Did I weigh an ageless night elf higher than a birch sapling? The question had never mattered to me. Kingdoms safeguard their own people, and druids protect the balance of nature. That is the way it has always been. That is how I preferred it,” Jaina ran a hand up the bark. “Whether Quel’thalas fell should have been none of my concern. But the Scourge was not…”

Sylvanas watched her work through her thoughts, rapt.

Jaina looked back at Sylvanas, meeting her eyes squarely. “I knew that you would die to defend your people, that you would do it proudly. And if it had been just a matter of that, I would have been able to bear it. But I felt the Scourge, pouring corruption into the forest, using pain and fear and rage to bind lost souls to this plane. I knew that you would fight them to your last breath, and that they wouldn’t let you rest. I couldn’t let you go. Not like that.”

She had been trying to avoid thinking about her fate in those terms. If she had slept enough for nightmares, though, she knew what they would have contained: that exact fear. On some level it had haunted her ever since the undead had passed into her country. Not that she would fall, but that she would be turned into a weapon against her own people.

“I can no longer pretend the conflicts of man do not affect the forest. That was no normal army full of selfish mortal goals, and if they grow unchecked there will be no force strong enough to stop them in the entire world. More than that, I cannot help but suspect even greater evil at work in the shadows of these events,” Jaina’s shoulders pulled back with determination. “I think that perhaps those protecting the woods and those protecting the nations will have need of each other, and I find that, whatever trials this darkness brings, I would sooner face them with you.”

Jaina stopped, looking tentative all of a sudden. She reached out, resting a hand on top of Sylvanas’ where she held the gem studded bracelet.

"I would protect what you hold sacred, regardless of whether you marry me,” Sylvanas said with a little nod. She recognized the request for alliance in those words. Her heart sang to know that Jaina would stay, and fight, and that they would combat whatever came side by side. But that was not, quite, what she had asked her for.

Sylvanas turned her wrist upwards, relaxed her fist, and wove their fingers together, bracelet clasped between their palms. That hand in her own, the two of them together, she knew it would be something the world never forgot. All at once, her doubts left her.

She smiled, resplendent like the sun, and held steady under Jaina’s regard.

And waited.

The druid’s face flashed through a kaleidoscope of affection and fear and embarrassment and determination, then went still.

“İ—” Jaina stumbled, like the jolt before a long fall. “Yes. I will.”

Sylvanas fastened the bracelet on her wrist, then laid her down beneath the boughs of that tree and kissed her long and well.
—as though
all night they had thought of what they would like
their lives to be, and imagined
their strong, thick wings.

Chapter End Notes

And that's it folks!!!!!! I hope you enjoyed the ride, and my take on the characters. I had an awesome time writing 'spooky drust' Jaina and 'im puttin a ring on that' Sylvanas, and making Jaina really OP hahahah. WoW gimps all the story heroes so player characters can do the cool stuff, but I disagree with that and I RULE HERE. I mean c'mon the villains now are like old gods who can stab the world and people bitch that Anduin is a gary stu because he has rez. Give me a break! Most importantly, I fixed the INJUSTICE that happened to the high elves because screw that whole plotline. Credit where credit is due, romans had the cool idea for Drust Jaina, Garth Nix in the Sabriel series had the idea for cool necromantic bells, and all y'all great Sylvaina writers dragged me back into Warcraft III so THANKS FOR THAT. Also, come visit me on tumblr for more of this madness.

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